

Almost Winter

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Almost Winter (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. If you are still reading this disclaimer, I am impressed by your attention to detail but wonder whether you really have nothing better with which to occupy your time.

Emrys Vaughn

To my mother. Because seriously, who else was I going to put here?

Chapter One

"Messy," I said, looking down at the body.

"No shit," Kyra snorted. "Come on, Winter, tell me something I don't know."

"Messy" was an understatement. The man had been virtually shredded. The skin was largely missing from his forearms, and most of the underlying tissues had been ripped apart. The gaps were large enough to see bone in several places, including the broken one in his left arm, and his hands were so badly damaged as to be unrecognizable as human. Defensive wounds, almost certainly—you don't attack somebody's arms on purpose. Moving up I saw that there was a chunk of flesh missing from his right shoulder near the neck. It probably would have bled enough to kill him, except that I was pretty sure the throat wound had done the job first.

There was more damage to the body, although I was guessing it had happened after he was dead. Several ribs had been snapped and wrenched away, exposing the chest cavity, after which something had gone to town on him. The heart was missing, the blood vessels raggedly snapped off and hanging, and large hunks had been torn from both lungs. His abdomen had been ripped at until it more closely resembled hamburger than living tissue, and I could see that both the liver and stomach were gone as well. Laminate flooring doesn't absorb blood very well, and a large pool of it had formed around the body.

I imagine this is where most people would have needed to go outside and throw up, or at least been nauseated by how icky and pungent it all was. I didn't, and I wasn't. I felt mildly curious, and rather hungry. I hadn't eaten breakfast yet, and I've always associated the smell of blood more with food than anything.

The most disturbing part about corpses for me has always been how little they disturb me. I know people are supposed to find dead things unsettling and creepy, but I've just never felt it. I mean, we're all made of meat, and I've seen enough meat that it doesn't bother me. I suppose it's an indication of how broken I am, but deep down I have to wonder whether maybe it's everyone else who's crazy for making such a big deal of it.

"Is there anything else to see?" I asked.

Kyra, who'd been here already, shook her head. "This is it," she said.

"All right. Come on, you're buying me lunch." Kyra snorted, but didn't argue as we left and she locked the door behind us.

I marveled, as we left, at how ordinary things seemed. The street, a narrow back road one step up from an alley on the western edge of town, was quiet. There'd been a teenage girl sitting on the lawn across the street reading a magazine when we went in, but she'd vanished by the time we exited the

house, and there was no one else in sight. It was the middle of the day and there were only a few cars parked on the street, old enough to look somewhat battered but not enough to be collectable.

I shivered. Corpses don't bother me, but the contrast between something like that and the calm, peaceful world outside gets me every time. It makes me think of all the secrets that might be hiding behind every closed door and curtained window, and *that* is a creepy thing to consider.

Even against that background Kyra's car stood out as being hard-used. It was a beat-up sedan maybe fifteen or twenty years old, the original color long since buried under a thick layer of accumulated dirt. The interior upholstery was largely held together with duct tape, and neither the heater nor the air conditioning had run for at least four years. About the only good thing you could say about her car was that, somehow, it ran nine days out of ten.

On the other hand, the stereo worked reasonably well. And, in any case, I didn't have much grounds for complaint. My wheels are on a bicycle, because I can't afford a car. So I got in the car and we drove back into town in silence.

I should make something clear right now. I'm not a detective, private or otherwise. I'm not a hardboiled gumshoe with a dark and troubled past, a substance abuse problem, and an inexplicable tendency to use the word "dame" in casual conversation. I have never in my life worked for or with the police. I make furniture. I do have a friend who's a police officer, but we avoid the topic of work studiously.

Kyra, contrary to what you might now be thinking, is not that friend. She has also never worked with the police in any capacity, and wouldn't have anything to do with them of her own free will. She's a waitress in a bar that attracts a very unusual clientele.

What we were just doing was, as a result, illegal as hell. Cops tend to get upset when you trespass on their crime scenes, and that guy didn't wind up in that condition by natural causes. It was fresh, too; the smell of rot had been hardly noticeable. I was guessing he'd died after midnight the night before. It was entirely possible that we'd been the first people to take a serious look at the scene.

Fortunately, neither of us was really the type to be concerned by that sort of thing. I try to stay on the right side of the law, but that's pretty much just out of pragmatism. I don't think of it as being a moral obligation or anything. Kyra doesn't pay it even that much respect.

She wasn't stupid, though. We'd gotten a chance to look at things in privacy—which I highly doubted was a coincidence—but there was no guarantee of how long it would last and we *really* didn't want to still be there when the police finally started swarming the place. That's why we didn't stay there any longer than we absolutely had to. We could talk about it anywhere.

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We ended up going, as we usually did, to the bar and restaurant where Kyra worked. Pryce's was a fairly small bar a little closer to the center of town than my home that catered to members of the preternatural community. Most of his customers, and all of his employees, were something not quite human.

Somehow people, on the rare occasions they think about things like werewolves and vampires at all, never think about them in a mundane setting. Even people who know they exist, and really ought to know better, somehow get surprised when they learn that a werewolf works in retail.

There's a funny thing about werewolves, though. They like to eat as much as the next guy. Actually, they often like to eat more than the next guy. Now, most supernatural critters know some interesting tricks, but I don't think any of them could manage an infinite supply of money, which they need to survive in the modern world. Following this line of thought to its staggering conclusion you may realize that most of them have jobs, just like ordinary people. A few of them do the kind of work that seems more appropriate—extortion, say, or tracking, things on the gray edges of the law. Society can only support a limited amount of that kind of thing, though, and mostly we have boring, everyday jobs.

The supernatural creatures still living in this world are good at hiding, at blending in to the background. Most of them take jobs that are conducive to that—they're waitresses, construction workers, computer technicians. They work in sanitation and telemarketing, as prostitutes and migrant workers. There will always be people who society doesn't examine too closely, who go unnoticed because people don't want to acknowledge that they exist.

The things that go bump in the night have blended in to modern society so ubiquitously that you'd never guess they were there at all.

In fact, you probably know one.

Pryce, who has much the same attitude, doesn't advertise, not even by hanging a sign. He doesn't need to. He isn't interested in attracting tourists or impulse customers, and word of mouth is more effective with the beings that make up his clientele anyway. As a result, there's nothing to distinguish his restaurant from the old warehouses around it except the absence of graffiti.

If the building is unremarkable on the outside, the same can't be said for the interior. On the other side of the heavy wooden door a half-flight of stairs leads down to the oak floor. Pryce keeps the room dim—not dark, just dim enough that a human would have a little trouble seeing until their eyes adjusted. It didn't slow Kyra or I down a bit.

I come to Pryce's fairly regularly, but I'm always impressed. To the right of the door the bar takes up most of the room, a twenty-foot work of art crafted from black walnut. Tables are scattered throughout the rest of the room. None of the handmade wooden furniture matches, having nothing in common other than excellent craftsmanship. Kyra picked a small table in the corner opposite the bar, where we weren't likely to be overheard or bothered. Pryce's is arranged so that there were several such tables; wanting a secluded spot in the shadows with your back to the wall and a clear view of the

door was a fairly common thing, with this crowd. If you want to survive any length of time in the sort of environment they frequent, paranoia's sort of a necessity.

There were only a few other people in the restaurant, which wasn't much of a surprise considering the time—Pryce is open twenty-four seven, but most of his business comes in the evening and night. Currently there was one table of four college-age kids, a grizzled man fifty or sixty years old sitting alone at the far end of the bar, and a pair of young women playing pool in the back of the room.

Pryce himself, of course, was behind the bar. I've never seen him anywhere else. He's a big man, eight inches taller than me and probably twice as heavy, although I doubt much of it's fat. With vibrant red hair just going to grey, a bristling beard, and a moderate Irish accent, somehow he's always struck me as exactly what a bartender should look like. The only discrepant note was that his appearance hadn't changed, at all, in the five years since I'd met him.

I doubt he's human. No human could keep the kind of crowds his bar attracts in line. That's okay, though; mostly the people I interact with on a regular basis aren't human. Neither am I, although I fake it better than some. I look human, more or less, and I act human, generally, but genetically I have less in common with the average person than, say, a chimpanzee.

Kyra placed our order and grabbed our drinks herself—one of the few benefits of being a waitress. Pryce is a relatively benevolent boss, but that doesn't change the fact that her job sucks. I mean, it might actually be worse than mine, and there are bums who can't say that.

"So what do you think?" she asked me, leaning most of her weight on the table—though I wasn't sure whether that reflected nervousness or eagerness. Possibly she didn't know herself.

I took a deep swallow of iced tea before I answered her. "I think it looks like werewolf. The wounds look mostly like bites, the moon is waxing full, and there's a residue of magic that could be from a wolf," I said, keeping my voice low. There wasn't any need for the other people in the room to know about this. "I also think that you don't need my help to point that out. It's pretty obvious, and you wouldn't have been there in the first place if you didn't think it was a werewolf. So why'd you call me?"

"Because it doesn't smell," Kyra said quietly.

I blinked. "What?"

For the first time that day Kyra looked me straight in the eye—a confrontational gesture among both werewolves and their natural relative, the grey wolf, and I was quick to look away. "It's true," she said hotly. "There's no smell from the killer. None."

I frowned. "Could it just have been overwhelmed by the blood?" Blood has a rather strong scent, and one which werewolves, for obvious reasons, tend to place importance on.

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Kyra rolled her eyes. "Please. I'm better than that." Then, proving that she'd thought about it, she continued, "Besides, I checked all the exits. None of them held a scent, and there wasn't any blood on any of them."

That was bad. Kyra's senses were only average by werewolf standards, but that still meant that in human form they were more acute than mine, and vastly more than human, more than adequate for tracking. Wearing fur, and I had no doubt that she had shifted to the wolf for this task, they were several steps beyond that. She should have been able to get *some* scent, even if it wasn't good enough for identification.

"Could a werewolf do that, Winter? Hide his scent like that?" She asked me because, even though she was a werewolf and I was not, I knew more about them. When I first met her, she'd been a werewolf for more than a year and she barely knew what werewolves even *were*. I, on the other hand, had had my entire life to be educated on the subject.

I shook my head. "Not a new werewolf. There are a couple wolves who might be able to, but I doubt they were involved." They were all experienced enough to be smart, and a smart werewolf would have just shot the guy if they wanted him dead. Generally speaking the only reason a werewolf would kill somebody like that would be if they wanted to send a message—which Kyra would have known about—or if they were new.

When a human becomes a werewolf, he—and it usually is a he; Kyra, as a female werewolf, was distinctly in the minority—gets all kinds of instinctive urges that humans aren't accustomed to dealing with, things like territoriality, hunting behaviors, that sort of stuff. Mostly they manage to keep it under control, but it can take a while to get used to it. In the interim, a lot of new werewolves are erratic, and sometimes violent. It sometimes leads to deaths, especially on a wolf's first full moon.

Kyra stood up abruptly. "Hang on, our food's ready." She went to get it herself, because Pryce would hardly leave his bar just to deliver food. He had employees other than Kyra, of course, but at the moment the only one working was a cook. There just wasn't enough business at this time of day to justify more.

She grabbed sandwiches, fries, coleslaw, soup, and mashed potatoes in one trip, balancing them easily on her arms and still managing to grab a refill for my tea. She was a professional, after all, and the weight was hardly a problem. Popular culture sometimes exaggerates the superhuman strength of werewolves, but there's definitely a base there to build off.

"Listen," I said while she arranged the various plates and bowls so that all of them would fit on the table. "I know some people who might have some idea what's going on. I'll talk to them and get back to you when I have a better idea what to do, okay?"

She nodded, her mouth already full of hamburger, and for several minutes the food was all either of us paid attention too. Werewolves tend to be like that, particularly near the full moon, and I couldn't afford to eat this well often enough that I took it lightly. Pryce's food was always excellent.

The next time she spoke, fear had been replaced by mischief and curiosity in her voice. "You know, Winter, I never asked how it is you know so much about werewolves."

That's one of the ways werewolves are different from humans. Most of them don't place much importance on the past or the future, because the part of them that isn't quite human is so tightly bound to the present. Besides which, it had taken almost a year since I met her for Kyra to express curiosity around me at all. She was still broken in some ways, but she was making progress.

I finished chewing and swallowed before I answered, taking the time to think about what I should say. This wasn't a topic I had ever been comfortable with. "I guess you could say it's genetic," I told her eventually.

"What, you mean your father was a wolf?" Kyra asked.

"No, my mother was." I paused. "I'm a little surprised nobody in the pack's ever told you about her, actually. She had a pretty impressive reputation."

She grinned. "As a brutal dictator who ruled with an iron fist?"

I snorted. "No, she had a reputation for being the least discriminating slut in North America."

Kyra blinked. "Wow. I was not expecting that. Was she bisexual or something?"

I considered that for a moment. "More like omnisexual, I'd say. She'd have sex with men, women, other werewolves—male and female, and in every combination of shapes possible. I've heard she slept with at least three of the fae and a vampire, too." I'd heard more stories about her exploits growing up than I cared to remember. It was a hell of a thing to have hanging over me when I was young.

Kyra glanced aside. "Sorry to bring it up," she said. She could tell I wasn't comfortable with the topic, of course. Werewolves aren't polygraphs, and the myth of them being able to smell fear is patently ridiculous—a werewolf can smell sweat, especially in fur, but that doesn't say all that much about what a person is feeling. In spite of that, it's surprisingly hard to deceive most werewolves. They pay a lot more attention than most humans to things like body language and breathing rate, and it's difficult to lie with those.

I shook my head. "No, that's okay. It doesn't bother me much anymore." Which was also a lie, but not one she was likely to catch. I've had quite a bit of practice at lying to werewolves.

After that the conversation died out; I guess both of us were too caught up in memory to make small talk. Not that either of us is actually any good at it to begin with. Kyra made her food disappear like only a hungry werewolf can, and I wasn't far behind her. When all that was left of the meal were empty plates, I stood up to leave while Kyra cleared the table.

"You want a ride?" she asked.

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"No thanks, I think I'll walk. It's a nice day." The truth is that I walk almost everywhere; I have a bicycle, but I've never been comfortable riding it in the city. Being run over in the bike lane isn't how I want to die. I don't really get out much, anyway. Pryce's restaurant was less than a mile from my home, and walking wouldn't bother me a bit.

As it turned out, I didn't go home right away. I thought about it, but I just wasn't in the mood. This was pack business, and getting involved in pack business always makes me feel rather unhappy. On top of that, this meant I was going to have to talk to some people I'd been spending several years avoiding, and I wasn't looking forward to that conversation at all. Going home would leave me with nothing to do but stew on it, and that's never a good idea.

In the meantime, well, I had work to do. Work always makes me feel better.

I work at a tiny shop not too far from either Pryce's bar or my house. When I say it was small, I mean it seriously; the owner and I were the only ones who worked there. His name's Dvalin Kovac, although he usually goes by Val so that Americans can pronounce it. He is, at risk of sounding like a broken record, not human. Unlike Pryce, though, I didn't have to guess at what he was. He'd told me years before, not too long after I started working for him, that he was one of the fae.

That really wasn't all that informative; saying that someone is fae is akin to saying that an animal is a vertebrate. It might be true, but there's so much variation in the group that it becomes meaningless. Likewise, "fae" is a catchall category that covers everything from leprechauns and pixies to Norse trolls and creatures you've probably never heard of unless you happen to have a fetish for obscure folklore. They have a few things in common—most of them are weakened or harmed by iron, for example—but trying to apply those things as hard-and-fast rules can get you burned, hard.

In popular culture they're commonly referred to as fairies; I wouldn't advise calling them that to their face unless you have a serious death wish. Even before the homosexual connotation, they considered the term an insult—and insulting the fae ranks near picking fights with werewolves when it comes to ways to commit suicide. The fae are often both easy to anger and quick to act on that anger, lethally. Not quite the reputation they hold with the uneducated, but then Disney isn't exactly a great source to rely upon.

If you want to get an understanding of what the fae are like, try reading the uncensored version of Grimm's fairy tales. Then remember that those stories downplayed how dangerous the fae were, too. In the days before Christianity the strongest of them were worshipped as gods, and not the merciful kind.

Val didn't seem much like a scary, merciless god. He appeared—or chose to appear, which with the fae means essentially the same thing—to be a thin, somewhat short man in late middle age. He liked knock-knock jokes and B-movies, poured sausage gravy on everything he ate, and was a dedicated fan of

the Toronto Maple Leafs even though they hadn't won the Stanley Cup since before I was born. Honestly, there aren't all that many people less intimidating than Val.

That's most of what I know about Val, and I've been working for him for five years now. He doesn't talk much, and he likes small talk less than I do. I don't know how old he really is, how long he's been in Colorado, or why he runs his shop when I know for a fact he could be getting much, much more money doing other kinds of work. You get used to that kind of thing when you interact with nonhumans a lot. Heck, even I hadn't ever told Kyra about my past. It's just considered standard, socially.

Although neither of us was human, a decent proportion of our customers were, and as a result Val had to be a little more obvious than Pryce about his business—not a lot, but a little. There was a wooden sign over the door reading "VAL'S REPAIR SERVICE" in large, faded black letters and a smaller paper sign in the front window proclaiming "Locksmith services available." That sign wasn't as faded, probably because it only dated to when I started working for Val.

I learned to pick locks when I was seventeen, from an old werewolf who collects odd skills the way some people collect rocks. I think mostly that's why Val hired me; he loves learning new things. Even though he could open just about any lock with his magic, and had been doing so for some time when I met him, he still insisted that I teach him how to do it with a pick as soon as I started working for him. By the time he'd learned all he cared to, he liked me enough to give me a steady job. The better part of a decade later, nothing much had changed.

It was Saturday and the shop was officially closed. That didn't matter for me, though; I had a key, and there was always work to be done. A lot of the money I make is from side projects, which I can do any time I want. I pay Val for the materials, but he lets me use all his tools for free—a very generous gift on his part. It would cost thousands to buy even a fraction of the equipment he'd accumulated, which was money I couldn't easily afford.

I let myself through the steel door with the key Val had given me my first day on the job. The first room in was a sort of combination office and waiting room, and not much different from any other such room: small, and a little claustrophobic despite the large front window, with a few old chairs and a table with some even older magazines sitting on it. Val literally hadn't replaced some of those magazines for thirty years.

I didn't bother lingering there, proceeding past the desk into the shop proper. Val had a fairly small garage, empty at the moment but capable of holding two or three cars—in addition to all the tools he kept in there. It was a fairly broad selection, by which I mean that there were fully equipped machine shops that couldn't match it. I don't think I've ever met anyone other than Val who could actually use them all.

See, while Val has to advertise to attract business, he doesn't like it, and he doesn't advertise most of the services he's willing to provide. In the time I've been working there I've done automotive work, appliance repair, bicycle maintenance, locksmithing, gunsmithing, jewelry, plumbing, and carpentry.

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Basically, what Val did was very simple. He fixed things. It didn't matter what, exactly, they were. It didn't matter what was wrong with them. He could fix it.

I don't mean that in, like, a metaphysical way. He wasn't a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a priest; he didn't work on people, and in fact preferred to have as little to do with them as possible. Other than that, though, he would work on anything. Cars, of course, were one of the big sellers, but we did at least as much work on appliances, power tools, bicycles, and a ridiculous variety of random things. I honestly think some of the more regular customers sometimes bring in the most bizarre things they can think of to be repaired, just to see whether Val can do it. (Spoiler: he always can.)

Some of the jobs he did were, to put it lightly, shady. Sometimes people bring in safes for us to open without necessarily knowing what the contents are, or being willing to say where they might have come from. Other times they ask for modifications to firearms which are only legal with certain very restrictive licenses, which they don't particularly want to discuss. Stuff like that. Val doesn't ask questions, mostly because he doesn't care. Human laws don't mean much to him.

I usually avoid working on those particular jobs, and Val doesn't try to convince me to do otherwise. I try to avoid breaking the law, unless I have a good reason to. Not that that had stopped me this morning. I tend to be better at making rules for myself than following them, as evidenced by my total inability to keep my nose out of pack business.

In all fairness, I went a few years without any contact with werewolves. That's more impressive than it sounds, when your mother is one. She died not long after I was born, but the pack looks after its own, including the children of its wolves. I was in large part raised by my mother's pack.

When I moved to Colorado Springs, though, I didn't make any effort to contact the local pack. I'd had my fill of lycanthropy and then some. Kyra was the first local werewolf I met, and that was by total coincidence while I was eating at Pryce's.

It should have stayed like that, but there is some truth to the saying that werewolves are like potato chips—you can't have just one. Six months after I met her, I realized what a monstrosity her pack had become, and...well.

I'm not a saint. I'm not a hero. I'm not even a particularly good person. But even I have my limits.

You have to have a little background for this one to make sense. Seven years ago Kyra was going to college in Denver. I'm not quite sure what she was studying—something to do with math. I think maybe some sort of engineering. Not my thing, but apparently she was pretty good at it.

Anyway, the salient fact here is that one weekend she decided to take a day trip to Colorado Springs. It wasn't a particularly long trip, nor one that should have exposed her to danger. It was true that she was alone, but she was smart about it.

Unfortunately for Kyra, the Alpha of the Pikes Peak pack at the time was an old werewolf named Roland. At some point not too long before Kyra took that (at risk of absurd melodrama) fateful trip, Roland started going crazy. It happens, sometimes, to werewolves who get too old. They get out of touch with reality and, at some point, they just snap.

Age-related insanity manifests differently in every werewolf. For Roland it meant paranoia. He was obsessed with rooting out disloyalty in the pack, convinced that his wolves were conspiring against him. In Roland's defense, in many cases he was right, just because he was so crazy that even loyalists wanted him dead or, at the very least, removed from power. Nobody sane wants to serve a madman.

The end result of this was that he killed a number of werewolves in his own pack. Trying to make up the difference, he ordered his people to replenish their numbers by the traditional method. Although being attacked by a werewolf isn't as foolproof a way of becoming one yourself as some of the more recent stories claim (only about a third of victims change successfully, and a lot of those die shortly thereafter), it works often enough to make it a valid means of making more werewolves. Insane, but valid.

So he had his wolves target anyone who they thought might make it as a wolf. And, more to the point, people they could attack without being noticed.

I'm not sure why Roland's second, a werewolf even crazier than his boss who was addicted to the hunt, chose Kyra. Probably we'll never know, because anyone who might have is dead now. Whatever the reason, he *did* attack her that night, she *did* beat the odds and survive, and she *did* become a werewolf.

Ordinarily, the pack supports new wolves until they've come to grips with what they've become and they can keep it under control. Well, it shouldn't surprise you that when it comes to a pack like Roland's that all goes right out the window. They didn't do jack to help Kyra. In point of fact Roland encouraged some of the worst of it, on the basis that it would break new wolves' spirits and keep them from rebelling. He didn't want to go to the effort of bringing in new blood just for them to turn traitor as well.

Of course, being crazy, the notion of just treating them well enough to inspire loyalty never occurred to him.

Normally it takes about, oh, three or four months for a werewolf's sanity to stabilize, or for the pack to decide it never will. After that period things calm down for most wolves. In this case, things worked differently. The new wolves—Kyra was only one of several that were changed in the same way—were physically and emotionally abused in a continuing effort to break them. The slightest display of defiance would provoke him to a screaming rage. I'm not going to go into detail about what was done to them. Suffice to say that it was bad, and you can probably guess most of it. I suppose it could have been worse—there was no rape involved, and no outright torture—but it was still pretty awful.

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Eventually, after four years of abuse and at least one suicide attempt, she came in to work at Pryce's with a bruise covering half her face on a day I happened to eat there. She interpreted it as a come-on (incorrectly—after my werewolf-heavy youth I have no interest in becoming romantically involved with one) when I asked her what had happened, and brushed it off as an accident of some sort. Probably walking into a door; that does seem to be the traditional choice, although honestly it seems a little ridiculous to me. I mean, does *anybody* buy that line anymore?

Anyway, the salient fact is that she was lying. More importantly, she was lying *badly*. Her tone, her posture, everything about her made it clear she was being dishonest. (The ridiculous excuse helped a lot, of course. I might not have noticed it otherwise, but come on.) She started to walk away, and I reached out to touch her wrist. I was planning on just telling her that it was fine if she didn't want to talk about it, but she should at least have a believable excuse.

My first indication of what was really going on was when she flinched away from even that minimal of contact. She wasn't angry, either—just afraid, absolutely and instantly terrified, for no real reason.

So, long story short, I got the real story out of her. Once called on it she seemed almost desperate to finally talk to somebody about what was happening. The bruise was from one of the other werewolves, needless to say. I forget what, exactly, was the pretense for it. Something inconsequential, I know that much.

I try not to get involved in other people's business, and I'm generally pretty good at it. Once I realized what was going on, though...well, let's just say it trumped my standard policy of noninterference. I went straight home and called some people. When the dust settled, there were a number of bodies. Roland's was one of them.

Even after that, though, I made it out all right. Kyra was the only werewolf I thought of as a close friend, and the only one I'd seen more than a handful of times in the past three years. I left the pack alone, and they returned the courtesy. It had been the most peaceful and maybe the most pleasant time of my life.

And whaddaya know, here I was sticking my nose into pack business again. You'd really think that someday I'd learn.

Chapter Two

My current project was a chessboard which, like most of the work I do, was made out of wood. While Val advertised mostly mechanic work, I'm not really all that great as a mechanic. I am reasonably great as a cabinetmaker and at woodworking in general, so most of the time that's what I do.

When I'd been working on it about two hours, someone started pounding on the front door. It took me a couple seconds to realize it was probably a customer rather than someone from the pack, which should tell you something about the state of mind I was in. We were closed, but the light was on, and plenty of the regulars knew that meant someone was there who would probably be willing to help them.

It turned out to be Anna Rossi, one of my very few human friends. She had short brown hair and dark eyes, and a face that had more character than beauty to it. She wasn't wearing perfume today, so I could smell her more clearly than normal, an odor defined by notes of olive oil and oregano. You spend your days in a kitchen, you smell like food.

"Winter," she greeted me warmly. "I was in the neighborhood and I saw your light was on, so I thought I'd come check on my cabinet."

I grinned at her. "Good timing. I finished it yesterday. Come on back and take a look." She'd ordered the china cabinet a week and a half ago when she realized she didn't have anything for a friend's birthday. She claimed I was the only one who could get her something in that time frame, but I kind of doubt that was really why she asked me. Anna, I was fairly sure, was one of those people that always felt responsible for the wellbeing of her friends. At least she acted that way with me.

Of course, when we met I was still holding a cardboard sign on street corners on my days off. That might have something to do with it. Just maybe.

When I first met Anna, I thought she was Italian. I mean, dark hair, dark eyes, Mediterranean complexion, smells like olive oil, last name is Rossi, how much more Italian does it get? It turned out I was only a quarter right; her father was native Italian, but his mother was a Spaniard and he married a Cherokee. That's what she said, at any rate; I'd never met either of them, and I sure couldn't see Cherokee in Anna's face.

She spent a good twenty minutes looking at the various works in progress in the shop, including the chessboard I'd started that morning. Finally she made it to her cabinet, made of birch and cherry, and spent another fifteen minutes there, examining every surface in detail until I wanted to scream. I mean, I like having my work be appreciated as much as the next guy, but enough is enough.

I still carried it out to her Jeep, though. She was a friend, I was raised to be polite, and Val would have my head if he knew I made a customer carry their own furniture. Probably not literally, but you never know with the fae.

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It took some work, but the cabinet fit into the storage area of the Jeep nicely enough. Anna insisted on paying me twice what it was probably worth—like I said, she's a giving person. I protested, but not very hard. I needed the cash. Besides, Anna pulls down more money as a high-end chef than I've ever made in my life.

"Hey, Anna," I said as she started her car. "Could you tell your brother to come by today if he gets a chance? I've been meaning to call him, but..." I shrugged helplessly. I actually hadn't wanted to talk to him until that morning, but it was still true enough.

Anna laughed. "I think I can guess what happened; I saw how much work you have to do in there. Don't worry, I'll send him over whether he gets a chance or not." She grinned out the window and waved at me as she drove away, one moderately expensive gift tucked in back.

I watched her out of sight and then went back into the shop. I was already past second thoughts, and working on having fourth thoughts about the plan coalescing in my head.

It should be noted for the record that my objections were not baseless, and were in fact probably the contribution of the—relatively small—sane portion of my mind. What I was doing was dangerous. Really dangerous. Idiotically dangerous.

One of the most important things to remember about werewolves is that you are always, always dealing with the pack. Most of the time it's not a big deal. Werewolves are individuals, and mostly they only act as a group on matters that affect the whole pack. That's why, for example, I could stay close friends with Kyra for years without having to interact with any of the other wolves in her pack.

This time, though, I wasn't just dealing with her. This was likely to involve the other werewolves, which meant I had to concern myself with the pack. That meant following pack protocol, something I hadn't been doing.

Long story short, werewolves have a hierarchical system. The more dominant a werewolf is, the higher they rank. The few submissive wolves are at the bottom. At the top is the Alpha—a term borrowed from grey wolf literature, and no, I don't know what they were called before that. Possibly the scientists actually started using the word after the werewolves did.

Dominance is mostly a part of your personality, and it isn't limited to werewolves. Odds are good that you know a perfectly normal person who doesn't like to give orders or make decisions for others, would rather follow than lead, and is happy being told what to do and when to do it. They probably don't like confrontation, and they might not be willing to contradict authority even if they think it's wrong. You may even be a person like that yourself. If so, congratulations! If you were changed you would almost certainly be a submissive werewolf.

Dominance is tricky to define, though, because it isn't just the opposite of submission. It's not about forcing others to obey. It is about being willing to direct others, refusing to cede authority, things like that. Mostly it's a desire for control. A dominant person will not willingly allow control—of their own actions, of their environment, of their group—to be taken from them.

That's not a bad thing. Dominant personalities tend to be good leaders, organizers, managers, and so on. They also tend to make successful werewolves, because they strive to control rather than allowing themselves to be controlled. Submissive werewolves are a lot more likely to allow the wolf to control them, and werewolves who do that die. That's why, although submissive personalities make up about half of the human population, almost all werewolves were at least slightly dominant.

Kyra was a dominant wolf, definitely in the top half of the pack. Probably in the top five out of twenty-five or so—the local pack was a little on the small side, as such things go. I didn't exactly keep close track of who fell where in the pack, because I never really cared.

What I did know was that she wasn't highly enough ranked to involve an outsider in pack business. That was a privilege restricted to the Alpha. Christopher Morgan, the local Alpha, was a decent person who was generally pretty reasonable. He liked me, and he felt like he owed me for getting Roland taken care of.

Challenging his authority was still really stupid, which I knew. The Alpha can't tolerate challenges to his authority. Other werewolves, whether they want to or not, will perceive it as a sign of weakness, which is an extremely dangerous thing to show a werewolf. If I played this wrong, or it got out of hand, it was entirely possible that Christopher would have to kill me to keep his pack in line. He would try to avoid it, he would regret the necessity of it, but I'd still wind up dead.

There are reasons I don't like getting involved in pack business.

The next time I heard someone at the door was less than an hour after Anna left. In a mystery novel, that time it would have been the pack visitor I had been afraid of the first time. Somewhat to my disappointment, it was Enrico, who must have been off work to make it there that quickly.

I met Enrico Rossi entirely by accident, while he was working undercover. That's where he spends most of his time, although I don't really know what he does—I'm better at keeping out of police business than most of the rules I make for myself. When I met him he had been posing as a Hispanic gang member, but I know he has at least a dozen personas that he can play just as well, ranging from a homeless man to a lawyer. He's astonishingly good at it.

Enrico did not inherit his sister's distinctive and memorable appearance. His skin, hair, and eyes are all just a touch darker, making him look more Mexican than Italian, and his features are best described as nondescript. He's the sort of guy who could step into a phone booth wearing a superhero costume, walk out looking like an investment banker, and convince you that it made sense *even though you saw the whole thing*. The man's incredible.

I had no idea he was anything other than what he looked like when I met him. We were both eating at the same taco truck; me because I was poor, it was cheap and I didn't have to go far from my house or Val's shop to get there, him because it fit his disguise of a Mexican gangster. I'd been seeing

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him there for a few weeks and made casual conversation with him a couple times when a man in a ski mask tried to rob the place.

I kinda feel sorry for that man. A criminal has certain expectations when he holds up a roadside food vendor. They generally don't include one of the customers breaking your arm and taking your gun away—growing up around werewolves I'd learned more than a little about how to fight. Especially the parts which can be charitably described as dirty. I'd had a plastic dish of lime juice, onions, and jalapeños to hand, and he hadn't enjoyed having that in his eyes very much.

When another customer who is obviously about as law-abiding a citizen as you are pulls out a pistol and a badge and arrests you on the spot, I imagine it just makes your day that much worse.

I still get special treatment and a discount at that taco truck. Enrico doesn't, because the owner doesn't recognize him. He's *that* good.

Today he wasn't in costume, although he wasn't in uniform either. He looked just like the sort of unremarkable, moderately prosperous person you might expect to find managing a business or running a store. As far as I could tell that was the closest he came to taking all his masks off.

"Anna said you wanted to talk to me?" he said by way of greeting, grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator we kept in the office and sitting down.

"Yeah," I said, taking the seat opposite his and trying to think of a polite way to phrase what I was going to say next. Eventually, I decided it didn't exist and just came right out and told him. "Look, I need a favor. I need a really, really big favor."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" he said cheerfully, leaning back casually—and, I noticed, just as casually placing his hand near where a shoulder holster might ride. That might have just been my paranoia talking, but I didn't think so.

I grinned at him anyway. "No, probably not. There was a death last night in Manitou, a real nasty one. The body looks like it was savaged by animals. You know the one I'm talking about?"

Enrico leaned forward, any trace of casualness gone from his posture. "How do you know about that, Winter?" he asked sharply.

I shrugged. "I know somebody who mentioned it. Anyway, if there's another death like that one, is there any way you could get me in to look at the scene?"

He gave me a hard look, which didn't faze me at all. Not that his was bad—but I grew up surrounded by werewolves. Compared to some of them his wasn't all that impressive. "What, you want to look at the body before we tell the media?" His voice was hard.

I snorted. "No. In fact, I'd really rather not look at it at all. But," I paused here, not sure how much I should tell him. "There is a very small chance that I could see something useful soon after it happens. Something that the cops wouldn't see."

He grinned at me in a way that wasn't—quite—patronizing. "We hear that all the time, Winter. People watch too many episodes of CSI and get to thinking they know better than the forensic people. Truth is they're good at what they do. They aren't likely to overlook some crucial detail that you're going to just walk in and see."

"That's not what I meant," I said quietly. "Besides, you really think forensics is going to turn up anything useful?"

The grin faded from his face. "Probably not. If they were going to they already would have, I suppose."

I gave him a puzzled look. "I thought they usually took more than a day about their stuff."

He shrugged. "Well, sure, but I don't think they're feeling real hopeful. I mean, I guess they might find something this time, but they've had almost a month to look at this mess and they haven't got anything. The whole station's been talking about it."

There'd been other deaths? Almost a month of deaths? Kyra hadn't mentioned anything like that—and I didn't think she'd have concealed it from me.

I couldn't afford to ask Enrico about it, though. Revealing that I'd only known about one death wasn't likely to increase his confidence that I could help.

Instead, I told him "It's not real likely they'll find it next time, either, then. Is it."

He sighed and shook his head. "No," he said, standing up. "It's not." He paused. "You really think you can do some good?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I don't really know. It couldn't hurt anything."

He hesitated, then sighed. "Look, Winter, I can't get you in. I'm not assigned to this case. But I'll talk to some people who are and see if they can do anything. If they can I'll call you."

He left without saying goodbye.

After that conversation I wasn't in the mood to work any more. I locked the shop up behind me and started walking home. It wasn't a terribly long walk, and it was one I took on a regular basis. It didn't take me very long.

My house was on the far western edge of the city, in an undesirable part of town. It was too far to be convenient to pretty much anything, but not so excluded that it could be scenic and desirable. I could see the forested slopes of the Peak and its surrounding foothills, but they weren't anywhere near me. Where I lived there wasn't anything more scenic than borderline desert spotted with crabgrass and the occasional scraggly bush.

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I call it a house, but I'm not honestly sure that it deserves the name. I live in a literal log cabin, which I think was built in the nineteenth century and not renovated since. Okay, that might be an exaggeration; it has indoor plumbing, and a gas stove, so it must have had *some* work done. On the other hand, there was no furnace and the insulation was crap, meaning that only the room with the woodstove ever really got warm. Nobody wanted to live in it and it hadn't been worth building anything else in that neighborhood, so it had sat empty for years before I moved in, looking rather lonely in the middle of that desolate space. I don't have any close neighbors, because nobody's interested in living near me. Occasionally some company or other considers building something nearby, but so far none of them had even made it to the planning stage.

I bought the cabin and the lot it sits on when I first moved to Colorado Springs, when I had a little more money available than I did now. I think most of the people who had seen it found it distinctly unappealing. For me, it was perfect. It had solitude, and lots of open space, and there wasn't much traffic through the area. It was also cheap enough that I could afford to buy it, which not many places were.

Just now I felt as happy to see it as I ever had. It had only been a few hours since I'd left, but I felt exhausted and I really, really wanted to sit down.

When I opened the front door, I found that the pack still hadn't sent anyone. That meant that either Christopher didn't know that Kyra had asked for my help or—more likely—he knew but had chosen to allow me the opportunity to make amends for my breach of pack politics. Like I said, he's fairly reasonable as werewolves go. He would give me every opportunity.

It seemed wise to take it while I could, so I sat on my battered couch and called Christopher. He'd given me the number years ago, but this was the first time I'd ever used it.

He answered on the second ring. "Hello?" Christopher sounded much the same as he looked, like a pleasant, well-educated young man. It was, of course, a carefully constructed mask, which bore about as much resemblance to reality as Enrico's pretense of being a criminal.

"Christopher?" I said, making sure to keep my voice equally level and polite. "This is Winter. Kyra called me for help with that body this morning...?"

"I know," Christopher replied, his voice not sounding quite so polite now. See? I was right.

"Then you know that she couldn't smell anything."

It hadn't been a question, but he chose to answer anyway. "Yes, she told me. Did you have any more success?"

"Not really. Everything I saw said werewolf, but a new werewolf couldn't hide his scent." I paused briefly, then continued, "I have a friend in the police. He says he might be able to get me in to look at any other bodies they find like this." Tone of voice was very important with werewolves. Right now, I couldn't afford to sound like I was instructing Christopher, or even making a request; it had to be

an offer instead. It's important not to make dominant wolves think you're ordering them around when you don't have the authority to do so. It's even more important when you're dealing with Alphas. All their instincts rebel against that. It doesn't overwrite their personality, but I believe in playing it safe where possible.

"Go ahead," Christopher said after a brief pause. "You can call Kyra in to see if she smells anything, too. Keep me posted."

"Wait a second," I said hastily before he could hang up on me. "Did you know there've been other deaths like last night's? Happening in the past month?"

There was a longer pause before he answered this time. "What?" he said, his voice quiet and very, very dangerous.

"When I mentioned the body in Manitou, my friend said that forensics has had almost a month to look at this mess."

"Did you ask him what he meant?"

"No," I said, growing exasperated. "I was trying to convince him to trust me enough to let me look at a crime scene, Christopher. Telling him I didn't know what was going on wasn't exactly the best way to go about it, now was it?"

"I haven't heard anything about other deaths, Winter. Is it possible that your friend was lying? Maybe leading you on to see how much you actually knew?"

I hesitated. "I don't think so," I said eventually. "I suppose it's possible, but it's not really his style."

"I see," Christopher said softly. "I'll be talking to the people who should have told me about something like that, then. Thank you, Winter."

I hung up. It had been a long time since I had to deal with a pack, and I found I was unaccustomed to the precarious nature of it. There'd been a time when I wouldn't have thought anything of a conversation like that. I wasn't entirely sure whether I was more worried that I was out of practice at dealing with the wolves, or glad that I'd managed to avoid dealing with werewolves long enough to get out of practice.

Of course, that might not have been the only thing bothering me. Werewolves take a dim view of incompetence. If whoever should have been monitoring this had been doing such a poor job that almost a month passed before they realized people were dying, they would probably be facing some fairly severe punishment. If Christopher decided that it had been a deliberate attempt to keep him in the dark, well, it would be worse. A lot worse. You can't afford to be lenient when you're dealing with werewolves. They're predators, and some part of them will always interpret a move like that as a sign of weakness.

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It was entirely possible that that phone call had signed someone's death warrant. Maybe that was why I felt so disturbed. I've killed people, but I'm not comfortable with it. That's comforting, really.

In any case, I'd accomplished something. I could, if Enrico managed it, take a look at the next in what was apparently a series of deaths without incurring trouble with the pack. And I knew that either Enrico was playing me, or Christopher was, or else he honestly hadn't known what was happening. I wasn't sure which prospect I disliked most.

I don't sit around and mope when I get upset. That's never made me feel better, and I guess I never saw the attraction of feeling awful.

One thing that does make me feel better is doing something, anything, just so that I can feel like I'm accomplishing something. Most of the time that means doing something unrelated to what makes me upset, because I can't fix it and I don't want to think about it. Usually it's work, like earlier today when I'd worked on that chessboard. This time I decided to do housework. I'd been putting off cleaning for weeks, and it really needed done.

It still didn't take me very long. My cabin wasn't large, at all. I was the proud owner of one kitchen, one bathroom, and two bedrooms, one of which served as my de facto living room, office, and storage area. I did the dishes, which in my house accumulate at a snail's pace most of the time, and did a certain amount of dusting as well.

Anna is an excellent cook. Kyra isn't quite as good, but she can still make some pretty good food. I can't, which is why I had a frozen pizza for dinner. It wasn't very good. Most of the time I probably wouldn't have bothered but, like the werewolves, I tend to eat more around the full moon. I'm not quite sure how much of that is upbringing and how much is natural.

After my meager meal I took a plate of brownies I'd made the day before into the spare bedroom. They were significantly better than the pizza, loaded with chopped walnuts and chocolate chips. I'm a terrible cook, but I can make tolerable dessert when I'm motivated.

While I ate I looked online for any mention of the deaths Enrico had mentioned. I didn't find anything, which wasn't much of a surprise—there was no way in hell Christopher's people would have missed something that obvious. Then, thanks to the peculiar way the Internet works, I wound up reading about Indonesian folklore for an hour and a half.

I have this hobby—although, if I'm going to be completely honest, it might be better described as an obsession. I study mythological creatures. I've been doing it for most of my life now.

I have a whole list of reasons that this is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. A lot of those beings aren't nearly as imaginary as science likes to pretend, for example, and knowing what their abilities and weaknesses are is likely to be important if I ever encounter one. Even knowing how to recognize them might be important.

They're good reasons, and they're true. But, once again being completely honest, they're complete bullshit. The real reason I started doing this was to figure out what I am, an endeavor which has so far been unsuccessful.

See, here's the thing. What I'd told Kyra about my mother was true. She was inclined to sleep with anything that moved, and I'm not sure that's as figurative as I would like it to be. When you have a mother like that, trying to figure out who and what your father was is a pretty tricky task.

She did at least know what encounter had resulted in me. I never heard the story from her, and barring a miracle or heavy-duty necromancy I never will; she committed suicide by disinterest when I was about six months old. She told her sister what happened, though, and my aunt basically raised me until I was eleven.

According to her, my mother said that she was roaming the forests of western Canada under the full moon in December. Needless to say she was in wolf form, partially because of the full moon and mostly because she was in the forests of western Canada in December, and humans really aren't built for those conditions.

Apparently she was approached by a large and extremely attractive male wolf at that point. Now, werewolves don't turn into wolves, exactly—they are larger by a wide margin, and more heavily built as well. They're close enough to wolves to justify the name werewolf, though, and that was more than close enough for my mother's taste.

I did say she'd screw anything that moved.

Apparently the two had an excellent time that night, or more properly several. I'm really not comfortable even contemplating that scene. Some things are just too icky even for me.

So, moving right along. After that night my mother realized a few things. The first was that my father was gone, having left no scent she could track and no prints in the fresh snow, which should have been impossible and was her first indication that he was something more than he seemed. The second was that she had no desire whatsoever to have sex with anyone or anything else. Considering her usual habits that's probably either a change in attitude equal to the conversion of the entire Roman Empire to Christianity, or an indication that my father was so good that every other living thing on earth paled in comparison, at least to her mind. Again, not something I want to think about.

It took her a while to realize she was pregnant, probably because it should have been impossible. Although male werewolves have been documented to father children as wolves—I don't know the details and I *really* don't want to—females basically can't conceive in wolf form. Without getting too graphically detailed, the female body produces all its sex cells at birth. As such it won't produce more eggs after changing shape, making it physiologically impossible for them to become pregnant. And, according to my mother's presumably detailed and shameless description, she had stayed in fur throughout that encounter. That might have been because there were limits to even her perversity, but everyone I'd spoken to thought it more likely that she didn't think she could convince the

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wolf to perform with a human body. Which, like many of my mother's exploits, was disturbing in the extreme.

Having somehow overcome that barrier, there remained the fact that most female werewolves can't bear children by normal means, because the transition from one shape to the other is too jarring and violent for the fetus to survive. Werewolves don't actually have to shift to the wolf every time the full moon comes around, but the urge to do so is very strong, and becomes stronger the longer they go without shifting. There aren't more than a dozen werewolves, of either sex, in the entire world who could go for the requisite nine months without changing once. My mother had not been one of that dozen.

When she learned she was pregnant, she went to the Alpha of her pack, in northern Wyoming, and told him she wanted to go and live with her family so that they would be nearby when she gave birth. That was a bit of a strange request, given that she'd never really gotten along with them that well, but he agreed anyway. Werewolves tend to understand not wanting people there to see you when you're vulnerable.

Somehow she pulled it off, and I was born in the middle of September in my aunt's house in northeastern Oregon. She named me Winter after that night in the woods, and Wolf for a surname. I suppose it fits, but I'm not fond of my last name and I don't use it much. I already inherited eyes of a golden shade which, while technically within human possibility, look like they belong on a wolf better than a man. A lot of people assume they're colored contacts. My hair also resembles an animal's, although not so visibly. It looks black at a glance, but it's actually dark grey, and has a tendency to become matted in remarkably little time. Having a name like Winter Wolf (I don't have a middle name) on top of that really makes it seem like I actively try to resemble a literal wolf, when the truth is that it was an accident of birth.

My mother never recovered, mentally. She'd already lost interest in sex, but after I was born she just faded away. She spent most of her time as a wolf, alone. Eventually she lost interest in food as well, and less than a week later they buried her.

Once I started to understand all of this, I was very interested in what my father had been. I think probably it would be more worrisome if I weren't a bit obsessed with it, really. Unfortunately, in a decade and a half of looking, all I'd managed was a long list of things he wasn't.

By the time that I made it to bed, it was almost midnight, later than I usually stayed up. That was all right, though; I didn't have to be at work tomorrow until I felt like it. I figured I'd just sleep a little late and everything would be fine.

Chapter Three

As it turned out I didn't sleep until my alarm went off at eight, because the phone went off six inches from my head at three thirty in the morning.

It brought me out of what was already fairly light sleep. I don't often sleep very well near the full moon; it makes my magic too restless. Between that and my hearing I didn't have a chance of sleeping through the phone.

Being woken up by the phone at three o'clock isn't my idea of a good time. I picked up the phone and let the person on the other end know that, although not quite that politely.

"Yeah, I probably wouldn't have called except I thought you wanted to see the body. If it's too much trouble I guess I can call back later, though," Enrico said dryly.

That woke me up fast. "There's been another murder?" I asked him.

"Murder?" Enrico said, not sounding casual at all now. "Is that what this is about?"

Oh shit. "I don't think so great at three in the freaking morning. I meant to say another death."

"Yeah, I'm sure you did. Look, the guy I talked to just called to tell me that they found another body like the others. He thinks he can get me in before anybody comes to look at it, but only if I get there real soon."

"Great. Can you pick me up at my house?" Enrico knew where I lived.

"Be there in ten." He hung up, and I called another number.

Kyra's reaction to being woken up was about the same as mine, although it involved slightly more creative use of profanity. I waited for her to calm down a bit, then told her, "There's been another death. Can you be at my house in ten minutes? I've got a friend taking me out to look at it."

"I'll be there," Kyra said.

"Thanks. Don't bother with your nice clothes." I hung up on her without saying goodbye and started getting dressed myself, in the same clothes I'd worn yesterday.

I wouldn't have called Kyra if I had any choice in the matter; I didn't want to involve her further, and I doubted that she would be very useful. Her senses were more acute than mine, sure, but if I concentrated I could still pick out the scent of werewolf. Besides, I was pretty sure that physical senses weren't going to be any more use than they had been for the last corpse. And I didn't want to get her any more mixed up in this mess than she already was.

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Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice in the matter. Christopher had talked around the subject, and he had been polite about it, but I knew how to listen. Ostensibly he had offered Kyra's services to me. Alpha werewolves are a bit like the mafia, though. When they say they have an offer for you, it takes a foolish man to say no, however politely they might phrase it.

My hearing was plenty good enough to hear it when Enrico turned down my road thirteen minutes later. I couldn't distinguish his car by sound, but it didn't take a genius to figure out who it was; that area didn't see a lot of traffic even in the daytime.

I was waiting for him out front of my house when he pulled up. When it became clear that I wasn't going to get in his car—which was significantly nicer than Kyra's—immediately, he turned it off and got out.

"What you waiting for?" Enrico's voice was cheerful once again, at odds with his rather grim expression. Today he looked very much like a cop, although he wasn't in uniform. I don't know if he ever wears a uniform. Actually, I don't know if he owns a uniform.

"A friend of mine. She should be here in a few minutes. Hope you don't mind."

He gave me a hard look, but said "No, that's fine. I mean, I'm already illegally aiding you in trespassing on a crime scene. What's one more?"

I frowned. "Are you risking your neck for me here?" Enrico was my friend; I didn't want to endanger his job.

He shook his head. "Not really. I think the people covering this are so desperate they'd try just about anything. They won't tell anybody."

About that time Kyra rounded my trailer into view. She'd made pretty good time, but then werewolves can really move when they're motivated. Four feet and supernatural physical abilities can do that for a person.

"Holy shit," Enrico said, falling back a step and going for his gun. "That's the biggest dog I've ever seen." Kyra was about average in size as a wolf, the same as human, but that's still bigger than just about any natural canine. Her fur was about the same walnut-brown as her hair as a human, but her eyes were green rather than blue. She'd come as the wolf, like I'd asked her to. Obliquely, but not speaking directly about werewolfery over the phone was an ingrained habit for both of us.

"Easy," I said hastily. "She's a friend."

He looked like he wasn't sure he believed me. "That's your dog?"

I snorted. "Not hardly. She's willing to pretend, though." I walked over to Enrico's car and held open the door for her. Kyra jumped in casually. Unlike most real dogs, she didn't seem smaller inside a vehicle; she sprawled across the entire back seat, and she was a little cramped at that.

I tossed the plastic grocery bag I'd brought next to her and shut the door. Enrico was just starting to move when I got into the passenger seat to wait for him. He didn't ask any questions when he got in, just started driving with a thoughtful look on his face.

I've always wondered whether Enrico knows what I am—or something of it, anyway. I'm not a werewolf, but I have enough in common with them to give off certain cues. Nothing obvious, but enough small clues can add up. Enrico had had years to pick up on them, and watching people is pretty much his job. I'd be more surprised if he *didn't* at least suspect something, really.

At this time of night the roads were just about empty. Once he got onto a main road he turned east, driving through the dark and empty streets quite a bit faster than was legal. Kyra and I both watched the darkened lots flashing by the windows. I was remembering other nights, many of them even darker and less pleasant than this. I don't know what she was thinking. I don't think I want to.

Kyra's mind was a nice place once, I think. Once.

We rode in silence until Enrico turned north onto the Interstate. There we started seeing other vehicles, mostly delivery trucks. A fine rain had started falling, and the headlights shone oddly through the water.

"So where're we going?" I asked finally, tired of the melancholy memories.

"Up near the Air Force Academy," Enrico said quietly. I wondered whether maybe he was also lost in old, ugly memories. As a cop he probably had plenty.

"That's a long way from Manitou," I pointed out.

He grimaced. "That's part of what's driving them crazy. I don't know where the first one was, but the second and third deaths were less than ten blocks from this one. Then the fourth down in the southern part of the city, and the fifth one in the middle of town. The sixth you already heard about, out in Manitou, and this one makes seven."

Seven deaths? I wouldn't have guessed it was that bad. "What are they blaming it on?" It was very important that nobody even started muttering "werewolf" around the station. If that happened, well, things might get bad. Very bad. People would probably die. I might be one of them. Werewolves take their privacy seriously.

"Hell if I know," Enrico said grimly. "At first I think they said bear, but a bear wouldn't have that large of a range. The other day I heard somebody mention that it might be ritual murders, like a gang initiation or something."

I relaxed a little. That was a much safer thing for the cops to chase after. For that matter, it might even be accurate. At this point, I really didn't have enough evidence to say one way or the other what was going on.

Almost Winter (Winter's Tale)

In the back, Kyra was whining a little. I hadn't thought to call and tell her about the other deaths yesterday, and I hadn't had time this morning, so this all came as a shock to her. I glared at her anyway; it would absolutely not do for Enrico to realize that she understood every word we were saying. Dogs aren't supposed to be that smart.

We got off the Interstate and turned east, heading out toward the plains. It wasn't a part of town I was familiar with; when you don't have a car you're kind of limited in how far you can travel. Especially in a city like Colorado Springs; it sprawls across more land than a lot of cities that are much larger, and the public transit isn't worth a whole lot.

Eventually Enrico turned off into one of the housing developments. I'm not sure how he found the right one; they always look the same to me, but he didn't have any trouble finding the right building.

He hadn't been kidding when he said he could get me in before anybody else. The house wasn't even surrounded by police tape. There was one cop car parked outside, but no other sign that anything was wrong. The lot itself was practically empty as well, just a smattering of cars parked outside the houses of still-sleeping residents. There were no other people in sight at all.

"Where's your friend?" I asked him. I would prefer not to involve any other cops in this.

Enrico smiled at me without much humor. "He said he'd make himself scarce for a while. No sense both of us getting in trouble."

I was starting to have serious doubts about whether he'd been telling the truth when he claimed that this little adventure was safe for him.

I didn't let that slow me down. I knew Enrico well enough that I was pretty sure he'd have felt hurt if I kept trying to protect him. If he hadn't been willing to deal with the consequences, he wouldn't have offered to help me. He wasn't that sort of man.

Kyra whined softly as we approached the front door. She smelled the blood, even outside the building. I could, too, and my senses weren't nearly as good as hers when she was in fur.

The door Enrico let us through wasn't locked, although he did lock it behind us. To keep his friend from accidentally stumbling in on us, presumably.

This house was nicer than the last one, all the furnishings a little newer, and matching. There were a few tasteful paintings hanging on the walls, and the carpet was perfectly clean. There was something unsettling about it, though. It made me think of a zoo exhibit; it had all the trappings of a natural habitat, but there was something lacking, indefinable and unmistakable. It smelled like blood, of course, and under that disinfectant and air freshener. The end result was reminiscent of a hospital, never my favorite kind of place; maybe that was part of what unnerved me about the house.

I followed Enrico through the building, down a short hallway decorated with more paintings, and around a corner. I glanced at the kitchen—more of the same, all stainless steel and surgically clean

surfaces—before following him upstairs. Kyra crowded behind me, all but treading on my shoes, and I could feel her steadily growing discomfort pressing against my mind. Communicating with predators, and werewolves are essentially no different from other predators, is one of the few things my magic lets me do. Most of the time it's more of an inconvenience than a gift.

The second floor matched the first, right down to the neutral grey paint. There was a short hallway with four doors leading off it. Three of the doors were solidly closed; the fourth was hanging open slightly, the light leaking out from behind it providing the only illumination in that hallway, and it was from behind that door that the smell of blood was coming.

I nerved myself and then stepped into the room. It had been a study, I think, and was the first room I'd seen in that house that felt lived in.

And, of course, died in.

This room, unlike the last site, showed signs of a struggle. The expensive office chair, which I presumed the victim had been sitting in, had been upended and was sitting upside-down in the corner, one of its wheels snapped off. A number of books had fallen from the shelves and now rested on the floor, their covers bent and soaked in blood. I looked at the titles, including those still on the bookshelves, because the part of me that associated death with mystery novels was sure I would see a vital clue in them. It would appear that the deceased had been reluctant to offer me assistance of that sort, unless paperback spy novels and romances counted as a clue.

How to describe the body? It was a lot like the last one, really. I found that I noticed mostly the details. The way the throat had been ripped out, completely, exposing the spine from chin to chest. Said spine was in two sections, having been severed just below the chin, leaving her head attached only by what little muscle was intact at the back of the neck. Once again the torso showed the heaviest damage, ripped open like a child might tear into a box; the heart was missing, like at the last scene, although the lungs were intact. The arms weren't as severely damaged as the previous corpse's, but her legs had been attacked more. The left thigh and groin had been ripped at, and the right leg had been literally torn off at the knee. The lower leg, which looked to have been gnawed on, was sitting next to the dead woman's head.

Nothing useful there, nothing new. I didn't think either Kyra or the forensics team was going to pick up anything more useful here than at the other sites. That left it up to me.

Some part of my mind is always focused on magic, the way it smells and flows across my skin. That was why, for example, I knew as soon as I met her that Kyra was a werewolf. Her power smelled like werewolf, the tingling bite of magic overlaid with predator's musk and a touch of lavender. But it was like any other sense; if I didn't pay attention to what it was telling me, I wouldn't get much out of it. And, much like any other sense, if you learn to really focus on it, you can get a surprising amount of information.

Almost Winter (Winter's Tale)

The first thing I could smell was Kyra. Her magic smelled like werewolf, obviously, and under that a touch of blood and darkness. No, I don't know how something can smell like darkness; probably it can't. It didn't matter, though; I wasn't really smelling anything. That's just how my mind interprets the sensation I was receiving. I dismissed that scent and moved on.

Enrico was the only human smell I could detect. Humans have always smelled, for whatever reason, like disinfectant to me, and he was no exception. The scent of his magic wasn't very strong; he didn't have the power of a werewolf or a mage. Under ordinary circumstances I couldn't have smelled it at all, but now my senses were very focused on it. It wasn't important right now, and I didn't pay it much attention.

Moving on, I could just catch my own scent. It was, naturally, a hopeless jumble. A little bit of werewolf was the most obvious tone, followed by old blood and freshly cut grass. I could barely detect the subtler scents of snow and cold. Most of the time I'm too surrounded by my magical scent to actually smell it, the same as my physical scent. It was still familiar, and I dismissed it easily.

At first I thought those were the only scents in the room. Then I realized that there was another, strong and pervasive enough that I could have picked it out even without the effort I was making, and I just hadn't caught it. I'd thought that the smell of blood was physical, but there was more to it than that.

As though reacting to my awareness, it grew stronger, richer, and I realized it wasn't just blood I was smelling. Blood wouldn't have bothered me, and this did. I could smell blood, but also rot, the stench of decay and corruption. It was a vile, choking miasma, as though the body in that room were weeks old rather than just hours.

It smelled evil, the way that Kyra could smell of darkness and I could smell of cold, but a thousand times stronger.

I had smelled something a bit like that before. Only once, and it had been years since that day, but I don't think I could ever forget the smell of demon.

Magical scents, unlike physical ones, seldom linger long. That was why I hadn't bothered really looking at the last scene. It also meant that whatever left that residue had been recent. Even a strong signature doesn't last longer than a day or so, and most fade within a couple of hours.

That was strange, because the one thing I didn't smell was werewolf. Everything about this—the timing, the injuries, every single detail—still screamed that it was a werewolf responsible. But I couldn't catch even a trace of one, and I could tell that Kyra wasn't having any better luck with physical scents.

I walked over to the body, Kyra padding along at my side, and stared down at it. This close I could make out individual wounds—the scratches and rips of claws, interspersed with deeper punctures left by fangs. The claws had seen more use than the teeth, at least until the victim was dead. The wounds were far more extensive than should have been necessary to be lethal.

"We should get out of here," Enrico said, glancing out the window.

"Happy to," I said honestly. Now that I was aware of it, the stink of evil pressed so hard against my senses that I was starting to feel physically ill. "Come on, Kyra," I said, stepping out the door into the hallway.

Enrico waited for Kyra before following me out, turning out the light and closing the door behind us. That left the hall in near total darkness, but that didn't bother me. My vision, unlike my other senses, isn't significantly better than human, but I handle darkness better.

Outside, Enrico's friend apparently still had plenty of time, because he was standing on the sidewalk chatting with a young woman who was probably on her way to work. He pretended not to notice us, and we returned the favor.

I expected Enrico to drive back to my house, but instead he pulled into the lot of a chain restaurant a few blocks away, which wouldn't open for about eight hours.

"Winter," he said, turning to look at me, "I went out on a limb for you tonight. Now, you're a good friend, and I don't think I'm likely to get in trouble for this. But I don't think it's too much to ask that you tell me what's going on here."

Well. This was just great. I didn't have a convenient story that would explain why I was interested without the werewolf aspect. Even if I did, I really didn't want to lie to him. At the same time, telling him that werewolves were real was a dangerous move. If he didn't believe me, I would probably go to an asylum. If he did, the pack might kill us both.

"Look," I said slowly, "there are things I can't talk to you about. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"That's the thanks I get for this? I took you at your word when you said you needed to see this. I just broke the law to get you in that room, because you said you could help. And now you're stonewalling me?" Enrico's voice held real anger now.

I looked away, feeling truly awful. Then I shook my head, once. "Screw it," I said, getting out of the car. "Come on. And don't say I didn't warn you."

I let Kyra out of the car. She gave me a warning look on the way by, which I pretended not to see while I grabbed the bag I'd brought and closed the door. "Come on," I told Enrico again, leading the way around the corner of the restaurant.

Around back was the inevitable Dumpster and delivery door. At the moment the place was deserted, and pitch black in the plentiful shadows. In short, it was as close as I could conveniently get to perfect privacy.

"Kyra," I said quietly, so as not to attract attention, "would you show him?" She glowered at me, and I added "Please. I'll take responsibility." I could tell she wasn't happy, but she stalked into the deepest shadows next to the Dumpster anyway. Kyra respected me.

Enrico was looking at me like I was crazy. "Are you talking to dogs now, Winter?"

"No. And you might not want to call her a dog. Some people find it offensive."

"You're telling me that's not a dog."

"Yeah, pretty much."

He pursed his lips. "That's a new one. I mean, I've heard some pretty lame attempts at explanation, but this one takes the..."

He trailed off there, because Kyra had started changing, and that's a real conversation stopper.

I've been around changing werewolves so often, and for so many years, that sometimes I forget just how remarkable it is. It's not a quick process; most werewolves take around ten minutes. Some of the more experienced ones can do it faster, but even they don't like to.

What that means is that Enrico and I could watch every detail of the change. We could see Kyra's bones shifting around under her skin. Some of the bones and joints had to break to accommodate the movements, which they did, audibly.

The change started at her extremities and spiraled in, with her face remaining lupine until the end. As her body began to appear more human in form, it started to change in less dramatic ways. Muscles shrank and shifted, moving from a quadrupedal orientation to that of a biped. Her fur started to recede, and darkened a little. I could hear her bones slipping back into the right configurations with little clicks and wet noises, which might have nauseated me if I hadn't seen it all before. Eventually she looked human once again, although she was still lying on the pavement with her eyes closed.

It was, as you may imagine, a painful process; ripping your body apart usually is. I'd experienced it a few times, and it really hurts. At the same time, though, it's amazing. I'd seen werewolves change at least a hundred times, and every time was unique, a little bit different from every other. Like snowflakes, but nastier.

Enrico just stood there, staring at Kyra the whole time. His face had gone pale, and his hand was once again on his concealed weapon—out of instinct, I think, rather than any thought of violence. He smelled like fear and shock, rather than anger. I reached over and gently removed it, anyway. Then I grabbed the bag.

Most werewolves, including Kyra, get in the habit of leaving clothing anywhere they spend much time. They can, technically, change wearing clothing, but it won't change with them. The end result is that they rip the fabric, a process which is *not* comfortable, and which is obviously hard on clothes. It also leaves them rather severely hampered, with whatever bits of clothing are remaining hanging off and tripping them. Most werewolves just strip first, and then get dressed again when they go to human.

Kyra's clothes weren't much nicer than mine. The bag she'd left with me had underwear, a faded and stained T-shirt, and a pair of jeans with holes in both knees, plus a pair of sandals that hadn't been worth much new, and were totally inappropriate to the weather. I left them next to her and walked

around the corner, taking Enrico with me. Kyra had about as much modesty as the average werewolf—which is to say none—but it's still just not polite to watch a woman dressing.

Kyra, I knew, would take her time. After the change, werewolves tend to be somewhat disoriented; it takes time to get used to a different body, and a werewolf is much different in human shape than in fur. Besides that, it took a little time to recover from the change physically. The stories about werewolves' supernatural healing abilities are based in fact, but there was a lot of minor damage to fix, and it would be a few minutes before she could move without any pain.

Eventually Kyra stepped around the corner. Her hair was plastered to her head by the rain, but her eyes were bright and fierce as she glared at me. "Have you gone insane?" she asked me bluntly. Even through the rain I could smell anger and fear from her.

"No more than usual," I told her. "Kyra, this is Enrico Rossi. He's a friend of mine who works in the police. Enrico, meet Kyra Walker. She's a friend of mine who happens to be a werewolf."

Kyra smirked and stuck her hand out. After a shocked pause, Enrico shook it.

"Nice to meet you and all that," Kyra said, "but seriously, Winter. Do you realize how stupid this is?"

"I think I have an idea, yes. Speaking of which..." I stepped forward and caught Enrico's eye. "I wasn't kidding when I said I couldn't talk to you about this. You need to promise me this doesn't go any further, not even to your sister."

He was starting to look more in control of himself, although I could still smell him sweating and his heart and breathing rates were elevated. In their heightened state my senses were more distracting than normal. "It seems to me," he said slowly, "that werewolves are something the police should know about."

"Oh no," Kyra said quickly. "That's a really bad idea."

"You think it was a werewolf that did this, though, don't you? That's why you called me." He gave me a cold look. "If werewolves are killing people, we need to know about it."

"If it was a werewolf, which it may not be, it won't be your problem." I hesitated, trying to decide how much I could safely tell him. "There are other werewolves," I said eventually. "Other than Kyra I can't tell you who they are in this city. But they exist, and they don't approve of slaughter like this. If this was done by a werewolf, they'll deal with it."

Enrico snorted. "You mean that they'll kill him."

I shrugged. "Maybe. But think about it. You really want to try and imprison a werewolf? Make him stand trial?" I shook my head. "It wouldn't work, Enrico. Besides, they'll only kill him if they think he did it intentionally."

Almost Winter (Winter's Tale)

"You don't kill seven people by accident, Winter."

"New werewolves do." Kyra's voice was a little strained, and I remembered that the pack had allowed her to commit murder when she was newly changed rather than helping her control herself. I think she killed three or four people.

I knew how she felt, exactly, but this wasn't helping to convince Enrico so I broke in. "Look, man. Have you ever felt so angry that you just wanted to smash somebody's face in? Or ram a car that just cut you off? Anything like that?"

"Yes," he said patiently. "But I didn't."

"Exactly," I said, nodding. "Now imagine what you would have done if you'd never felt anger before. If your first experience of what it felt like to be angry had been that intense, that unexpected, and you'd had the means to make it go away right there."

He opened his mouth, then paused. "I don't know what I'd have done," he said finally, his voice thoughtful. "I mean, I like to think I'd have done just what I did, but...I don't know. Are you saying that's what it's like to be a werewolf?"

"More or less," Kyra told him quietly. "But it's not really anger. We get territorial urges. The instinct to chase things that run, like dogs do. The impulse to react with violence to confrontation, or challenge." She paused. "Hunger."

Enrico shivered. "Christ."

Kyra's mention of hunger reminded me that she hadn't eaten this morning. She'd changed twice in less than an hour, too, and shifting takes a lot of energy. It's not only a physical exercise, it's a magical one, and neither effort is light.

"Look," I said, "I hate to interrupt and all, but I'm starving, I'm cold, and it's raining. Do either of you object to carrying on this conversation on the way to more habitable climes?"

Enrico, who had been staring at Kyra—unwisely, but she understood that it wasn't a challenge—started a little then shook his head. "No, of course not. Come on, I'll buy you both breakfast."

We piled back into his car. Kyra in the backseat took up significantly less space as a human than she had as a wolf—no surprise, since she was probably close to a hundred pounds lighter. I don't know where the extra mass comes from. Apparently it doesn't actually violate conservation of mass, but the explanation involved a whole bunch of advanced magical theory and complicated math, and I don't like math very much.

"So are all werewolves maniacs?" Enrico asked. His voice was back to its normal, cheerful self, which meant nothing at all.

I shook my head. "No, no more than all people are. They usually learn to keep it all under control within a few months, just like you don't ram the guy that cuts you off in traffic. Werewolves have a short temper, but other than that they aren't much more dangerous than your average human." I didn't tell Enrico what happened to the wolves that *didn't* learn self-control. He did not need to know that the pack executed the weaker-willed werewolves. It was necessary for their safety, but somehow I didn't think he'd see it that way.

"Huh," he said. Then, "So if this was a werewolf, he's only been one for a couple months."

I shrugged. "Maybe. But it shouldn't surprise you that sometimes werewolves go crazy. I mean, people do too, right?"

He took his attention off the road long enough to glance at me. "Crazy how?"

I shrugged again. "They decide they like killing more than they like living, and then..." I dragged a finger across my neck.

That killed the conversation for a while.

Chapter Four

We stopped at a Denny's for breakfast, because there weren't exactly a lot of places open at four in the morning. The morning rush would start soon, but right now there were only three other tables in the restaurant.

I waited until we'd ordered before I continued the conversation. It was bad enough I was telling Enrico this; I really didn't want to tell the waitress too. "Look, Enrico," I said, quietly enough that no one would overhear it unless they had ears at least as good as a werewolf. "I know you must have a lot of questions, but I really can't tell you anything. I'm not going to lie to you, but there are things I can't talk about. Even what I've already shown you could get us both killed if you start spreading it around."

He didn't look happy. "You think this is that serious?"

"No," I said with a thin smile, "I know it's that serious. Do you know anybody who believes, seriously believes, in werewolves?" I didn't wait for him to answer. "You know they exist now. Have you thought about how hard it would be to keep that hidden? How much work it took them to make sure that everybody has assumed they're just a myth for the past several hundred years?" I paused to let that sink in. "They take their privacy seriously, Enrico. If you start mentioning this to people, even if they don't believe you, you'll die. If they know that I told you then I die, too."

He swore under his breath. I don't think I was meant to hear it, but my hearing is quite a bit sharper than human average. "You're sure that the pack will take care of it?"

I gave him a sharp look. "What gave you the idea that the werewolves are a pack?"

He grinned at me. "You did, just now. But it's what they're called in all the stories, so..." he shrugged.

I sighed. "All right. Yes, they run in packs, although the term comes from actual wolves, not stories. And yes, they'll take care of the problem. Although you should still keep looking, I suppose, in case it isn't a werewolf."

He looked at his coffee for a long moment. "All right," he said finally. "I don't like it, but if it's that dangerous to talk about, I'll keep my mouth shut." He smiled honestly for the first time since he saw Kyra transform. "Not that anybody would believe me if I didn't."

"What do you know about these deaths?" Kyra asked, leaning forward. It hadn't taken her long to catch on.

Enrico shrugged. "Not much. This is the first one I really paid attention to. It started about a month ago. We had five deaths in four days, really nasty deaths. I know one of the guys who looked at them. He's a solid fellow, been a cop for more than ten years and seen some ugly stuff. He says he just

about threw up after he looked at the first body. It was worse than the one tonight, freaking ripped to pieces."

I saw the waitress coming and waved him into silence. She arrayed plates of what could, charitably, be called food in front of us and refilled both Enrico's coffee and my iced tea with a bright smile that seemed utterly inappropriate to both my state of mind and her obvious lack of job satisfaction. Kyra's glass of water was still nearly full, but she attacked the food with the gusto of a hungry werewolf.

"So what did you do about it?" I asked, ignoring my own food for the time being.

"What could we do?" Enrico asked rhetorically. He took a bite before continuing, I think mostly to keep from seeming remarkable. He's good at that. "I guess at first they thought it was a bear attack. Weird, so far into the city, but who knew, right? The next night there were two more deaths, some couple most of the way across town, and then two more. They knew it couldn't be a bear by that point, but they didn't have any better ideas."

"What explanation did they come up with, then?" Now I did try the food, which was surprisingly edible. Either that or I was just really, *really* hungry.

"I think they were pretty much grasping at straws. By the time the fourth person died they gave up on blaming wild animals. Anyway, we told the newspaper about the deaths, but we didn't give them any of the details. I think the people in charge were afraid of the headlines."

"But then the deaths stopped, right?" Kyra said. She might look like she wasn't paying attention to anything but the plate in front of her, but she was following the conversation very closely.

"Right," Enrico said, nodding. "At first everybody was sure they'd find the next body in the morning, but after a couple of weeks we started to relax. We figured it was weird and we'd never know what happened, but so long as the deaths stopped who cares, right? We were actually about to tell the media what condition the bodies were in when we found that guy out in Manitou."

"So where'd they get that idea you mentioned about it being a gang initiation?" I'd been wondering that for a while. It wasn't a bad guess, but I don't think it would have ever occurred to me.

"Full moon," he replied promptly. "It didn't take them long to catch on to that." He hesitated, then reluctantly added, "He mentioned that they think these people might be imitating werewolves. You know, mutilated bodies under the full moon and all."

"Huh," I said, eating some more. "Why would they think people would be imitating werewolves?"

"Beats the hell out of me why anybody would," he said cheerfully. "I guess there are some psychos who do that with vampires, though. Makes sense eventually somebody would do the same thing with werewolves." He paused a beat, then said, "Makes sense to cops, anyway."

Almost Winter (Winter's Tale)

Well, that wasn't good. It wasn't terrible either, though; with a bit of luck we could make sure the cops found something to confirm their imitation-werewolf theory. At any rate it would keep them from looking for actual werewolves, no matter how obvious it became. That could only be a good thing.

"How'd you know about this death so soon?" Kyra asked suddenly. "That body wasn't two hours old."

Enrico grinned. "Funny story, actually. Apparently this woman's neighbor was a Peeping Tom of the first order, although I doubt he'll be keeping up the habit after tonight. Anyway, he claims he wasn't looking at her, said she usually stays up later than him and he doesn't have a view of her window, anyway. But one of the other ladies in the housing complex works the night shift, and he was up waiting for her to get home when he saw that his other neighbor's back door was hanging open. She didn't answer when he called, and he decided he should call the police."

I blinked, because although I'd heard a lot of very strange stories I'd never heard a story even close to that one. "That is possibly the most messed up thing I've heard all week," I told him.

"Agreed," Kyra said fervently. "Now, if you don't mind, could we get moving? I'd really like another couple hours of sleep before I have to clock in."

"Right," Enrico said. He paid for the food, in cash. I didn't object; he made more than Kyra or I by a long shot. If he was willing to buy me food I wasn't averse to the idea.

I did add a couple dollars to the tip behind his back, because I'd heard so many stories of horrible customers from Kyra. Oddly enough they seem to affect me more than her. Enrico didn't notice. The waitress did, and gave me a smile with significantly more honesty in it as we left.

By the time we made it back to my house it was about five in the morning and the sky was just starting to get light to the east. Enrico had offered to drive Kyra home, but she said she'd just as soon walk from my house. The truth, of course, was that she didn't want him to know where she lived. I'm sure he knew it, too, but he didn't say anything.

We stood out front and watched him drive away until his car blended in to the early-morning traffic. It was still raining, the same light drizzle as earlier, but not enough to bother either of us; Kyra was a werewolf, and it takes a great deal to make me cold. By which I mean that I could wear a T-shirt and shorts in the middle of the night in Colorado in November and not even really feel chilly. It was another of the meager blessings, or curses, which I inherited with my magic.

I expected Kyra to leave immediately, but instead she leaned against my trailer and said, "It wasn't smart to tell him all that, Winter."

I sighed. "I know, but what else could I do? He'd have been pissed if I didn't tell him anything, and he'd have been sure I was hiding something from him. It's not like I had a convenient story, either."

"Yeah. Still, though. I know you like him, and I can see why and everything, but would you rather lose his friendship or get him killed?"

"I'm hoping it doesn't come to that."

Kyra grunted noncommittally. We stood there and watched the beginnings of the sunrise for a while. Eventually Kyra pushed herself off the wall and turned to face me. "You were wrong, you know," she said quietly.

"About what?"

"The pack won't kill him if he talks. They'll tell you to." She nodded goodbye to me and then slipped around the corner of the building. The overland route was shorter than the highway for walking, and the difficulty of the terrain didn't mean much to a werewolf.

I stood in the rain for a while and thought about what she said. She was probably right, I concluded eventually. The werewolves discourage telling people about them rather strongly, but it was inevitable that sometimes word got out. Usually it was a slip of the tongue, or somebody seeing or overhearing something they shouldn't have, but it isn't unheard of for someone to be told deliberately. Regardless, the pack's response is the same. If they don't make trouble, and they don't tell anyone, and the werewolf in question doesn't slip up very often, it's overlooked.

When they do become a problem the pack Alpha has two options. One is to kill the offending werewolf—and the human, of course. I didn't think Christopher would take that option unless he really had to.

The other way is for the werewolf to kill the security risk himself. It shows that he can still make the hard choices, that he still puts the pack first. It also conveniently serves as punishment for the accident—nobody likes killing their friends. Especially not werewolves, who tend not to have many and to value them highly. Werewolves don't, as a rule, have many virtues that a human would recognize as such. Loyalty is an exception.

Would I be able to do it? I wasn't sure. Enrico was one of my best friends. I didn't know if I could bring myself to kill him, but...by that point he would be doomed anyway. Refusing wouldn't do anything but make sure I was too.

I didn't think I wanted to know whether I could kill Enrico. Either answer would be devastating, I thought, and not just because one of them would mean my death. I was raised to value loyalty as much as the next werewolf, and knowing that I could violate that loyalty would be a blow. But I was also raised to make hard choices, and knowing that I couldn't anymore would almost be worse.

Best to keep it from going that far, then.

I stood outside until the sun had fully risen above the horizon. The high clouds continued to sprinkle dismally, and somehow the sunrise had made the world seem more depressing rather than less.

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Then I went inside and went back to bed, because I'd only had three hours of sleep and somehow I didn't think the next day would be any better.

I didn't sleep well. My rest was disturbed by dreams—actually, that's a bad word for it, because dreams aren't real and what I was experiencing undeniably was. It wasn't the first time, not by a long shot. It's just one more of the burdens my heritage forces me to deal with.

Everybody has things that come easily to them, and things that just don't. Everybody. That's true no matter what you're talking about. Every single person in the world is practically guaranteed to be an expert on at least one thing, and absolutely worthless at something else. Well, that goes for magic too; everyone with any skill at magic has something that just comes naturally. For me it's animals, and predators in particular. Oh, I could force my power to work on werewolves as well, but it doesn't come naturally. With genuine animals I didn't have to think about it for the magic to happen; I had to work to *keep* it from happening.

Before I learned to control my own power I had visions almost every night, intrusions on my mind by the sensations of other beings. By the time I was twelve years old I had experienced the vision of a hawk, the nose of a coyote, the ears of a fox, and the pressure of so much sensation had made significant inroads on my sanity.

These days I was a lot better. But, this morning, my magic was already restless with the full moon, and I had stirred it up further examining the corpse. It was inevitable that it would react. I was just glad I got to be the cat this time rather than the mouse.

Finally, around eight o'clock, after waking up three times in confusion about what body I was actually in, I gave up and got out of bed, feeling not significantly better than before I laid down.

I knew something more than I had before. I knew that there was a demon, or something that left the same energy signature, involved. Unfortunately that left me about as confused as I had been before.

When people in the know talk about demons, they don't mean it in any religious sense. Some people call them tulpas instead, which leads to a lot less confusion, but I was raised to think of them as demons. It wasn't hard to see why, either, considering the stench in that room. Anything that smelled that evil deserved the name.

Anyways, the point is that demons aren't native to this world. Whether they're native to *any* world is more a question of philosophy than magic, but it isn't really important. What matters is that they don't exist in a physical sense. I suspected that a demon would be only too happy to kill half a dozen people, for any reason or none at all, but it couldn't do so without someone providing the means.

The problem, I reflected, was that I didn't know enough. I had encountered precisely one demon in my life, for less than five minutes. My knowledge of them was spotty to say the least. I knew the basics, but I had no definite idea about what exactly a demon might be capable of doing.

I knew what I should do, had known it even before I left the room where the woman had died, but I was still trying to think of another way forward. Finally I was forced to admit defeat. I gave up and picked up the phone to call my...what, exactly? Foster father, I guess you might call him.

I was raised by my aunt, but she was younger than her sister by a wide margin. When I was born she was barely nineteen years old and struggling to put herself through college. She could never have afforded a child.

The Alpha of my mother's pack stepped in to make up the difference. He wasn't phenomenally rich, but he owned a sizable ranch in northern Wyoming and the pack had a certain amount of wealth as well. So, when I was young, it was Edward Frodsham who made sure I was doing well in school and had plenty to eat. He came to visit occasionally; as I got older, more often I travelled to Wyoming to visit the pack.

I think Edward initially wanted to keep his nature a secret from me. He quickly found that this was a wasted effort; I was born with the ability to smell magic, and it's hard to conceal lycanthropy from someone with that talent. By the time I was ten he'd given up completely and formally introduced me to the pack. When I was twelve years old, and more than half insane, and my aunt had finally been forced to admit that she couldn't help me and she was afraid for my life, it was Edward who took me in and kept me safe until I learned to control my developing power. He was the closest thing I ever really had to a father, I suppose.

Growing up in the pack it was only natural that I assumed I would someday be a werewolf. Actually, that's not quite right; I didn't assume anything. It never occurred to me that I should. It was more like the possibility that I might *not* become a wolf never even crossed my mind. I knew it with such certainty that it might as well already have happened.

As it turned out, that certainty was misplaced. You see, although lycanthropy is contagious, it isn't a disease as some versions of the legend claim. It's more like a blueprint.

Everyone has magic, even ordinary people like Enrico. It hangs about them like a cloud, which is why I can smell a person's magic even if they aren't using it. A werewolf infects humans through that medium, not by any physical mechanism. If you get a lycanthropic power, it spreads through your magic like mold through cheese.

Most of the time your own magic won't let that happen. While the average person doesn't have much power, that power does have a sort of home field advantage, and it acts like a metaphysical immune system. If you want to make a werewolf, you have to disable that system. The simplest way is the traditional one—massive physical damage will weaken a person's native magic until the wolf magic can spread faster than you remove it.

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Where you run into problems is when the person being converted isn't human to start with. Their magic reacts differently to the contagion. Sometimes it fights it off successfully, and the change never happens no matter how hard they try for it. Other times the struggle remains even, and the combating magics rip their host to pieces between them. Even if somebody like that manages to become a werewolf, the pack has to kill them, because the person they were doesn't make it through.

I didn't have those problems. Instead, my change was much too easy. My magic affected the wolf like gasoline affects a fire. That first change happened far too swiftly. The werewolf friend who'd agreed to help me proved unable to control me, and of course I had no hope to control myself. He was very young, for a werewolf, not even five years past his change; an older one would have known better.

I killed four people that night, before the pack found me and brought me to bay. Edward made me look at the corpses, the next day, standing in the harsh morning light with a phenomenal headache and the taste of blood in my mouth, unwilling to leave no matter how much mouthwash I used. They had been savaged far more horribly than the corpse we'd looked at tonight.

I don't think I'll ever forget that morning.

It turned out that not even Edward could keep me under control when the full moon came around. Both the wolf and my native magic grew more powerful then, reinforcing each other in a vicious cycle. I didn't kill anyone that time, but only through sheer luck. He really should have killed me then, but he liked me and he felt like he owed my mother so, instead, he asked his superior for help.

The Khan is, theoretically, the unquestioned master of all the werewolves in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Greenland, Iceland, the Caribbean, assorted Pacific islands, and Japan. In practice that's a whole lot of werewolves, and, impressive though he is, he can't keep up on the details of that many wolves. So, for the most part, he lets his Alphas rule their own packs and only steps in when things go wrong. That's why Roland could get away with what he was doing for so long; most of his wolves didn't know to call the Khan, and the rest were prevented.

The Khan should also have killed me, but apparently he also liked my mother (I don't plan on asking for the details), so instead he locked me up until I was no longer a hazard to myself and others. It took three months, and at the end of it I wasn't a werewolf any more. It left me with some interesting residue, including superhuman senses and several of a werewolf's abilities. If I concentrated and I was willing to make the effort, I could do pretty much anything a wolf could do, except actually changing shape.

When I found out the hard way that I could never be a werewolf, never really be one of the pack, it hurt. A lot. When I realized that Edward had known all along, and never told me, it was so much worse. In fact, it hurt so much that I couldn't make myself go back to Wyoming, and instead I lived in the Khan's pack for three years before I moved to Colorado.

I'd spoken with Edward fewer than a dozen times since then. I wasn't sure whether I avoided him more because I was angry at him for lying, or ashamed at myself for my inability to become a werewolf. Illogical, I know, but then that seldom matters to guilty feelings, does it?

I wasn't quite self-centered enough to prioritize that over dealing with this, though. So I sighed, swallowed my pride, and picked up the phone.

The phone had rung almost a dozen times, and I was on the verge of giving up and calling back later, when Edward finally answered. "Hey there," he drawled casually, sounding a bit like a cowboy off of an old Western. It helps that he basically is a cowboy off of an old Western.

"Hello, Edward," I said. That was the closest I could come to informal at the moment.

"Winter," he said, his voice suspiciously calm. Edward wasn't the calm type; if he wasn't in good humor, he skipped calm entirely and proceeded to raging, although he'd never directed that anger toward me. "What's the crisis, boy?"

"Hey," I protested. "It's not always a crisis when I call you."

"Isn't it?" he asked mildly.

"I called you on Christmas," I reminded him.

"Ah, yes. So if it's not a crisis, why are you calling?"

I cleared my throat. "Um. Well, it's sort of a crisis."

My only answer was a pointed silence. "Oh shut up," I snapped, embarrassed.

Edward just laughed at me. "What did you need, then?"

"I had a question about demons."

"And why might you want to know about those godforsaken monsters?" Edward's voice was calm again.

"Not because I want to summon one," I said hastily. It's not a good sign when Edward says something like that in a calm tone. "I need to know if it's possible for a werewolf to be possessed by a demon." It had occurred to me that this was the most likely explanation for the demon signature combined with the marks of a werewolf kill.

"Hm. You know, I don't know that I've ever heard of such a thing." There was a long, thoughtful pause. "I don't know all that much about demons. I've never heard of one possessing a wolf, but I can't think of why it wouldn't be possible."

"Thanks," I said, disappointed. I had known it was a long shot, but I'd hoped Edward might be able to solve my problem then and there.

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"Listen," Edward said, sounding more like his usual self. "How's about I ask around? There are people who know more about demons than me. One of them might be able to help you."

"Just don't tell the Khan," I said. I always felt uncomfortable around the Khan. Part of it's that I feel like I owe him, ever since he allowed me to live. More of it is because of who and what he is. He's not a bad man, or an unfriendly one, but he's possibly the most dominant werewolf in the world, certainly more than any other in the area he controls, and that can make him hard to deal with sometimes. Apart from that, part of being Khan is living with the knowledge that you're the one who makes the hard choices. Usually he doesn't show that, but when he does it reminds you forcibly of exactly what he is.

Edward laughed again. "Don't worry, Winter; I won't tell him you were asking." He knew how I felt about the Khan. It helped that pretty much everyone felt that way.

"Thanks again, Edward."

"Anytime. Don't be a stranger, eh?"

The rest of the day was mercifully uneventful. I went to work, where I finished the chessboard and made a good start on the pieces. Lunch was a peanut butter sandwich, unexciting but adequate.

Neither Enrico nor Kyra called me. I took that to be a good sign. Enrico would have called if they'd found another corpse, or any evidence; Kyra would have called if I were in trouble with the pack.

Edward didn't call either, which probably meant that he was still gathering information. Actually, he might not have even started yet. Edward might well have decided to finish all of his—quite numerous—chores with the ranch and the pack before he started looking into things. Werewolves don't always assign things the same kind of importance that humans do.

It's kind of hard to learn about werewolves, because most of the information available is false. Part of that's the natural accumulation of false accounts and mistaken identity (you wouldn't believe how many supposed "werewolves" were actually something completely different). A great deal of it, though, is the result of the werewolves' own efforts.

The reasoning behind this is simple. Back in the day, when people actually believed in werewolves, it was dangerous for people to think you were one. They tended to burn suspected werewolves alive, or kill them in other, equally unpleasant ways. Needless to say, the actual werewolves tended not to like that very much.

So, being cunning critters, they arranged for people to believe in completely inaccurate identification methods. My favorite is the traditional method of injuring it and then watching for someone to show a similar injury the next day. It's not a bad idea, conceptually. Unfortunately for the

werewolf hunters, werewolves can heal so much injury in that time that you could never catch one that way.

Elderly people, on the other hand, were often so arthritic and had been dealt so many wounds by life that few parts of their bodies didn't hurt at any given time. It was never hard to find a crone that was limping on the appropriate foot, so mostly the people convicted of lycanthropy were innocent of any crime except bad luck. That was probably the most blatantly worthless technique, but none of them were reliable.

It was a clever move, and it kept a great many werewolves safe. Unfortunately for the casual interest, however, it also ensured that the few accurate scraps of knowledge were buried in an avalanche of misinformation. Trying to sort out the one from the other is almost impossible if you don't already know something about werewolves.

Some things are pretty easy to recognize, though. The funny thing about magic is that, a surprising amount of the time, it actually makes perfect sense. Werewolves, for example, can turn into a wolf. It's pretty hard for any misinformation to mask that, since it's, you know, a definitional statement.

Think about that for a second. I'm talking about completely reshaping your body. Mammals all share a certain body structure, the bones and muscles and such, but still. Imagine simultaneously changing the shape, size, and positioning of every single bone in your body, while at the same time converting your organs, your hair, the wiring of your nervous system. Imagine doing all that without killing yourself, too.

Compared to that kind of alteration, a cut's nothing. Less than nothing, really. Even a broken bone isn't that impressive. When she makes an effort, Kyra can literally seal a cut before it starts bleeding, and she's barely average as werewolves go.

As a werewolf becomes more experienced, better able to control their power, they start getting other abilities too. Most of them, like the inhuman strength, are directly related to their body, unlike my primarily nonphysical magic. But, like mine, they don't generally require a lot of thought to function. They might be able to focus their magic so that they heal faster, or increase their strength even further, at the cost of efficiency. But they don't have to concentrate to heal faster than human, or be stronger.

Here's an interesting fact about aging: mostly it's the accumulation of damage. Part of that damage occurs on the molecular level, as the DNA is replicated. Part of it consists of the cumulative minor injuries you sustain throughout your life, stress fractures and microscopic tears in the tendons and ligaments, general wear and tear on the cartilage and bone, not to mention more severe injuries. They're all cumulative, and they add up fast.

Another interesting fact about aging is that werewolves heal this damage.

They aren't immortal. Death, as Edward likes to say, is how you recognize life. If you're alive, then you will die, period. Werewolves are very much alive, and therefore as tightly bound by death as anyone else.

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They can take longer about it than most, though. Edward was close to two hundred years old, and he looked young enough that they carded him at bars. He wasn't the oldest werewolf I'd met, either, not by a long shot. In that length of time, it was inevitable that he became a little bit...strange by the standards of a modern human. It says a lot about his character that he had been living in the same small town in northern Wyoming for over a hundred years, always using a variant of his own name (currently Teddy, I believe). This isn't because he couldn't move or change his name, or even his appearance; he just thinks it's funny to make himself as obvious as possible without actually giving himself away. If that's not enough for you, the town his pack lives in is called Wolf.

Seriously. I couldn't make this shit up if I tried.

Unfortunately for me, he also has little sense of urgency. I guess when you've lived that long, there just isn't that much that can make you feel the need to rush. So I probably couldn't expect to hear from him until tomorrow.

That didn't keep me from brooding about it all morning. I tried, but I couldn't think of any explanation other than a possessed wolf, and I also couldn't think of even one mention of such a monster in any story I'd heard.

Which, come to think of it, was a little strange. I mean, I'd grown up among werewolves and I'd heard a lot of stories. You'd think that at least one of them would include a demon-infested werewolf whether they existed or not, right?

Fortunately for me, after lunch I'd finished the chess board and started work on the pieces. This was intricate enough work that I had to focus on it, and as a result I could stop obsessing over the deaths.

Like I said, work makes me feel better. It wasn't just because I needed the money that I was in the shop on a Sunday.

By the time I closed up and left it was getting late, and the sun was just dipping below the horizon. It was a beautiful sunset, and I got to watch it all the way home, the clouds over the mountains turning a beautiful golden color touched with crimson. The colors were just fading out to violet and amber when I unlocked the front door.

I love sunsets.

The rest of the night was equally mundane. Dinner was half of a frozen pizza and the last of the brownies. After I ate I spent a while reading. I have an inexplicable but persistent fascination with exotic cookbooks, and I'd recently found a book about Czechoslovakian cooking at an used bookstore.

No, I don't actually make any of the food. Yes, I'm aware that this is sort of weird.

Chapter Five

When I walked out of my bedroom the next morning there was a werewolf in my house.

He wasn't making any particular effort to hide his presence. In fact, he was leaning against the wall opposite my bedroom door reading the cookbook I'd left out last night.

"You know," he said conversationally when I opened the door, "I had no idea the Czechs ate brains so much."

I bowed my head slightly. "Good morning, Conn." With most werewolves I wouldn't have done that; they're subtle beasts, whatever their reputation, and they would interpret my posture as submission. In this particular case they would have been right, because the young-looking man standing across from me was the Khan of the werewolves. Even if I weren't willing to respect his authority, which I usually was, I'd be insane to challenge him. He could rip my head off before I could even blink, and I'm not indulging in hyperbole here. I'd seen him do it.

Conn Ferguson didn't look like the sort to inspire fear. He was about my height, making him a little shorter than average, and he looked even younger than most werewolves. To look at him you'd think eighteen was being generous, and calling him unthreatening was an understatement. Unless, of course, you were to look into his eyes, the bright green of aspen leaves in spring with the sun behind them, in which case you would probably look away and walk somewhere else very quickly, and swear to God that there was something deeply unnerving about the young man with the old, old eyes.

He smiled slightly and nodded, acknowledging my display. "Winter. I hear you ran into some problems."

I gave him a mildly suspicious look. "Where'd you hear about a thing like that?"

"Edward, actually." I must have looked hurt, because his smile widened a little and he continued, "He didn't tell me it was you. But he wanted to discuss a truly bizarre occurrence, so naturally you were the first person I thought of."

"Hey," I protested hotly. I mean, I might have gotten into a couple of sticky situations while I was living among his pack, but I wasn't that bad. Probably. It could have happened to anyone. Excepting possibly the one incident with the beavers, and anyway there's no proof I was involved in that.

Conn laughed, a rich sound at odds with his youthful appearance. "You're still easy. No, I didn't think a thing of it until after we'd finished talking and I asked him how you were doing. Most of the time he won't shut up about you, but yesterday I couldn't get him to string five words together. It didn't take a genius to take it from there."

I sighed. Edward was a good man, and he had a lot of skills, but I should have known better than to ask him to lie. He's too straightforward to be any good at it.

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"So," Conn said, leading the way into the kitchen, "you think you've got a possessed werewolf on your hands?"

"Is it possible?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Maybe. It's not common that a wolf is demon-infested, though. I've only seen it once in the past century."

I frowned. Demonic possession wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence, but that still seemed a little much. "Why is it so rare?"

Conn paused, as though organizing his thoughts. "Werewolves," he said slowly, "must be possessed of very strong will to withstand the pressures within us. You know this. It's difficult for a demon to infest a strong mind, a strong personality. This is particularly true when that mind is knowledgeable and prepared to resist, which most werewolves are."

That made sense. "What about the young werewolves, then?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. "Most of them are having a hard enough time coping with their own urges that I wouldn't expect them to be able to resist a demon."

"That's true," Conn admitted easily. "But, for whatever reason, it doesn't work that way. I have never seen a young werewolf possessed. I suspect that their souls are in too much turmoil for a demon to even gain a foothold, much like attempting to board a ship during a storm. The same factors that limit their defense prevent them from being attacked in the first place."

"But if old werewolves are too strong, and young ones are too turbulent, how do any werewolves become possessed at all?"

"All the strength in the world can't help if you don't fight," he said dryly. "Every possessed wolf I've ever seen invited the demon in, for knowledge or power or some idiotic reason of their own." He paused. "Do you think that's happened here?"

"Maybe," I said, shrugging. Then I proceeded to give him the story—the whole story, including Enrico's involvement and what I'd inferred from the two scenes I saw. It took a while. The whole time Conn sat and listened intently, occasionally asking for more detail.

When I'd finished, he just sat and processed it for a moment. Then he leaned back in his chair, which creaked alarmingly, and said, "Well, now. This is not good, not good at all."

His words were mild, and so was his posture, but I knew better. His tone was tense, agitated. It wasn't particularly obvious, just barely at the threshold of my perception, but most of the time I couldn't detect his emotions at all. Enrico is a good liar, but Conn puts him to shame.

That was a little disconcerting. The situation wasn't bad enough to merit that much of a response. Oh, Conn was as good a man as his position would let him be, but you don't get to be one of

the oldest and possibly the single most powerful werewolf on the planet by being squeamish. He had seen many worse things than a handful of corpses.

"What's the problem?" I asked him politely. Conn doesn't care for beating around the bush.

He sighed. "Ordinarily there wouldn't be one. Unfortunately, we are considering revealing ourselves to the populace in the near future. If the local police are considering even a slight werewolf connection, it is possible that someone will remember, and make trouble."

Wow. The werewolves had been hiding for centuries. For them to admit their existence would be...incredible.

"Nobody told me about this," I said, starting to feel the first stirrings of anger.

"You chose not to involve yourself," Conn said bluntly. "Werewolf or not, I would have continued to accept you in my pack. You chose to leave, and I understand that. You made it clear that you didn't want to be a part of the pack and its business, and I understand that as well. That was your right then, as it is now." He paused to let that sink in. "But don't complain to me that you weren't informed when you as much as asked not to be."

That stung, but I had to admit I deserved it. I looked away and nodded. "So when are you planning this?"

Conn sighed again. "I wish I knew. As soon as the negotiations are finished."

That got my attention. Conn gave his Alphas a great deal of leeway but, at the end of the day, he was the Khan and his word was the only one that really mattered. "You're negotiating with the Alphas?" I said incredulously.

He snorted. "No, most of them see the necessity, and the others are too smart to argue. I'm negotiating with the Twilight."

I frowned. "The Twilight? You mean the Twilight Court?"

"Yes," he said dryly, "that is generally the only form of twilight one can negotiate with."

"But I thought the Twilight only governed the fae?" The Twilight Court consisted of the most powerful, influential, and ancient fae in the world, referred to as the Twilight Princes. They weren't autocrats in the manner of the Khan—the fae were too fractious for something like that to work. But it was generally understood that on the rare occasions when the fae moved as one it was the hand of the Twilight Court at work. The last such had been nearly six hundred years before, when they retreated from humanity almost completely.

"They do. But the fae are planning to emerge from hiding jointly with us." He paused. "Actually, it was the fae that had the idea first. I understand that some of the Princes became concerned about the

possibility of detection nearly fifty years ago now, although they didn't contact me until recently. Apparently it's taken them that long to talk the rest of the Court around."

"I don't get it. Why would they reveal themselves to the public? Why would they coordinate it with *you*?" Most supernatural species don't play well with others, although there are some exceptions. As far as I knew fae-werewolf relations weren't among them.

"Why does a fae do anything?" Conn asked rhetorically. "Because they think they can benefit from it. They're revealing themselves because they think that soon they'll be exposed whether they like it or not. People's own determination not to see them has kept them safe so far, but eventually it's bound to fail. Modern technology is making it hard to stay hidden."

"I take it that's why you're joining them?"

"Hardly. Their fears are vastly overstated. We've already weathered the hardest period, when people still believed, without even a slight suspicion. No evidence would be sufficient to truly convince them now." Conn shook his head. "No, I don't feel afraid. I'd wager the fae don't, either; they can see all this as easily as I can. They might plead ignorance, but this is a political act, and they know what they're doing."

"I don't get it. What do they get out of exposing themselves?"

Conn shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea. It comes back to politics one way or another, I'm sure. Either way, it's a foolish decision, and one which puts us all at risk. I'm still hoping to convince them of this, but I don't have much hope at this point."

Wow. This was...way too big for me. I could barely balance my bank account, for God's sake, and that was only because it was empty. No one in their right mind would even be discussing this with me.

"You see why this is so critical now?" Conn continued, standing up and pacing over to stare out the window at the mountain. "It isn't likely we'll be able to avoid exposure. Failing that, it is of paramount importance that the public have exactly the proper attitude toward us. Our reveal will most likely be within the year, and it's all too likely that someone will look at this and connect the dots. No, this situation has to be resolved as soon as possible, and an explanation arranged so that no one considers that it might have been a werewolf."

"Couldn't you just acknowledge them and say it was a lunatic or something? I mean, humans kill more than seven people all the time."

"If you could stop him before there are more than seven, I'd be quite impressed," Conn said dryly. "And no. They might not believe in us now, but it won't take long for people to remember the legends of werewolves as monsters. If humanity comes to believe, even for a moment, that those legends are true, they will wipe us from existence. Even if only one person had died, public opinion will be delicate enough for the first few years that we couldn't admit it."

"What will you do, then?" It had been years since I'd been a part of Conn's pack, but it didn't even occur to me not to do what he suggested. There's something about him that makes even humans obey him without thinking. It's the same thing that makes him the most dominant wolf in all the territory he controls. Most of the time it aggravates me, but in times of stress his ability to step into any situation and impose order was deeply comforting.

"It sounds like the pack hasn't been able to do anything toward catching this killer." At my nod, he continued, "I can't afford to wait long enough for him to reveal himself—there's no telling how many people would die first." He paused for a long moment, frowning. "I would prefer to stay here until this crisis is dealt with," he said eventually. "Unfortunately, I have no time to spare. Negotiations with the Twilight are at a critical stage, and a lapse now would undo a year and a half of work. I'll send Dolph out here to keep an eye on things instead."

"You don't need to send Dolph."

He cocked one eyebrow. "I have to send a representative. Would you rather it were Dolph or Erin?"

"On second thought, Dolph is fine." I'm not spectacularly fond of Conn's son, but I'd rather deal with him than his sister any day—which Conn knew, of course. Conn is a real master of the art, because even—make that especially—when he offers you a choice, you will always be doing what he wants. Odds are very good he already knows what you will do, too.

Conn grinned. "I thought you might say that." He handed me a business card—a phone number printed in black against a blank white background, with nothing to say who it belonged to, and an email address at a free domain consisting of apparently random numbers underneath. "Don't hesitate to call. Dolph should be here within a couple of days." He nodded to me politely and then walked toward the front door.

"Conn?" I interrupted on an impulse.

"Yes?" he said, turning to face me.

"Why didn't Christopher know there had been so many deaths?"

Conn sighed. "I expect that he did," he said. "Christopher was concealing the deaths from you, and probably from much of his pack. By the time you confronted him about it, it was too late to back out, so he doubled down on it."

"I don't get it," I said in genuine confusion. "Why would he need to lie about that?"

"Because this pack is broken," Conn said heavily. He paused, clearly considering his next words carefully. "The two factors which define one's place in the pack, aside from simple dominance, are the urge to lead and the desire to shelter one's subordinates from harm. When dominance is equivalent, these are the things which determine where a werewolf stands."

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"Right," I said, nodding. This was all familiar, even if it had been years since I'd heard these lessons. They'd been drilled into me hard enough that I wasn't likely to forget them.

"Christopher has the protective impulse, but he's distinctly lacking in the desire to lead others. That's acceptable in most cases, but the Alpha of the pack *must* provide leadership. Under most circumstances he would never have been put in the position, but between Roland's purges and mine, all of the more dominant wolves were killed."

"So Christopher shouldn't be an Alpha?"

Conn shook his head. "But I didn't have a choice here. After all the chaos, importing new leadership would have been too much strain for the pack to take. After things had calmed down, he was entrenched, and the pack would accept no one else. Christopher did a great deal to endear himself to them, both during Roland's insanity and while recovering from it. But they can all sense that he isn't suited to his position, even if they aren't aware of it or don't know why, and his position is unstable as a result."

"I see. Thank you for explaining it to me."

"Of course, Winter," Conn said, starting for the door. "Dolph will be here as soon as he can. Try not to do anything rash until then."

Well. That was...disturbing. Conn was worried, which I had never before seen. For him to send Dolph into such an admittedly tense situation was a somewhat desperate move.

It is, generally speaking, never a good sign when one of the most powerful people in the world is feeling desperate.

Dolph is Conn's second son. His real name is Rudolph, but he can't use that anymore thanks to the children's song. Of course, since World War II he has to correct people constantly because they think he's saying Adolph. Personally I'd rather people thought I was a reindeer, but that's just me.

He's not dominant the way his father is. You know, the "I can hold half a dozen nation's werewolves under my sway by sheer force of personality" kind of dominance. He's still plenty dominant, though, probably one of the top fifteen or twenty in the Khan's territory. Christopher isn't. Not even close.

Adding a more dominant wolf to an unstable and possibly imploding pack while trying to avoid publicity being drawn to a series of murders was somewhat akin to trying to stop a fire by starting another fire to consume the fuel first—actually a fairly common strategy, but still. In both cases the theory is technically sound, and there are some situations which are presumably bad enough that it qualifies as a good idea, but...the potential for something to go catastrophically wrong is really, really high.

The rest of the day was less stressful—which, I know, isn't saying all that much. Most days are less eventful than that morning. Finding a scorpion in your bathtub, for example, would be less stressful. Discovering that you've been picked as a juror for a serial murder case would be less stressful. Losing your home to arson while you're still inside would be more stressful, but not by all that much.

Really though, nothing happened. I didn't get a call from Edward, although I hardly needed one. He surely knew that Conn had come out to speak to me in person—itsself an indicator of how serious this situation was, given how rarely Conn left his home in North Dakota. Enrico didn't call me either, which I took to be a sign that no more bodies have been found. Either that or an indication that our friendship had been completely severed by this mess, which would be terrible but not something I could do anything about anyway.

I considered calling Kyra, but couldn't think of what to say. Telling her that Dolph was coming would be meaningless, because I was pretty sure she'd never met him and probably didn't know who he even was. In any case, she couldn't do any more about it than I could, so what was the point? So I eventually just went to work, hoping that my problems would magically resolve themselves.

Because it was Monday, I didn't have the shop to myself. Val got there about an hour after me, around ten in the morning—he doesn't believe in getting up early, and he's so skilled he doesn't have to. He walked into the shop like he owned it, probably because he does, and examined my chess set a moment. Then he grunted, said "Not bad," and walked off to find something to do himself.

Val doesn't talk much. He's even more reluctant to give praise. The bright side of that is that I always know that he isn't just saying it. He might have only complimented my work twice in the past five years, but when he did he *really* meant it.

He brought over a panel of cherry and laid it across the table near to where I was working. He contemplated the wood for a moment, still not speaking, and then pressed his finger into it and began to trace a simple border around the edges.

In case you're confused by the syntax there, let me clarify. I don't mean that he touched the wood, or pushed on it, or anything like that. No, he literally pressed his finger about a quarter-inch into the surface of the wood, which melted away as though he were tracing designs into warm butter. The wood didn't scorch or splinter, which is more than even some very high-end tools can manage. It just melted at his touch, leaving a nice clean trail of sawdust behind.

It was, needless to say, magic. The odor hung heavy in the air, stone and iron, with just a touch of the odd mineral smell you find deep underground.

Val finished the border and turned his attention to the main section of what would probably be a cabinet door. His work was incredible, intricately detailed and perfect on the first try, always. He sculpted a delicate floral design into the surface of the wood and began adding flourishes, not even pausing to think about where to place each line.

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His skill isn't the result of magic; he doesn't *need* magic to leave any human craftsman in the world in the dust. No, Val's skill was the result of practice, an incredible amount of it. I don't know how long Val's been doing this kind of work, but I know he's old even by fae standards, and that meant it was more conveniently measured in centuries than decades. The fae are also immortal, although, unlike with werewolves or vampires, there isn't any immediately obvious reason why they should be. The fae are the most mysterious of the major supernatural players, and I don't understand much about them. Val has been exactly no help with this.

It took me a while to work up the nerve to ask him about what's been going on. No, that's not quite right; it wasn't my nerve that was lacking. It's just that I was fighting against a lifetime's ingrained training, all of which said not to involve an outsider in pack business. Werewolf troubles, as Edward taught me, should be taken care of by werewolves. Not humans. Not the fae.

I trusted Val, though. And, more importantly, I wasn't sure how far I trusted anyone else involved in this. Dolph used to be a friend, but I'd changed a lot in the years since then. He might well have too, and even if he were the same I wasn't sure how well we'd get along. Christopher...well. He was a nice enough guy, and as far as I could tell a decent Alpha, whatever Conn had said. On the other hand, being a good Alpha isn't at all the same as being a trustworthy person. I hadn't spent much time around Christopher—a part of my ongoing effort to avoid the pack—and I wasn't entirely certain whether he was both. Kyra, of course, I trusted implicitly, but—even disregarding how much influence Christopher might have over her—she was more clueless than me. That didn't leave a lot of options if I wanted a reliable source of information.

So, eventually, I said the hell with it. "How much do you know about demons?" I asked, as casually as I could manage.

Val stopped what he was doing—which, no power tools and everything, means pretty much just that—and turned to look at me. He didn't say anything, just raised one eyebrow and gave me a skeptical look.

Clearly not casual enough. I worked up what was probably a rather sickly smile and tried to look innocent. Judging by his expression, it didn't work very well.

Val grunted and grabbed a towel to wipe his hands with. "Don't know much," he said eventually, leaning against the back wall of the shop.

"But you do know something?" I pressed, following him back.

He shrugged. "Some. Why?"

I told him, leaving out Kyra and Enrico's involvement and not mentioning what Conn said at all. It took a little while, and he just stood there and listened the whole time, occasionally muttering under his breath. I have superhuman hearing, but Val knows that and he's no idiot, so he did his muttering in what sounded like an extremely archaic form of German, or possibly something Scandinavian. It didn't take a genius to guess what he was saying, though.

"How do you know what a demon should smell like, then?" Val asked promptly when I finished.

I sighed. I'd hoped to avoid this particular conversation—and succeeded until now, because Conn and Edward both already knew the story. "I was out camping with a few friends not long after I moved to the Khan's pack," I told him reluctantly. "Some demon-possessed lunatic wandered into camp and tried to kill us."

Val chuckled. "And?"

"He tried to attack me, two werewolves, and a guy with a gun. It went about as well as you'd expect."

Val shook his head. "Trouble follows you like a hound looking for a treat."

"Hey," I protested. "It's not like he was looking for me specifically or anything."

"Exactly."

I didn't have much of a smart retort for that one because, I had to admit, he was pretty much on the money. So instead I changed the subject, because if there's one thing I'm good at, it's avoiding my problems. "Demons?" I reminded him.

Val shrugged. "Not met one. It's not encouraged."

"Why do the Twilight frown on it so much?" I wondered aloud. Mostly the Twilight Court doesn't impose very many restrictions on the fae, especially not specific ones. The fae are just too fractious, as a rule, for that to work; I know practically nothing about them, and even I know that.

Val smirked at me. "No one wants to see one of us possessed. Wouldn't end well."

"That's real helpful," I told him dryly. "I don't suppose you know what I should do if that is what's happening?"

He shrugged again—he tends to do that a lot, probably because he talks so little. "Kill it if you can. Might be you could save the fool, but I wouldn't bother."

"So how do you kill a demon?" I asked, genuinely curious. Most of the stories I'd heard about demons were annoyingly vague, and a distressingly large proportion ended with all the people dead and the demon laughing as it walked off into the sunset. Not exactly the specific how-to guide I'd like. Val claimed he didn't know much, but he was still more helpful than anything I'd found so far.

"You don't," Val said flatly.

"Then why'd you suggest it?" I asked, annoyed.

"I hate this language. I meant kill the possessed. You can't kill the demon. Not unless you have a lot more power than you've told me about."

I frowned. "How much power are we talking, here?"

He shrugged. "A Twilight Prince could do it, a couple of vampire lords, some few mages. Heard of some killed by saints, but I don't know if I believe it—even if you qualified."

I whistled. Val wasn't kidding when he said it would take major power. "Why does it take that kind of power? Even a vampire doesn't take that much to kill it."

"Vampires are already dead," Val pointed out dryly. "Demons were never alive. Host is, but demons can live without hosts."

"But if you kill the host, the demon goes away."

"Yes." He paused. "Though that's harder than it sounds. The infested are strong, fast. They don't feel pain."

I sighed. On top of a werewolf's natural abilities that was starting to sound pretty damn hard to kill. "Anything else?"

Val sighed. "I told you I don't know. You never quite know with demons, anyway. They have some magic. More than that, who can say?"

Wonderful. Demon-possessed werewolf just took a bump from impressively dangerous to holy-crap terrifyingly dangerous. "I take it their weaknesses are about what you'd expect? Sunlight, holy objects, sanctified ground, that sort of thing?"

He laughed. "They aren't vampires. The sun doesn't harm them. Faith, yes. Demons cannot stand faith, even less than bloodsuckers. But I think it best to simply kill it; more certain." He hesitated. "You might be able to do something with magic. There are a few shamans who've affected demons in the spirit world, without doing anything to the body at all. But I don't know anything about how."

"Thanks, Val. You're the best."

He glowered at me. "Get back to work."

I had plenty to consider the rest of the day. Assuming Val's information was accurate—which I thought I could pretty much count on—killing the demon was off the table. I supposed it was technically possible for me to get my hands on something or someone who could pull it off, but they would probably charge a higher price than I'm willing to pay—and not in cash, either.

That left killing its host. From what Conn said this morning I assumed that he probably made that bargain willingly and in good faith, which my limited knowledge suggested pretty much precluded both persuasion and exorcism as options. The weakness to faith was more promising, but I honestly couldn't think of one thing I believed in enough to bother a demon.

Which was kind of disturbing, actually.

Anyway, that pretty much left overwhelming force as the only option. I doubted I'd be able to bring anything like enough firepower to bear to get the job done. A werewolf is hard enough to kill, what with supernatural strength and healing. Add in even more incredible superhuman capabilities and immunity to pain thanks to a demon and you have a real walking nightmare, even before you tossed unknown magical powers into the mix.

Fortunately, I'd never been planning on taking the thing down alone. I might not be able to kill it, but somehow I thought that me, Dolph, and about thirty werewolves for backup might be able to make a pretty good try at it. Say what you like about talent, overwhelming numbers can generally get the job done.

I couldn't really do much about it until Dolph got here, though. I was pretty sure his role in the planning would be too integral to ignore. So instead I finished out the workday, completing the chess pieces and starting on the back and sides of the cabinet Val was working on. I'm good, but I'm not anything like as good as Val—even without magic, which he mostly just uses to show off. Fortunately for me his work is so good I can mostly stick to basic stuff and let his contributions shine.

Before long I was walking back home. When I got there, I discovered that my current visitor wasn't as subtle as Conn had been. I could smell werewolf all around my house—physically, I mean. If you think it gets confusing distinguishing between physical and uncanny senses, just imagine how I feel. There are times I'm really not sure whether what I'm smelling is actually there, or just in my head.

A werewolf wouldn't leave that much of a track by accident.

I hesitated a little at the door, then shrugged. Screw it. If this wolf meant me harm then standing around outside wouldn't do me any favors. Letting a werewolf think they can intimidate you that easily just gives them ideas. I pushed open the door and walked inside, trying to look assertive because first impressions are so important with werewolves.

And then stopped short when I saw Dolph sitting in the kitchen.

He looked exactly like I remembered, of course. That's a given with werewolves. He had short black hair which, combined with his pale skin and thin build, conspired to make him look like a Goth. He's not, or at least he wasn't the last time I saw him. He was just born with that coloration. Like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and Nazis, the Goth subculture is younger than he is.

He could easily change the features that make people confuse him with any of those things. He just doesn't care enough. I honestly doubt that he even notices much of modern culture anymore—and, I assure you, by the standards of an old werewolf the fifties are still very modern. Dolph's seen five centuries pass. Fifty years is a drop in the bucket.

He looked up at me as I walked in and grinned. "Hey, Winter," he said brightly. Dolph's voice is surprisingly high, almost boyish. "You know, I knew you weren't rich but I still expected better than this. I've known hobos who lived better than you do." He waved one arm expansively.

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Looking around the room, I had to admit that he had a point.

Somehow, when people find out what I do for a living, they always expect me to have nice furniture, if nothing else. Now, while this may sound reasonable, it actually makes just as much sense as expecting all mechanics to have nice cars. (I know that it makes just as much sense because I'm at least occasionally a mechanic, and I don't have a car at all.)

See, it's true that people in my profession can make some really awesome stuff. But, as far as I know, most of those people aren't rich, including myself. So, when I finish a piece, I have to consider whether putting it in my house is worth as much to me as eating for a week. I usually come up in favor of the food.

I have some of the stuff I've made, of course. But mostly only the stuff we can't even sell on clearance, which means that scattered among the purchases I've made at thrift stores and yard sales are a few otherwise nice pieces with a truly fatal flaw. Like the chair that needs a phone book under one leg to sit level. I screwed up pretty badly on that one.

I'm too stubborn to admit it, though, which is why I made a point of sitting in said chair across from Dolph. Let it never be said that I don't know how to make a point.

"Dolph," I greeted him. "I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow at the earliest."

He shrugged. "Got a good flight. So since when do you need my help just to deal with a little possessed werewolf?"

"I don't," I said lazily. "But your father thought you were getting bored of North Dakota, so I agreed to give you a tour."

He laughed. Dolph laughs a lot more than most werewolves. Most people too, actually. "Well, I'd hate to miss out on the action, so I guess I'll take it out while I'm here. Might lighten up the monotony of having to stay in Colorado."

After that, of course, I had to tell him what's been happening. I'd told the story so many times in the past few days I'd be tempted to just tape it or something, except everybody got a different version. Dolph, being his father's representative here, had the privilege to hear about everything except my conversation with Val. By the time I was done he wasn't smiling anymore.

"What makes you think it's a werewolf?" he asked when I'd finished.

"Huh?" He couldn't hope to top a witty comeback like that.

"It sounds like the only thing you've found sign of is demon. What makes you think a werewolf is involved?"

"Maybe it's the perfect resemblance to a werewolf rampage? I mean, just guessing here, but I think that might have done it."

He shook his head. "It only resembles a werewolf circumstantially. All you have so far are some brutal killings on the full moon. That's not a hard thing to arrange, Winter. Especially not for a demon."

I hadn't thought about it like that for some reason. I guess because I'm not a cop, or a hard-boiled gumshoe. It made sense, though—and it would explain why Kyra hadn't been able to smell werewolf, at either scene. It's hard to make a better disguise for that than not actually being a werewolf.

"So you think he's trying to get us chasing werewolves deliberately, then?" There aren't many other reasons to make your kills look so much like the classic conception of what a wolf would do to somebody.

"It," Dolph said, putting a mild emphasis on the word. "And it's possible. I can't think of why else a demon would restrict itself to the full moon."

We sat and brooded over that for a moment. It wasn't a pleasant thought. A demon-possessed werewolf was a terrifying concept, but at least it gave us something to chase. Without that I didn't know what to do.

Dolph stood up and walked to the door. "I'm going to go have a...chat with Christopher. I'll let you know if I learn anything."

"You're not going to kill him, are you?" Conn's description of the pack's problems had been...unsettling to say the least, and I was afraid that the latest failure would be the last straw. Dolph doesn't like killing people, but sometimes it's necessary.

There are days when I'm very glad not to be a werewolf.

Dolph didn't do much to reassure me when he just smiled gently and said, "Not if I can help it."

Super.

Why do I do this to myself? I mean, really? Why?

The next week was, thankfully, a reprieve. Nobody found any mauled corpses, or even particularly violent assaults, suggesting that the demon, werewolf-associated or otherwise, was sticking to its pattern. Kyra made a point of calling every day, and visited the shop a couple of times, although she didn't have any news.

Dolph, too, was constantly calling to update me, even though all of the updates amounted to "we're pretty sure nobody died last night, keep tuned for more updates." I...wasn't sure how I felt about that, really. Dolph was a great guy and an old friend—in case you didn't guess, he was the one who taught me to pick locks, along with a host of other bizarre skills and useless information. I hadn't seen him in a long time, and it was kinda nice to see him now.

But at the same time, he was a reminder of my time with the Khan's pack, and I really didn't have any pleasant memories of that. They were all tainted with the unending reminders that I wasn't,

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and never could be, a werewolf, a part of the pack. Between that and the looming specter of my own lingering insanity, even the best parts of the time I'd spent there had a bitter aftertaste.

Enrico, on the other hand, didn't call me at all. Most of the time that wouldn't have surprised me—he and his sister are probably my closest friends aside from Kyra, but I didn't actually hear from them all that often. Now, though, the silence seemed to take on an ominous significance. I was afraid that, despite my pitiful attempts at reconciliation, I had just lost Enrico's friendship.

So suffice to say that, while the situation was unquestionably better, I was anything but calm. I discovered, too, that the only thing I hated more than being drawn into pack business and demonic killing sprees was when, having been so involved, I was left waiting to hear about the next death with nothing I could do about it.

Feeling helpless sucks. There's a special horror to knowing that bad things are about to happen, but simultaneously being utterly impotent to prevent them. It's like waiting on test results from the hospital, except there isn't even a slim hope that things will get better before they get worse.

I made the best of it, going to work every day and shaping wood into increasingly detailed shapes in an effort to distract myself from the ongoing, slow-motion crisis. Usually nothing soothes me quite like making things, but just now I couldn't seem to see the beauty in my work. I started to get irritable, and slept only fitfully—which was actually fairly normal for me. Sleep's never been a close friend of mine.

By the time the third week of this rolled around, I was getting desperate for things to change. I couldn't take much more of the waiting. It had gotten to the point that I wanted something, *anything*, to happen, just to end the waiting.

So, naturally, I was horrified when something did. I'd known that it would, of course, but...there's a whole world of difference between knowing something has to happen and seeing it. As a result, when Dolph called around midnight to tell me that there was yet another corpse, even though I'd seen it coming all along I still reacted with a certain amount of distress

I know. Stupid, right?

Chapter Six

It wasn't as late as the last call, but it was still plenty late—or early, I suppose—enough for me to be asleep. I was still a little groggy, but by the time Dolph came by to pick me up I'd managed to get dressed and was waiting for him outside. He drove up in what was obviously a fairly nice rental car about ten minutes after he called. When I got in I saw that Kyra was already in the back seat, wearing fur again.

"So what do we know about this one?" I asked Dolph as we started moving.

"Pretty much nothing," he said. "Except that the killer broke their pattern."

I blinked. "What?"

"I had Christopher's pack check into things, and it turns out your policeman was pretty much right. I didn't bother telling you because it wasn't anything you didn't already know." I glared at him, and he laughed briefly before continuing. "Anyway, they had five deaths in the days surrounding the full moon, then another two the next time the moon was full."

"So this one makes eight overall." That's me, master of the obvious.

"That we know of," Dolph corrected me absently. "I'd guess no more than ten more that we don't."

I waited for a moment, then asked, "So what did the demon break about its pattern?"

Dolph gave me an incredulous look. "It's nearly another week until the full moon, Winter."

"Oh. Right. I knew that."

We arrived soon after that, which was good because after that exchange even Kyra was laughing at me. If you don't get why that was impressive, try and remember that she was a wolf at the moment. I know it can be hard to get used to werewolves that way, but it really is important.

As though the killer were intentionally providing as little of a pattern as he could, this time the death had occurred in almost the same neighborhood I lived in. It was only a few blocks away from Pryce's bar in a badly run-down part of town, almost a slum.

We had obviously gotten here before the police. There were exactly no cars in sight, and it wasn't hard to see why. Even for the short time we were planning to be here, I was concerned that Dolph's car would be jacked. Fortunately—or possibly unfortunately—the only person in sight was a slender girl in her late teens leaning against the wall across the street. She was occupied with something on her phone, and showed about as much interest in us as a cat would have in a bag of potato chips—which, in case your cat has weird appetites, means none.

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We were parked in front of one of the few houses in the area, a one-story building badly in need of maintenance. When we went in—the door was unlocked—I couldn't keep from noticing the contrast between this building and the last murder site. This one was about as ramshackle inside as out, poorly cleaned and with battered furnishings. It stank, too, an unpleasant mixture of mildew and rotting garbage that almost drowned out the blood. Whoever had lived here hadn't been particularly fastidious. Or hygienic.

Dolph and Kyra both gave me funny looks when I gagged as soon as I hit the door—and believe me, there are few things stranger than getting funny looks from a werewolf in fur. It's a very strange expression to see on a canid's face. I waved off their concern and we kept going. The corpse was in the bedroom, which was slightly tidier than the living room we'd entered through.

There's not a lot to say about it. Just another savaged corpse. The injuries were about the same as before, with a few variations. No defensive wounds. The throat left intact, but the jawbone ripped off the face entirely, and the eyes removed as well. It hadn't been done neatly.

I knew as soon as I walked in the door that this was the product of the same being as before. The scent of demon hung in the air around the corpse, heavy and reeking. It seemed stronger here, somehow, thicker. It was sharper, biting, so that every breath I took seemed to burn on the way down. It even spread beyond the olfactory, as I seemed to see oddly shaped shadows in the periphery of my vision, and objects took on a strange, unnatural significance when viewed out of the corner of my eye.

I realize that sounds more like a bad drug trip than an investigation. Magic is funny like that. Most of the time any attempt to describe it makes you sound like a surrealist artist after too many shots and some funny mushrooms. Please bear with me, and remember that usually experiencing it isn't any more fun than hearing about it. Less fun, most of the time. Especially around demons.

I didn't stick around. I managed to tell Dolph I would meet him outside, then all but ran for the door. I didn't feel sick—the past days had eliminated whatever weak aversion to blood I had built up—but that whole house stank terribly.

While I waited, I noticed the woman across the street. She'd been there when we went in, but I hadn't paid much attention then. Now that I did, I realized that there was something very subtly...off about her.

At first glance she fit right in. She looked about as old as I did—meaning late teens; I'm not a werewolf, but I don't age any more than they do—and aside from her obvious Asian ancestry looked about as normal as they come. She was a little on the small side, wearing jeans, a hoodie, and a black baseball cap emblazoned with a large, stylized fox in red. At the moment she was apparently entranced with something on her cell phone.

It didn't seem too strange, except for the setting. This was a bad part of town, and this late at night I wouldn't have wanted to hang out alone. I wouldn't have expected to see a woman standing around here unless she were a gangster or a hooker, and her attitude was wrong for either of these

things. A gangster should have been aggressive, wondering what we were doing on her turf; a hooker should have been looking to turn a trick. Instead she was ignoring us totally, still staring fixedly at her cell phone.

I didn't have anything much else to do, giving me plenty of time to keep turning the puzzle around. I put a few other things I'd noticed together, enough to give me an idea of what might be going on. A moment later I concentrated and managed, just barely, to catch a breath of her magic. It wasn't terribly strong, at least not at this distance, but it was pungent and very distinctive, and it confirmed my suspicion.

Say what you will about being obsessed with supernatural monsters. It has a lot of downsides, but it does wonders for your identification abilities. By the time the others came out, I'd been planning my next step for a couple of minutes. I was pretty sure she noticed me noticing her, which made things a little more awkward than they otherwise might have been.

"Anything?" I asked idly, very carefully not watching the thing across the street. I didn't want to give anything away. Maybe she'd already caught me, but I didn't want Dolph to realize what was going on yet.

"Of course not." Dolph's voice was sour. "I take it you still got demon off it?"

I nodded, absently scratching Kyra's ears. "Stronger than before."

"Damn," he muttered. "This poses some serious problems. I don't suppose you can track it?"

"I wish. But the trail fades as soon as I leave the building."

He grunted. "Scent tracking wasn't any better. We'll have to hunt this thing down some other way." He started toward the car, then paused when he realized I wasn't following him.

"I'll make my own way back, thanks," I said in answer to his question. Technically he hadn't asked, but that hardly mattered.

He turned to face me. "Why?" he asked, his voice only somewhat casual.

I didn't answer him. Ultimately, he would either trust me or not, and either way I preferred to know now. Maybe that's paranoid of me, or cruel, or whatever word you prefer. Maybe so. In any case, it was more rude than I'd ever been to Dolph when I was still living in Conn's pack.

I'd changed since then. If he wasn't prepared for that, it wasn't my fault.

Eventually he nodded tightly and continued on to the car, Kyra following him like a well-trained dog. His stiff posture conveyed his hurt feelings quite clearly. Kyra, in contrast, looked rather concerned, glancing back at me over her shoulder several times. I didn't move from where I was standing until they had driven off.

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I would owe them both an apology later. But for now, well, it was important that I be alone for this next part. It was likely to be very touchy, and I couldn't afford any complications. Plus this way there were fewer people likely to get hurt or killed if something did go wrong, but that was really just a sort of collateral benefit.

I waited a minute, just to make sure that they had really left, and nobody else was coming. Then, taking a deep breath, I walked across the now-empty street to confront the entity on the other side.

You'll forgive me if I make that sound excessively melodramatic. It's...strange, I suppose that I would have so little practical experience with supernatural beings, given that I am one myself. But I was in large part raised by humans—and the only admixture was werewolves, who are considered by most to be only slightly different than human themselves. They're also strongly protective, which most definitely extends to keeping those they protect away from potentially dangerous inhuman beings.

So, long story short, Val was the only real nonhuman I'd ever spent time with except for the wolves. I'd certainly never challenged a representative of a lesser-known species in a dark alley at midnight. Alone. When I knew full well that there was a rampaging, demonic murderer in the area. One that I almost certainly couldn't defend myself against effectively.

Okay, maybe it wasn't excessively melodramatic.

I didn't know the proper formula for the situation, so I just walked up in front of her, bowed slightly, and without preamble said, "Kitsune."

She glanced from her phone up at me. "Beg your pardon?" she asked me, sounding bored and slightly hostile. It was a reasonable reaction under the circumstances, and an excellent mask. It probably would have fooled almost anybody else.

"Kitsune," I said again, making certain that my voice was polite and not challenging at all. "You needn't bother denying it—I am not so easily fooled as that."

She looked at me a moment longer, then slipped her phone into a pocket and stood up straight. "Interesting," she murmured. "What gave it away?" Neither her voice nor her face held any trace of boredom or anger now. She sounded amused and a little curious, and her face was unreadable. The change was so sudden, and so complete, as to seem unreal.

"It's not as though you're making a great effort to conceal it," I pointed out. "A young Japanese woman, alone in a dangerous place at night, and yet you don't seem at all concerned for your safety? Not to mention your rather...distinctive appearance," I say, gesturing slightly toward her face. Her features were sharp, with high cheekbones and small eyes. In case you don't have an obsession with obscure mythical creatures, that's a traditional distinguishing mark of a kitsune in Japan.

"I hardly need to," she countered dryly. "Do you know, you're the first person who's ever noticed me? That's pretty sad, really."

"And yet, perhaps, understandable. You are, after all, a long way from home."

She laughed brightly. "Am I? I don't think so. I was born in Chicago. I live here in town."

That's the problem with the modern age of easy transportation. It doesn't matter where a thing originated; you can find them anywhere. Take the werewolves, for example. They're native to Western Europe, but they have a very strong presence in North America these days. And, if that wasn't enough of a jump for you, the Sydney and Tokyo packs are doing well too.

Politeness was very important with kitsune—they're a Japanese myth, that has certain implications. So, rather than make a biting comment or something, I smiled and bowed slightly. "I stand corrected then. And yet, I—"

"Look," she interrupted me. "I'm not particularly old-school, okay? So let's make a deal. You stop beating around the bush, and I'll tell you the truth instead of following family tradition and leading you on a goose chase before I abandon you in the middle of a landfill. Sound good?"

"Ah...sure," I said uncertainly.

"Awesome!" she said happily. "So what the hell do you want?"

I was having a hard time keeping up with the conversation. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but it sure hadn't been...this. Apparently my information was a little out of date. She seemed to be willing to get right to business, though, so eventually I just hazarded the unvarnished truth.

"What are you doing here?" Okay. Maybe a little bit too unvarnished.

She didn't seem to mind, though. She just grinned and looked up at the sky. "Why, it's such a lovely night I thought I'd go for a stroll, and then I wound up here."

I rolled my eyes—I might not be the most experienced guy in the world at things like this, but seriously. "I expect it's total coincidence that you're right across the street from the scene of the crime, then? Just like—if I'm not mistaken—you were talking with the police officer a few weeks ago near the last murder site. And across the street from the one before. All by accident, I'm sure."

She dropped her gaze back to my face, and I noticed that her smile was gone. "I thought you might have noticed that," she said softly. "Yeah, that was me. Excellent job, by the way."

I hadn't actually been sure until that very moment, but it seemed likely. I, not being a detective, hadn't been clever enough to really be paying attention, and I hadn't been sure that it was the same person each time. But seeing one young woman that close to the scene, three times in a row, is a bit much to be coincidence. "So," I said in as nearly conversational a tone as I could pull off, "You mind telling me why you're so interested in these murders?"

Apparently I hadn't done that well—no surprise—because she smirked knowingly. "I didn't kill them, if that's what you mean. But I thought it might be worthwhile to see who came to visit. And, what

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do you know, I've seen you and that charming young werewolf quite a bit recently." No point asking how she knew that Kyra-as-human and Kyra-as-canine were the same, or how she knew Kyra was young. Might as well ask Conn how he got into my trailer and expect an answer—it was never going to happen.

"You didn't answer my question," I reminded her. "Why so interested in the first place?"

The kitsune looked me in the eye and showed a whole bunch of teeth in what I suppose was, in the technical sense, a smile. Her teeth seemed a little bit too sharp, a little bit too numerous, to be human, and they were actually gleaming in the dark, which was really creepy. It reminded me forcefully of all the stories in which the person who annoys a kitsune dies horribly. "The first man this thing killed was a friend of mine," she said softly, not sounding at all friendly now. "So let's just say I have an interest in seeing it ripped to tiny fucking pieces, and leave it at that, shall we?" I nodded, a little freaked out, and she grinned—a real grin this time. "Great! So what's your stake?" Her voice had reverted to its previous cheerful state.

I blinked—I was pretty sure I was getting literal mental whiplash from the emotional rollercoaster that seemed to be this kitsune's normal state. "Just helping a friend," I said. "But it sounds like we have a common aim here."

"Just what I was thinking," she said happily. "So what say we go grab some food and chat for a bit? I'm starving."

"If you're buying, I'd love to." She laughed at that, but she didn't object, so I figured I'd done all right.

As it turned out, kitsune have cars. I suppose there isn't any reason they shouldn't, but it hadn't ever occurred to me that a Japanese fox spirit would drive a black Toyota sedan with—I laughed when I saw it—a fox sticker in the back window. She really didn't try to hide.

As we got in, she abruptly asked, "So what's your name, anyway?"

I debated offering a false name, then mentally shrugged. At this point, if she wasn't telling the truth about her motivations, I was pretty well screwed anyway. "Winter. Yours?"

"Aiko."

We ended up at Pryce's once again.

No, it wasn't my idea. I did say that his place is very popular in the local inhuman, nonhuman, and semihuman crowd. I'd probably seen Aiko at least half a dozen times there, although what she had looked like at the time was anyone's guess. Kitsune, at least in the folktales I'd read, are extremely good with illusions, and in some cases outright shapeshifting. I wasn't sure how much of that was exaggeration, but it seemed safest to err on the side of caution.

In any case, she didn't bother asking where we should go, and she didn't have any difficulty getting there. Once we'd arrived, she waited for me to take the lead—another test, I realized. If I had any business involving myself in this sort of thing I'd know where to go, and if not the spell would ensure that I didn't stumble on it by accident. I didn't mention it, and neither did she—paranoia isn't a mental illness in my world, isn't even unusual enough to note except by its absence.

One in the morning was a much busier time for Pryce than the last time I'd been there. The room wasn't thronging, but there weren't many tables open. I still managed to find one tucked into the corner, where nobody was likely to bother us. Aiko smiled a little when I offered her the chair with its back to the wall, but she didn't refuse.

We hadn't been there thirty seconds when a waitress came to get our order. No, it wasn't Kyra—although now that I thought about it, she must have left from work to go to the murder scene.

She seemed a little surprised when both Aiko and I were ready to order our food without seeing a menu, and more surprised when I asked for iced tea and the kitsune chose orange soda. She had reason to, I suppose; there aren't very many people who go to a bar at one in the morning and don't drink alcohol. I never drink, though, and I was glad to see that Aiko was remaining sober as well. It's a bad sign when your potential ally voluntarily impairs her judgment before a decision.

All important conversation was put off until after we had our food. It took a little longer than before, what with all the other people in the bar, but not as long as you might think—Pryce runs a fast kitchen. In a relatively short time the waitress came back and deposited a Philly in front of me and a chicken-fried steak sandwich for Aiko.

We elected, unanimously and with no discussion, to forego conversation for the moment in favor of food. Aiko made remarkably short work of her sandwich, which was good; I can't stand people who pick at their food. It's one of a rather long list of things I can't stand. You may not have noticed, but I'm sort of opinionated. Personally, I've never managed to believe that that's a bad thing.

Once the food was mostly gone, I asked the kitsune, "So what do you know about what's happening?"

She shrugged, mouth still full of steak. "There's a werewolf killing people. He's up to what, nine now?"

I paused. What she'd said was reasonable, but...something felt off about it. "How do you know he's a werewolf?" I asked, expecting her to go through the same circumstantial evidence I already knew.

"Cause I saw him."

That I wouldn't have guessed. "How'd you see him?"

She shrugged. "After my friend was killed, I got a few air spirits to watch for a werewolf. The next night, one of them saw him and he was still there when I got there."

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"Really?" I was impressed; I'd never worked with spirits, and I didn't know too much about them, but that sounded like a really useful trick. "How did you get the spirits to work for you?"

"Shameless bribery, of course." I was not entirely sure whether Aiko was joking or not. It wasn't probably worth pursuing.

"So what'd he look like?"

She looked at my face like she was trying to figure out whether I was serious, then laughed and rolled her eyes when she saw that I was. "He looked like a wolf. Obviously. Mostly greys, if that helps any."

"Oh. Stupid question. Sorry." I forget, sometimes, that other people have a hard time noticing the details that set one werewolf apart from another. I've spent so much time around them that Val sometimes says that I'm more likely to recognize a customer by their dog than their face, and he isn't entirely joking.

"So what is it you know that I don't?" Aiko asked. She rolled her eyes again when she saw my startled expression. "I'm not an idiot. It's pretty clear that you know something. Give."

"He left a residue of demonic magic at the last two sites."

She frowned. "Really? How do you know?"

"I felt it. It's not something I'd mistake."

I could tell she wanted to ask how I would know, and how I could feel it in the first place, but she didn't. The supernatural community doesn't obey normal societal rules, for the most part, but we still have our own conventions. Privacy is one of them, and Aiko wasn't likely to pry. Instead, she asked, "Possessed, then?"

"Looks that way," I agreed.

She pursed her lips, obviously thinking through the implications of that statement. "Shit," she said eventually. "That might be a problem."

"Yeah," I agree. "That's why I've got the local pack for backup." Actually, if anything the opposite was true—but I didn't need to tell her that.

"It would be rather strange if you didn't," she said dryly. "You werewolves tend to look out for your own."

I winced a little when I heard that. People mistake me for a werewolf all the time, always have. It didn't even bother me, once; when I was young I liked hearing it, like it was some sort of confirmation that someday I'd finally get to be a part of the pack for real. Even after I learned that this wasn't the case, I didn't really mind it.

That changed the year I turned twenty-one. I was in college—that was why I came to Colorado Springs in the first place, incidentally—and doing pretty well with it. I'd found a niche, of sorts, in the normal world. I still didn't fit in, still wasn't human, but it was infinitely better than spending every day surrounded by the pack, knowing that I would never be one of them. I made friends. Fell in love.

Her name was Catherine. We met when we were both in freshman year. She was...clean. Innocent, kind, honest. In other words, she was everything that I myself am not.

If you think that sounds overly dramatic, wait for the end of the story. You'll understand. Trust me.

We got to be good friends. I recognized in her the things that, in some sense, had been missing from my life. She wasn't normal—she was much better than that, like if you took all the best things about the normal world and then subtracted the monotony, the boredom and casual despair that define so much of most lives. I'm not entirely sure what she recognized in me. I don't think I want to know.

Anyway. We got to be good friends. Spent a lot of time together. You can do the math.

That was the phrase she used when she realized what I was—or thought she did, anyway. "You're a werewolf, aren't you?" It's a no-win question, because in the modern world you don't ask somebody a question like that unless you pretty much already know the answer. It shouldn't have happened, but...well. Once I left the pack, I tried to leave it behind. I hadn't, deep down, really believed in the Khan's policy of absolute secrecy anyway. Hiding what you are from the media, sure, but from your friends? From the people you love? Keeping yourself separate from the real world? No.

So things slipped. Little hints, here and there, odd coincidences and subtle indicators that I wasn't quite what I seemed. Eventually Catherine picked up on too many of them, and started to really believe.

The worst thing about it was that, in some sick way, I'd dreamed of it. My dream had been tainted by too many romantic movies, though. I imagined that she would find out, despite my efforts, what I was. I would admit, reluctantly, that she was right, and then proclaim that I had to leave now for her safety. She would object, refuse to acknowledge it. I would be won over, she would forgive my lies. We'd ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. Roll the credits to an inspirational classic rock song and pretend playing outtake clips is still clever and original.

The reality was significantly different. I admitted it—it seemed easier than trying to explain that no, I was a mongrel blend of supernatural beasts that didn't have a name, which was almost exactly like a werewolf except for the most important bit. After that, though, it diverged significantly from the script. Catherine froze like a deer in the headlights, turned very pale, then pepper sprayed me and ran. She refused to talk to me, wouldn't answer my calls. I couldn't find her anywhere.

Even that could have been worked in. But, less than a day after that conversation, I learned from a mutual friend what she was doing.

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You see, Catherine was a meticulous person. She hadn't conceived of my being a lycanthrope and then come running to ask. She built up evidence, collected piles of records. Somehow, and most damningly, she'd managed to get a video of one of the actual werewolves at school transforming. (Yes, there were other werewolves there. More college students—and faculty—than you would think are nonhuman. They love college campuses, because everybody just sort of expects weird and inexplicable behavior. It's like a free pass to do whatever the hell you want.)

She wasn't going to the police. She was smarter than that.

She was going to go to the media. With names, and dates, and a video that any tabloid reporter in the country would sell their soul for.

Obviously that was the one thing the werewolves couldn't tolerate.

I didn't kill Catherine. But I knew that they would, and I stood by and let it happen. They made it painless, of course, out of respect for me and because she really hadn't done anything wrong. It didn't matter. If I hadn't got involved with her she might have lived a long, happy, productive life. She could have had love, happiness, a family.

I might as well have slit her throat myself.

The worst part is that, in retrospect, I was wrong. She wasn't nearly the threat I'd thought she was. She had videos, sure, but she wouldn't have made it ten seconds in before people started screaming that it was obviously fake and complaining about the poor special effects. Her data was meticulous, but no reputable newspaper would have even looked at it, and tabloids print a dozen stories about werewolves a day anyway. She could have shouted it from the rooftops, and blended in perfectly with a billion and one other lunatics. I could have just vanished, and she would have been left alone without any real problems. A few years later she would have dismissed the whole thing as an exaggeration of her memories, or forgotten about it entirely.

Had I thought about it I would have recognized that at the time. But I didn't think about it. It was my first real experience of autonomy, and I'd screwed it up badly. I panicked and overreacted, and she died for it.

I don't watch movies anymore.

It had been a long time since then—almost seven years, to be more precise. I...hadn't gotten over it, exactly. You don't get over something like that, not without turning into a complete monster. But it didn't hurt anymore.

I still thought of her when Aiko said that. But I didn't feel like explaining any of it, so instead I shook my head. "No, actually. Real common mistake."

The kitsune looked at me doubtfully. She didn't believe a word of it, clearly, and who could blame her?

She didn't make an issue out of it, though. "You'll call me if you find anything?"

"Sure."

I wasn't entirely sure what to think on the walk home.

Oddly enough, and probably suggesting depressing things about my psyche, the corpse had been largely overshadowed by my meeting with Aiko. Not so much because of what I'd learned from her—essentially nothing, although I might have to try that trick with the air spirits. No, it was more because....

How to explain this? Ever since Catherine died, I'd embraced the Khan's policy more than even the werewolves. Kyra was my best friend, and she was not only no more a part of the real world than I was, we weren't even that close. I saw her, for the most part, a couple of times a month. Other than that, well. Anna and Enrico, obviously, but I see them less than Kyra—and I'm lying to them, all the time. I can't do anything else, after what happened to Catherine, but it still makes me feel guilty. I'm pretty sure that Enrico, at least, knows that I'm lying, too. That doesn't make things any easier.

And that's it. All of my friends. None of them were very close. None of them knew all that much about me. Since Catherine had died I'd had essentially no contact with humanity. I worked at Val's shop, where a sizable portion of the customers were inhuman. Of those who weren't, I had established friendships with exactly none. It's not like we have many regular customers. Val himself was...an excellent boss, and I liked him well enough, but I wouldn't call him a friend. Other than that I pretty much stayed in my house, unless I was hiking or something. No activities with other people.

So it's something of an understatement to say that my encounter with Aiko was a rare event in my life. Not only in the obvious sense of my first encounter with a kitsune—I hadn't even been certain they existed before tonight—but also in the sense of making a connection with another (relatively) human being. Granted it was a connection founded in death and, frankly, really kind of creepy, but still. I contemplated how I felt about that and what it suggested to me about myself as I walked, and I didn't much like what I found.

So, with such weighty matters on my mind, it's no surprise I didn't see the attack coming—even though, really, I should have been expecting it before now.

The first warning I had was, oddly enough, from my sense of the magic around me. It was more acute than usual, maybe more acute than ever, and I felt the demon from a block away.

That gave me just enough time to draw the knife I was carrying under my shirt. It was a heavy Bowie knife, steel with silver patterns on the blade which formed a really pretty wolf's-head pattern and—more importantly—made it seriously inimical to the health of werewolves everywhere.

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I should have had more time than that, but the monster was moving fast—really fast. By the time the knife had cleared the sheath, it had gone from around three hundred feet away to less than fifty.

Whenever I get into a fight—which has happened more often than I'd like, but probably not as often as you're thinking—I feel like time sort of...stretches out. Not like time slows down, more like my mind speeds up—which I've read is actually a fairly accurate description of what happens to a human brain in a crisis. One of the downsides of being me is that I never know how different I am from human in any particular regard, but it felt similar.

Long story short, I had time as it was approaching to think about what was going to happen. Before my knife had even cleared its sheath, for example, I had time to think *Shit, that thing is fast. I can't fight that.*

And I couldn't. With or without a silvered knife, a regular werewolf would tear me to pieces in a purely physical confrontation. This one, well, I don't think I need to go into that. If I tried to fight this thing, I would wind up dead. Already I was having a hard time shaking the image of Kyra standing over my shredded remains, looking just like the ones I'd already seen, blood staining the sidewalk for a dozen feet in every direction....

I had to focus. Physical conflict was out. What had Val said about a demon's weakness? Objects of faith weren't an option. I just didn't have anything available that had a chance in hell of working.

And that left magic.

It was a long shot to say the least. I wasn't a shaman; I'd never done anything involving spirits, or demons, or anything even vaguely like that. But, let's face it, when you're staring down a demon-possessed werewolf from a hundred feet away and it wants you dead, a long shot's a lot more than you have otherwise.

So, rather than worry about how impossible it was, I brought the magic up inside me as strong as I could manage. It came readily to my call, surging up in an instant inside my mind.

As the werewolf closed to within a few feet I swept the knife at its head. The black wolf, larger than even a werewolf had any right to be, jerked back a few inches from the passage of the silver, and I could swear it was smirking at me.

I never had a chance of hitting it. I just wanted to slow it down.

I managed to make eye contact, and as I did I threw my mind down that sudden connection and slammed into it.

This was not a gentle sharing, the way I'd shared the cat's mind in my dreams. This was an assault, an expression of mental contact as a weapon, fast and brutal rather than slow and gentle. I'd

done this to other werewolves a couple of times, using the slim connection I have with the predator side of them, and it made an impression.

But as I learned the instant I made contact, this wasn't the same. There was no resistance preventing me from entering the mind of the monster, not even as much as I would expect from a normal human. I slammed into his mind with all the subtlety of a small bomb.

And, once I got inside, I felt like someone might after they accidentally set one off inside a fireworks factory. It wasn't hard to see why he hadn't resisted; his mind was unimaginably chaotic, like a battlefield inside his own skull.

When I leave my body, my mind changes. For one thing, apparently time *really* seems to slow down when you don't have all those pesky synapses getting in the way of speedy communication. Second, I don't have any senses as you understand the term, so my mind is kind of interpreting everything directly. As a result the following section may seem somewhat surreal.

The strongest, and most obvious, presence in the monster's mind felt more or less like every other werewolf I'd felt—which is to say, almost human. True, it was focused on rage and violence, and at the moment it was all about killing me, but still. It was something I could comprehend, something whose motivations I could understand.

The second presence was different. I didn't have to wonder what it was; it absolutely reeked of demon (except that, remember, I didn't have a nose right now. So, instead of olfactory signals, I got to experience the magical signature of a demon at close range with my mind directly. It was actually even less pleasant than it sounds.)

That presence felt...wrong. Alien. Malicious, yes, and of course violent, but at the same time not quite right. It felt as though I didn't understand what I was sensing, like even with the intimacy of that connection I still didn't grasp what it was. Even the most horrific human murderers have something recognizable as a motivation which, while it might be horrid and nonsensical, is at least something we can understand conceptually. The demon felt more like even if I knew exactly why it did what it did, the knowledge wouldn't mean anything to me.

That much made sense. I mean, I'd sort of been expecting that a truly possessed person wouldn't have the unity of mind that a normal person does. It made sense that the demon would feel like a different person.

The *third* person was what threw me for a loop.

Imagine neverending hunger. Imagine unearthly rage, unfocused and vague. Imagine incredible anguish, incredible need. Now imagine a being made entirely out of those things and imagine setting it loose inside your mind, and you might have an idea of what this bastard felt like. It didn't seem to have any real thought, just struggled mindlessly against the others.

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That was the other remarkable thing, you see. Even though they were all trapped inside the same psyche, the three personalities were apparently in the midst of a blood feud, all three of them fighting all the rest.

All of these observations took place in about a second and a half. Then, to try and keep myself from being a victim of said blood feud, I slammed my mind into the preponderant mind, figuring that that was the one with the best chance of success. If I could take out the dominant personality, the others would be unbalanced, and I might be able to get away before the thing managed to recover.

It didn't work. I succeeded in putting the human-seeming part of the monster off balance, but I had no real chance to defeat it. Not here, where it held a very important home field advantage. As if that weren't enough, the weird multiple-personality nature of the mind I was facing made it almost impossible to get a solid metaphysical grip on the thing.

Magic tends to have odd effects on your mind. I felt strangely detached, cold. I didn't want to die—I *really* didn't want to die—but the terror felt like a triviality, without any real immediacy. I could work through the logical consequences of my situation quite easily and dispassionately, and they all suggested the same thing, which was that my life would last exactly as long as it took the demon to get bored of playing with me.

I'd known that this was a gamble. I'd bet and I'd lost, plain and simple, and this had been the only hole card I had. Now my mind was so far detached from my body that I couldn't even fight back, although this did have the pleasant side effect that I wouldn't feel the pain.

And about that point was when the *fourth* part of my attacker's mind entered the fray.

At first I was certain that this meant simply that I was even more screwed than before, but I almost immediately noticed that this mind felt different than the others. It was...cleaner, somehow, lacking the demonic taint of the others.

And it was fighting them. Not a mindless struggle, but a concerted, intelligent attack. It caught the humanoid portion of the psyche by surprise, assaulting it with remarkable viciousness. The closest physical analogue I can think of is a cat placed in a bag, shaken briskly, and thrown across the room. It had the same frenzied quality, and the exact same disregard for its own wellbeing.

The third entity, which I had thought mindless, suddenly seemed less so. The all-consuming rage and hunger were still present, but it seemed more focused now, and the target of that rage was clearly the humanoid aspect of this thing. It wasn't helping the newcomer, exactly—but it wasn't fighting it, either. The demon, likewise, stood aside, and I got the impression that it was amused. That left just the original, humanoid persona fighting against the most recent addition.

I could tell that the human-like bit was going to win. It just had too much power, and...it's really hard to explain, but it felt like it had the superior position as well. Not in any physical sense, obviously, but it means the same thing: it was applying its power more effectively, more efficiently.

Which is why, acting on the theory that I was already completely screwed and as a result nothing I did could really make things worse for me, I threw my support behind the newest presence. Not directly, because I couldn't seem to affect this monster and it obviously could, but I channeled power to it. It wasn't magic, exactly, more like the concentrated force of my intention, my desire to see it succeed. In this battleground of the mind, those things had very real power behind them.

It accepted with...gratitude? Or simple glee? I couldn't sort out quite what I was feeling against the background maelstrom of emotion and insanity inside the possessed werewolf's mind—although I no longer had much confidence that what I was fighting was even that simple to describe.

In any case, it took it and used it. My support gave it an edge that the other presence obviously hadn't been expecting, and the clean aspect overwhelmed it in a sudden rush.

As it did it seemed to carry me with it into the body of my enemy. It was a strange experience, not at all like the total sharing I was more accustomed to. I was very clearly an intruder here, and an unwelcome one. I was sharing all of this body's senses, but I still felt as though I were watching the action from the outside, somehow.

He—or maybe it; this thing didn't feel natural enough to be a him—could see, well, me. I was standing right in front of it, and had just begun to fall on my face. I expected that, because without my presence my body wouldn't react to counterbalance my swing. I was a little surprised that I hadn't hit the ground yet, but then mental magic has odd effects on the perception of time. That entire struggle, which had felt like hours, had taken place in a second or two.

The werewolf, I could dimly tell, had to struggle immensely to turn away from me. It did, though, converting the slash it had already begun into a spin, and I belatedly realized that the fourth presence must have seized control of the body from the primary mind. I could no longer feel any of them directly, although I had the distinct impression of a malicious entity looking over my shoulder.

Once it had turned away from me it seemed to find the going easier. It ran back the way it had come, moving fast. I don't mean a little bit fast—it was faster than any werewolf I'd ever seen in my life, faster than any living thing had a right to be. It was hard to tell, but I was guessing it was moving better than eighty miles an hour within a few seconds, sprinting down the middle of the street. There were no cars in sight, fortunately, or other pedestrians.

It took me a few seconds to pry myself loose of the twisted morass that was this thing's mind, but once I did it happened very quickly, the werewolf almost catapulting me away. Back in my body, my first sensation was pain. I had a throbbing headache so bad it was hard to see, and felt about as strong as a week-old kitten. That, generally speaking, is what you can expect when you start throwing magic around recklessly when you haven't practiced in years. I was lucky I was still conscious.

As I discovered when I started to move, I'd also fallen badly. Again, this is generally the only way to fall when you don't have any conscious or reflexive control over your muscles. I found my knife a

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couple feet away—I was very lucky not to have stabbed myself on the way down—and managed to sheathe it before I stood up.

I'd bashed my face against the ground, as well as one elbow and my ribcage. In a while I'd have some lovely bruising patterns, but for now it just registered as pain whenever I moved or—thanks to the ribs—breathed. When I started walking I learned that I must have injured my hip somehow as well, because I was limping on every step I took with my right leg.

If that werewolf came around for a rematch I was absolutely dead in the water. I didn't think it would, though. I'd scared it tonight—not so much because of what I had done to it, which I knew wouldn't even inconvenience it for long. No, the key thing here was that it hadn't been expecting a fight at all. Werewolves are predators at heart, and there isn't a predator on earth that doesn't react when the prey turns out to be much more dangerous than it anticipated. Most of the time even a werewolf can be unnerved by nothing more than unexpected defiance. Add in my magic and...no, I didn't think that the demon-infested monster was going to be coming back for seconds. Not tonight.

I still kept moving, though, because I might be wrong and because—let's be realistic, here—falling down in the street in a bad part of town at night was just as likely to kill me as any werewolf. Maybe more, because I could at least fight a werewolf.

I can't remember anything of that walk, for which I'm just as glad. I have no idea how I managed to make it home. What I do know is that when I finally did get to my house, I was pretty much running on empty. I managed to lock the door again behind myself, then staggered into the bedroom, collapsed on the bed and fell asleep without even undressing first.

Chapter Seven

When I woke up it was almost sunset. The clock said it was already six, which meant I'd slept for roughly fifteen hours solid. I still felt somewhat weak and bone-deep tired. I was clearly badly out of shape when it came to magic. Come to think of it, I wasn't just lucky I hadn't passed out from how much power I'd spent driving off the werewolf—I was lucky it hadn't killed me.

My body still ached, too. I hadn't exactly done a thorough self-examination, but I was fairly sure that at least one rib was cracked, and I might have broken the nose as well. The rest of my injuries were fairly minor, but my mirror confirmed my prediction that the bruises were spectacular. I was lucky I wasn't female, or random people on the street would ask who was abusing me. As it was I could probably pass it off as a car wreck or something. You know, if I had a car.

If I were a human being I would probably have been very concerned by my injuries. However, as a distinctly inhuman being, I wasn't. The reason for this is very simple. You remember I mentioned having tried to become a werewolf when I was younger?

Well, it didn't work. But, and this is important, it didn't fail either. Normally that's impossible—you either become a werewolf, or you don't. Generally if you don't you die, from your injuries or from the pack.

I'm not normal. I turned into a werewolf, and spent a couple months being, as psychologists say, mad as a hatter. Then I wasn't a werewolf anymore, thanks to the unusual nature of my magic and possibly the intervention of a mysterious magical entity to which I accidentally sold my soul via a slip of the tongue and minor confusion due to being completely loony. Either that or it was a hallucination. You know, one or the other.

Anyways, the experience left me with a few mementos. One of them is increased healing—not werewolf level healing, but not human level either. A cracked rib would heal in a couple days. I could feed the part of me that retained a tiny bit of werewolf more magic, and it would heal faster.

But at the moment I was tired, and my head ached, and I'd used too much magic already. So I told my ribs, and assorted other aches, that they could bloody well get better on their own, and got to work.

I had two messages on my phone. The first was from Val around nine, asking where I was and whether I was all right. Apparently he'd gotten worried when I hadn't responded and, remembering what I'd told him about, called Christopher. He had in turn contacted Dolph, who had called to check if I was okay and ask me to call him when I woke up. It wasn't worth wondering how he had known I was asleep rather than dead or just not answering my phone. Conn's whole family—which, by the way, consists of just Conn and his three children, Bryan, Dolph, and Erin—had a tendency to know things they had no business knowing, and a matching tendency to refuse to explain how they found out.

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They're all creepy in their own ways, though. Don't think you can just match werewolfery, inexplicable knowledge, and a slightly unnerving air and you've described all four of them. Dolph, for example, is the gentle face of the Khan's enforcement. He does mostly diplomatic work. A deadly warrior, sure, but he was usually just a reminder of the forces that Conn can bring to bear.

Erin, on the other hand, is the real thing. She's the youngest sibling, only slightly older than Edward. If Dolph was a diplomat, Erin was an assassin. (Fun fact—did you know that that word only technically applies to ideologically motivated killers, thus invalidating three-quarters of popular usage?) When Conn has a problem and the best way to make it go away is the judicious application of violence, more often than not it's Erin that gets sent in.

We were good friends while I was with the pack, maybe better friends than I was with Dolph. Eventually I went on a job with her, though, and I honestly think that the experience will always stick in my memory as one of the most terrifying in my life. Not because I was in danger—on the contrary, with her present I was possibly safer than I'd ever been. But seeing the friendly, slightly mischievous werewolf I'd known turn into a stone-cold killer like flipping a switch had been seriously unnerving. Especially because, right after killing her target with a charged-silver sniper round before he ever knew she was there, she went right back to her usual self. Violence just didn't mean anything to her.

That was part of what Conn had been referring to when he offered to send her instead of Dolph. Granted that part of it was simple courtesy, but it also represented two different solutions. Sending a diplomat meant that he thought there could still be a solution to this that left relatively few bodies on the ground at the end. Sending Erin meant that there would still be few bodies on the ground, but only because there wouldn't be enough left of the rest to find. Regardless of what I thought of either of them personally, I preferred the first alternative.

Once I'd showered and dressed, the first thing I did was call Dolph to explain to him what had happened. He didn't answer, so I left him a message very briefly explaining what had happened and asking him to come talk to me when he got a chance. I didn't feel comfortable going into detail on the phone. Then I kept going, calling Val to tell him that I wasn't injured, but I wasn't feeling well either and I wasn't sure whether I'd make it to work tomorrow. His typically laconic response was, "Stay away from the demon this time."

Val, too, always knows more than most people give him credit for.

After that I called both Kyra and Aiko to reassure them that, although I had encountered the demon and come out on the losing side, I was still alive and not seriously hurt. Kyra had her tough-werewolf face on, but I knew her well enough to hear the concern underneath. Aiko...seemed like a bipolar kitsune who'd forgotten her medication and was on at least one illegal drug, the same as before.

By the time I got off the phone with the kitsune, Dolph was sitting in my living room. Actually, I suppose he was more lounging than sitting, sprawled across my couch like an oversized housecat. I walked to the office chair across from it, which I had made years ago from scraps of random hardwood, giving it a sort of Frankenstein-style look. I sat down on it backward, crossing my arms across the back.

"You figure he tried to whack you?" Dolph asked without preamble.

I shrugged. "Can't see why else he'd jump me like that. No way it was a coincidence."

"No," he agreed. "Not a chance. So you drove him off with your freakish magic powers?"

"Yeah," I said, and then outlined my experience. I tried, I really did, but it still wound up sounding like a drug trip.

"So I've been thinking about it," I said once I'd finished. "And I think I might know what I was feeling."

"Really?" Dolph said, sounding...skeptical? Or maybe just interested. It was hard to tell, and even harder to tell whether it was genuine. Dolph's been playing politics for a long time, and his acting abilities make Enrico look like an amateur.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "The dominant personality was definitely the original owner of the body. The demon's self-explanatory. But the third one felt like a werewolf."

He frowned. "I thought you said the first one was the werewolf."

"I did. But hear me out here. That felt like a werewolf. But the third one...it was a little like a moon-crazy wolf. All hunger and aggression, without any real thought behind it. So is it possible for a werewolf to sort of, I don't know, gather up the wolf and force it into a separate entity?"

"I don't know," Dolph said thoughtfully. "Not that I've ever heard of, but...I don't know what a demon can do." He stood up abruptly. "I'll call my father. How about you get some sleep? You still look like shit."

"Thanks," I said sourly, standing up and walking him to the door. "Tell me what you find out."

I meant to do exactly as Dolph had suggested, but once I went back to bed I found that I couldn't sleep, in spite of how tired I still felt.

Instead I kept thinking about what I'd told Dolph.

Werewolves talk about their wolves like separate entities sometimes, because it's simple and relatively accurate. Heck, most of the time I do it too. But the truth is a lot more complicated than that. The wolf is sort of an outgrowth of the instincts and attitudes that come with the change, combined with a person's own personality traits and desires.

What it isn't is some sort of external force. Kyra's wolf wasn't somebody else, something apart from her; it was an essential piece of who she was, given shape and definition and made much more influential by the change and the magic. Splitting it off should be impossible, like trying to rip your own

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soul in half. And yet, despite the apparent impossibility of it, I still felt like it was the most reasonable explanation for what I'd felt.

That was strange enough. But the fourth mind was what was giving me the most trouble. It, unlike the others, hadn't felt like a part of a greater whole—it had seemed, in some ways, as though it was as much of an interloper as I was. It had felt strange, too, clean and wholesome and oddly simple. Nothing like a werewolf, and certainly not demonic in nature.

The worst part was that it had also felt so very familiar, as though I had experienced it so many times before that I couldn't place what it actually was.

Eventually, though, my own fatigue was enough to drag me to sleep. I'd spent a great deal of power, but, contrary to logic, that left my magic riled up and hyperactive. Thus, I wasn't entirely surprised when I slipped straight into a remarkably vivid not-dream in which I shared the mind and body of a local coyote. I wasn't even quite asleep, which made the experience quite a bit more coherent than it usually was.

In the dream, we are hunting in the scrub grasses near my trailer and doing a good job of it. I feel somewhere between a voyeur and a participant as we slip up behind a rabbit with easy stealth and pounce. It tries to run but we are far too fast for it, catching it between our paws and slapping it to the ground.

It struggles, briefly, before we break its neck in our jaws. It kicks once, twice, then it twitches for the last time and we start to eat. The meat is delicious, the blood staining our muzzle a delicate shade of pink.

It's not a terribly large meal, but after we eat we don't particularly feel like doing...anything. We jog over to our den on a nearby hill and curl up in the fading sunlight. The lingering taste of blood mingles with the aromas of the desert and the nearby city to lend a subtle, richly complex flavor to the air.

We slip into sleep together, with the simple contentment that humans so seldom find. This time I don't dream.

The next time I woke up it was morning again and, with the echoes of the coyote still in my mind, I knew exactly what the strange presence in the mind of the possessed werewolf reminded me of.

I've mostly shared the minds of urban critters in my life, dogs and foxes and stray cats, with here and there the occasional coyote or raptor. That's what comes of living in a city. But I spent a lot of time in Wyoming growing up, and with my talent it was inevitable that I would occasionally have the opportunity to communicate with less domesticated beasts.

Then, when I was fifteen, I spent a month living in Yellowstone. Trust me when I say that there are plenty of animals there that aren't urban at all.

So I knew what I was talking about when I concluded that the strange, pure presence felt like a wolf. A literal wolf, I mean, not a werewolf. Every animal has a sort of unique signature, a pattern to its mind and its magic that nothing else matches, including other animals of the same species. (So do people, incidentally, although I can't sense those directly. Ultimately the differences between humans and other animals are pretty irrelevant, and I'm the guy who should know.)

I have a terrible memory for names, and faces, and often for voices as well. That is more than counterbalanced by my excellent memory for scent and magic. I hadn't felt a wolf's mind in over ten years, but I remembered the experience perfectly.

And it had felt almost exactly the same as what I'd touched in the werewolf's mind.

Stranger and stranger.

Well, at least now I had something else to ask Dolph about. Yippee.

I didn't go in to work, because I'd already told Val I probably wouldn't and I had a lot to consider and—

Okay. Yeah. I totally went back to sleep right after I ate breakfast.

That wasn't actually as lazy as it sounds. I could heal faster than any human, sure, but it doesn't come for free. It takes a lot of energy, and after my little magic expenditure I had little enough to spare. I thought I'd probably be wanting a lot more soon, and sleep and food are the fastest way to build it back up, so....

Although, to be fair, I would have done it just for laziness, so I can't exactly say I'm a paragon of efficiency here.

Anyway, the next time I woke up it was because Dolph was knocking on my bedroom door. He heard it as soon as I started moving, of course, and by the time I'd brushed my teeth and made it to the kitchen he'd dished out some sort of stew redolent with garlic and fresh black pepper. (I love that word. *Redolent*. It even *sounds* delicious). Once I actually grabbed my bowl I could smell that the meat was venison. The spices were strong, but I ate a lot of wild game with both Edward's pack and Conn's, and it's fairly easy to distinguish. He must have brought the supplies with him, because I don't eat well enough that he could have found venison and shallots at my house.

"I'd have let you sleep longer," he said apologetically, which was ridiculous considering that it was nearly noon. "But my father says this consultant doesn't usually work in the evenings, and I thought you'd want to be there."

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I smirked a little. "You mean there's somebody in town who knows more about werewolves than you do?"

"Werewolves, no," Dolph said dryly. "Demons, yes."

"Then why have we waited this long to talk to him?"

"I was hoping to avoid it. He's kind of hard to work with." He hesitated, then continued, "That's what my father said, anyway. I've never met him personally."

"Wonderful," I muttered under my breath. Dolph laughed—he had a werewolf's ears, so of course he'd heard me.

I meant him to. I'm not a total idiot. At least not about werewolves. At least not in the context of mistaking their capabilities. I'm just too dumb to act on my knowledge most of the time, witness my getting involved in this shitstorm.

I was feeling more than just a little paranoid (for obvious reasons), so instead of just grabbing a knife I really suited up before we left. In my case this means a pair of silver-inlaid knives and an easily-concealed semiautomatic nine millimeter loaded with more silver, which meant that I was essentially carrying an entire week's wages in shiny ammo, plus a small leather pouch on a cord that I slipped over my neck. I was a little concerned that this last would have aged beyond usefulness, but when I touched the powder inside it still tingled, and burned my skin a little, so it was probably fine.

Okay, time for another magic lesson. It's pretty much entered pop culture that silver is dangerous and painful for werewolves, which is really pretty impressive considering that they kept that little fact very well concealed up until about the eighteenth century. Anyway, one thing that almost nobody seems to consider is why silver would have an effect on what is, essentially, a magic-enhanced immortal killing machine which can, you will remember, heal itself preternaturally well.

That should be enough to explain why it can't be a physical poison or allergy; there's just no way that could affect something like a werewolf to such a degree.

Every substance has its own magic, though, the same way people and animals do. That's what hurts a werewolf; silver emits magic of a variety that disrupts the wolf magic—which also disables most of a werewolf's healing powers, making them much easier to kill. Dolph once told me that silver isn't actually the opposite of werewolf magic, contrary to what might seem logical; it's actually very, very close to the same, the same way that some of the most discordant sounds are those that are almost harmonic.

Anyway, if I were an exceptionally clever person, it might have occurred to me that if silver's magic hurt werewolves, silver with stronger magic might hurt them even more. Fortunately for me, a long time ago such an idea occurred to some other exceptionally clever person, and by the time I was born it was pretty much standard practice to energize silver for use against werewolves.

That leather pouch contained a mixture of silver dust, iron filings, rock salt, and several varieties of sawdust. I'd infused the whole mix with magic and then had it blessed by a friend significantly more holy than I'm ever likely to be. The result is an easily carried, inconspicuous, user-friendly weapon that can hurt or at least annoy about ninety percent of the dangerous magical critters on the planet, including both werewolves and demons. The downside is that it burns my skin if I touch it too long thanks to all the silver (part werewolf, remember?), and it has a limited shelf life.

That's the thing about enhancing substances with magic. There aren't very many ways to do it, and most of them aren't very nice. Even a regular person can make a silver weapon into a suped-up werewolf-killer, but you'd have to be really desperate or really deranged to do it. For example, one of the best ways for a normal person would be to take a silver knife and murder somebody with it in a creepy ritual of some sort. The power of the dead guy goes into the knife, and boom! You've got yourself an awesome weapon that can do damage to a werewolf just by touching the skin. And a corpse, of course.

I'm not a saint, not even close, but I wasn't amoral enough to do something like that, or any of the even worse options available to me. So instead I do a complicated bit of magic under the full moon, when my power's at its peak, and just sort of focus ambient energy into the dust until it has several times the amount of power that's natural. It's not as strong as some of the traditional methods would produce, and the magic slowly bleeds off to the surroundings. Generally speaking my dust is only good for three to four months, although it retains a minimal charge for years. Fortunately I had remained paranoid enough, even after such a long boring stretch, that I always kept a bucket full of the stuff on hand.

After that, all that was left to do was to slip on a pair of rings and a necklace. Jewelry might seem ridiculous as a weapon, but there's a reason there are so many stories of enchanted baubles. They're easy to work with, and they can take a wide variety of enchantments (every gem and metal has its own energy pattern). More importantly they don't make you stand out the way carrying a staff or a sword would. A guy with a sword is arrested on sight, but you don't even notice a few rings.

This particular set had all been made by Edward years ago, before I left his pack. He's actually a professional jeweler in his off time, and all of his work is incredible, which is what comes of having a couple hundred years to practice. I enchanted all of them years ago, too, but I used a significantly better method than I use for the dust, and the magic still hung around them as thick as ever.

I stared at the pendant for a long moment before I put it on. At first glance it looked fairly unremarkable, just a small, three-dimensional wolf's head on a steel chain. It looked like the sort of thing you could get in any cheap, tourist-trap store in town. It also contributed even more to the ridiculously stereotypical combination of my appearance and name, which is why I tend not to wear it much anymore.

Take a closer look, though, and you can see the artistry that went into it. Each and every single hair was individually crafted and placed. The fur is actually shaded and colored, which was accomplished by using metals ranging from brass and iron to bronze, pewter, steel, and copper. The eyes are made

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from topaz, obsidian, and quartz, showing an incredible precision in arranging them so that they actually look like eyes. The whole thing's also so heavily enchanted that, in addition to more useful effects, it's immune to corrosion and pretty much literally impossible to break.

It's also, apparently, a portrait of my mother. Edward did it from memory when I was thirteen years old, but people who knew her say that it's incredibly accurate, easily recognizable as her even made of metal and gemstones. I wouldn't know; the pendant's the closest I've ever come to seeing her in her wolf form. I have photographs of her as a human, but somehow nobody I've ever asked had one of what she looked like in fur.

Dolph knew what it was, and likely also knew most of what it meant when he saw me wearing it. Fortunately he also knew better than to mention it, so we went out to his car to go meet with his father's recommended demon expert without my having to hear about it.

"So who is this guy?" I asked as we got out of the car. We were in a fairly good neighborhood, so this consultant must be doing all right for himself.

"A wizard," Dolph said calmly. "I don't know his name, but he goes by Alexander Hoffman."

"Wait a second. A wizard? You mean there's an actual wizard in Colorado Springs?"

He looked at me sidelong. "It's a big city, Winter. Of course there's a wizard here."

You might have a hard time understanding why that was a big deal to me. After all, I have magic, right?

Well...yes and no. You see, the magical world has very specific terminology. Turning into a wolf, for example, isn't enough to make you a werewolf. Depending on how you go about it you might also be a shapeshifter, a skinwalker, an exceedingly skilled druid or witch, a changeling, or at least a dozen other things, many of them indistinguishable except to the trained eye.

The same is true for magic. Having magic doesn't make you anything specific; there's about a million categorizations for what kind of magic you have, how strong it is, how well you use it, and so on. Not being human I don't quite fit into any of them—there are other terms for that—but if I were, my magic would place me as a mage of low to moderate ranking in the witch and druid spectra. In other words, reasonably skilled at affecting the mind and body, and nature-based magic.

A wizard is a mage specializing in manipulating pure external forces, particularly raw magical energy. It's a demanding discipline, because a lot of the time you're working with enough power to turn you into a smear on the ground if you slip. It's not generally as quick as what I do—most wizards, faced with a demon-possessed werewolf up close like I was, would have died before they could muster up the forces of the universe and whatnot to turn him into a particularly gruesome training video. On the other hand, give them an hour to prepare and they'd wipe the floor with me every time.

The thing is that being a human with a gift for wizard-spectrum magic isn't enough to merit calling you a wizard, without any qualifiers or anything attached. You have to be good to get that. Real good.

And, because most of the time wizardry rewards scholarship as much or more than power, you have to know things, too. A lot of things. Sort of like having a Ph.D. in weirdology.

So odds were good that Dolph's consultant would be very useful indeed, although what his price might be I couldn't even guess. Hopefully Conn had paid in advance.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

Dolph pursed his lips. "It does look a little ridiculous, but this is the right address."

"Ridiculous" was actually a pretty good word for a two-story house painted lilac with maroon trim. Surrounded by more conservative—and sane—looking houses in a moderately well-off part of town, it was somewhat reminiscent of a man in a clown suit desperately trying to blend in with investment bankers and lawyers at "Bring Your Parent to School Day."

"Well," he said dubiously, "might as well find out." We walked up the steps—pine, if you were wondering—to the front door.

As it turned out the solid black door had an antique brass knocker rather than a bell. It was in the shape of either a maliciously pleased devil, an exceedingly ugly cherub, or a gnome with severe constipation. Whatever it was, it made a hell of a racket when Dolph pounded on the door with it. A moment later a male voice from within called, "I'll be there in a minute!"

Whatever he said, though, it was almost five minutes before the door opened—long enough that I was starting to get concerned, but not long enough that we left. When it did, it opened maybe two inches before the chain stopped it. Not your standard door chain, either; this thing was solid steel laced with silver, with links better than a quarter inch thick and humming with magic. The man on the other side was paler than me, which takes some doing since my grandmother was born in Iceland. Go ahead, laugh; I know you want to.

Actually, though, the wizard looked quite a bit like me. Like me he was thin, shorter than average, and pale. His hair was also grey, although in his case it appeared to be due to age. He was wearing a black flannel coat over pajamas.

He looked ridiculous, a perfect match for the house, but I wasn't fooled by his appearance. You don't get to be a wizard by being harmlessly eccentric, and this man was most definitely the wizard. He absolutely reeked of magic, the scent of human magic overwhelmed with hot metal and ozone.

He glowered at us and snapped, "What do you want?"

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"Are you Alexander Hoffman?" Dolph asked cautiously. He can't smell magic the way I can, so obviously he didn't realize that this aged lunatic was the wizard

"No. Go away." Alexander started to close the door, muttering something incoherent under his breath.

I stuck my foot in the way, which would have been an extremely stupid thing to do if I hadn't known that, unlike the chain and possibly the knocker, there was no magic at all on the door itself. "This is Dolph Ferguson," I said calmly. "Are you sure you don't want to talk to us?"

He paused, looked at me suspiciously, then slowly unhooked the chain and pushed the door open. "You're Conn's boy, then?"

"That's me," Dolph confirmed. "He said you might be able to give us a hand."

"Hmph. Twenty years it's been since I saw him, and now the old bastard can't even be bothered to come himself?" He sighed. "I suppose you might as well come inside, then."

I stepped gingerly across the threshold, feeling a tingling buzz across my whole body as I did. He must have some fairly powerful warding spells laid around the house; thanks to his invitation Dolph and I were safe, but I wouldn't want to be the man trying to break into his house.

"We can talk down in the laboratory. I don't mean to be rude, but I'm right in the middle of something rather delicate." He led us through his front room, which appeared to consist entirely of furniture in an eye-searing variety of tacky colors and styles, complete with a remarkable array of knickknacks and cheesy souvenirs. The trapdoor in the corner was covered in a rug which, although covered with stains, still had a recognizable image of Godzilla emblazoned on it.

By that point I could tell Dolph was feeling increasingly dubious about this whole venture, and I honestly wasn't too confident myself. Underneath the trapdoor was a steel ladder leading down which was, thankfully, as plain and practical as anything I could ask for.

"Close it behind you, if you would," Alexander said as he started down the ladder into the darkened room beneath. There didn't seem to be a point in leaving—if we even could; there was no guarantee that the wards would let us out—so I followed him down and let Dolph bring up the rear.

By the time I made it to the bottom the wizard had turned on the lights, revealing something much more...appropriate than the house above. "Now this," I said in a whisper carefully pitched to be audible only to a werewolf at close range, "is more like it."

Alexander's laboratory was housed in a simple concrete box which, although barely high enough for a tall man to stand in, had to extend under the whole of the house above. Despite that, there was barely enough room to walk, the rest of the floor being taken up with shelves and Formica counters and workbenches.

Arrayed throughout the room was a staggering assortment of...things. Plastic tubs shared space with a couple of wooden crates that looked like they belonged in the eighteenth century, stacked under the counters. Jugs and vases of fine porcelain, some lidded and some not, ranged in size from one the size of a salt cellar to a blue-and-white vase in the corner six inches taller than me. Other than that, there seemed to be anything and everything imaginable crammed into the room somewhere, from an assortment of skulls taking up the top shelf along one entire wall of the room to a stack of old comic books more than two feet tall in the corner behind the ladder.

The shelves held, among other things, a staggering variety of books, everything from the latest scientific journals and cheap fiction to dusty scrolls and ominous, ancient-looking books six inches thick bound in black leather. In between them, arranged according to no order I could understand, were pieces of jewelry, ornately decorated knives, a lava lamp shifting slowly through vivid, strange colors, and bits of glass or metal whose function I couldn't even guess at.

At the other end of the room an antique wooden desk stood next to a silver circle set into the floor. On the desk was sitting what looked, to my inexperienced eye, to be an extremely expensive computer with all manner of gadgets and things attached to it. The overall effect, like the rest of the laboratory, was a bizarre juxtaposition of a medieval alchemist's workshop and a modern science lab.

As I followed Alexander through the room—straying from the path seemed a rather dangerous proposition—I was buffeted by magic. Every moment seemed to bring a different magical aroma, sort of like a bazaar or a spice shop. From the expression on Dolph's face, the magic in that room was so strong that even he could sense it.

Eventually Alexander arrived at the large, relatively clear table in the middle of the room. Sitting on it, and apparently what he had been working on, was a glass beaker suspended over a Bunsen burner. Whatever was in the beaker—it was like nothing I'd ever seen—was a semitransparent grey liquid which, although boiling, nevertheless seemed to have a consistency like mud. As I watched Alexander began pouring magic into it, which explained the odor. I'd have been worried if he really had so much power that he reeked like that all the time, but if he'd actually been doing magic just before he answered the door I could understand it.

"So what'd you say you were here for?" he asked, casually carrying on a conversation while simultaneously manipulating the delicate strands of energy he was weaving into the fluid. To give you some idea of how hard that is, imagine playing both sides of a game of speed chess in your head and typing an email to your boss at the same time. What the wizard was doing...wasn't actually as hard as that, but still pretty hard.

"Information," Dolph said just as evenly. "And I'm willing to pay." Thus cutting me, very smoothly, out of both the conversation and any associated deals—something I was, believe me, more than happy about.

"Right then. Don't suppose you're carrying a chocolate bar?"

Dolph blinked. "What?"

"A chocolate bar, man, a chocolate bar! Do you have one or don't you?"

"I have a chocolate granola bar," I said quickly, pulling it out of my pocket. "Will that work?"

Alexander frowned. "Let me see it," he muttered, snatching it out of my hand and ripping the wrapper open. He glared at the thick coating of dark chocolate on the bottom, sniffed it once, then nodded brusquely. He picked up a knife, made of some dull grey metal I didn't recognize, and began scraping the chocolate into the beaker.

"Thanks," he said a moment later, wiping the knife clean on a rag. The grey liquid didn't look any different with chocolate in it, but I thought the magic overlaying it felt like it had shifted slightly. "All I have is bakers' chocolate right now, and I never get quite the same result from it."

"I'm glad I could help," I said carefully—acknowledging his thanks without dismissing the debt incurred. Wording can be both very important and very delicate in my world. "We need to know about demons."

He snorted. "Better be more specific than that, boy, unless you've a long time and more to spend than a granola bar."

"More specifically," Dolph interjected, "what abilities the demon-possessed have."

Alexander paused, and I got the sense that he was interested in the conversation for the first time since he'd answered the door. "I see. Would this have anything to do with the demon wandering town, then?"

Dolph blinked—he's surprisingly bad at poker for such an old werewolf. Or possibly he's playing a subtler game and is so good he can pretend to be that bad, but that gets into Princess Bride territory. "You know about that?"

He snorted again. "Obviously." Point to the wizard on that exchange.

"And you haven't done anything about it?" Dolph's voice had gotten remarkably cold.

"Demon hasn't tried to kill me," Alexander pointed out reasonably. He chuckled briefly, the sound somewhere on the far side of merely weird but not quite evil. "Like to see the demon that'd try. I'd blow the stupid thing to pieces."

I believed him. There was so much power in that lab alone that if even a quarter of it could be used for violence, just wandering around the room was the next best thing to actually attempting suicide. Attacking it would be about as stupid as, say, screaming "I want to kill the Pope," on national television. While surrounded by Secret Service agents. Maybe even with your hands tied behind your back while wearing a turban.

"Do you have the information I asked for, then?" Dolph asked, sounding calm again.

Alexander smirked. "Yes. And, because you're the son of an old friend, I'll even give you a discount. If I already know the answer to your questions, the knowledge is yours for the chocolate...."

Wow. That was some valuable chocolate, then—although it was hard to believe a wizard would have forgotten a reagent that crucial.

"...and a quart of your blood."

Okay, that was more what I'd anticipated.

"Wizard," Dolph growled, "If you think I'm giving you a drop of my blood, you're insane. I know what you could do with it."

So did I. Most of the things you can do to somebody using their blood and a bit of magic aren't pretty. Like, you know, vomiting-out-your-own-intestines kind of not pretty. There're sort of reasons that magic didn't have a good reputation in most of the ancient world.

Alexander didn't seem concerned by Dolph's reaction. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to legally obtain werewolf blood?" he asked rhetorically. "I ran out years ago, and there are a number of interesting properties that I haven't finished studying yet. I give you my word I won't use it as a focus against you."

Dolph glowered at him a moment longer, then nodded tersely. "Fine. Your answers in exchange for the chocolate, which you've already taken, and one quart of my blood, to be drawn once the demon is dead. If I'm unavailable another werewolf will provide it. Deal?"

"Change the dead to banished for the demon and I'm good with it."

"Fine."

"All right then. Deal. That potion will need more work within an hour, but until then you can ask as many questions as you want."

Well, that was easy. And it wasn't my blood, so even better.

Dolph glanced at me, clearly ceding the lead now that the negotiations were finished. I considered for a moment, then said, "How about you start with generalities and we can ask about the specifics later?"

The wizard nodded. "Demons," he said, his posture and voice falling into a sort of college-professor mode, "are capable of conferring a number of abilities on any individual willing to enter into a symbiotic relationship with them. Generally speaking, however, they will do so only as an effort to make the individual more reliant upon them and therefore more likely to do as the demon desires."

"What do demons desire?" I interrupted.

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The wizard glared at me for a moment, then shrugged. "It's difficult to make sweeping generalizations, because demons have relatively little in common, being a poorly defined category. Most spirits which we refer to as demons are associated with concepts of death, destruction, and chaos, and desire to spread those things. The powers they provide tend to be directly related to such concepts as well."

"What specifically are those powers?" Dolph asked impatiently.

"It varies. Functional immunity from pain is universal, although more a psychological effect than a magical one—it's essentially no different from a particularly strong endorphin rush in that regard. Enhanced physical strength is also common, and is likewise primarily the result of psychological and physiological influences. Beyond that it's dependent upon how much control the afflicted individual has over the demon."

I frowned. "You'll have to explain that one."

The way Alexander sighed, you'd have thought he was Stephen Hawking teaching a kindergarten class on a dare. "In every demonic possession, you have essentially two entities in the same mental space. Depending on a number of factors, one will control the other. Demons have no concept of sharing or fairness, and so will attempt to exert an influence on the host; an equal balance is not possible. For the host to make use of the demon's power, he must exert control over it. The more the host dominates the demon, the more control he has over its power and the more he can use it. However, the use of that power allows the demon to regain a measure of control in the relationship, resulting in a dynamic equilibrium."

Well, that fit with what I'd felt—excepting the bit about there being only two entities per mind, but I'd get to that later. "So what can that power be used to do?"

"As I said, demons are essentially beings of destruction. The further you try to change that course, the less effective their power becomes. Beyond that, essentially anything."

I frowned, trying to remember what Val had said. "Mind control?"

Alexander looked at me sharply. "That's one of the most commonly cited abilities, yes. I believe it works as a sort of extension of the possession process; although demons cannot outright possess humans without some form of consent, it's possible that a human host can circumvent that restriction."

Telekinesis was a cinch, from what the wizard had already said. "Invisibility?"

Alexander smiled thinly. "You seem to have a fairly good idea for someone who came with questions," he murmured, something in his voice making me suddenly more nervous about the fact that I was currently in the center of his power. Then he shook his head and the moment passed. "To answer your question, not as such. I do not think that a working as delicate and complicated as true invisibility is possible for someone without extensive experience, which most possessed individuals don't have. Even if they did, demonic power is inherently chaotic in nature. Attempting to use it to build a complex,

ordered magical structure would be difficult in the extreme; holding it steady would be impossible." He paused. "However, many reports do suggest that they have an exceptional ability to go unnoticed. I assume that they are in effect applying the mental control I already mentioned to force observers not to see them. It is, I admit, a fine point, and a fairly unimportant difference."

I met Dolph's eye, and saw that he had already had the same thought I had: it wasn't unimportant at all.

Because, if it was mind control, it wouldn't be limited to sight. Could a demon also twist somebody's mind into thinking that, say, they couldn't smell a werewolf even though they knew it had to have been there?

It seemed likely. It would sure as hell explain a lot.

Except..."Could it have that effect if it wasn't present?"

Alexander gave me a puzzled look. "Convince someone that they didn't see it? Why would it bother?"

I sighed. "No, not that. Convince a werewolf that they don't smell its trail."

The wizard looked intrigued. "Hmm. I don't know...I've never heard of it..." he trailed off for a long moment. Then, looking at me again, he said, "The only way I can think of to do something like that would be with a stable, self-supporting magical construct. You run into the same problems as with invisibility, except to a significantly greater degree since the spell wouldn't have anyone on hand to maintain it. However, I suppose it is theoretically possible that a demon could also use its natural talent for decay to break down the organic molecules which provide a scent signal."

"Without removing any other scents?"

He frowned. "That would take remarkable precision. I doubt that a tenth of the wizards I know could pull it off. So, at a guess, no." He shrugged. "I don't know that anybody's ever examined that specifically; demonic possession isn't a socially acceptable topic for research. I could ask around, but it would take a while, it would be expensive, and I honestly doubt that you'd get anything but speculation."

I shook my head. "No, that's fine."

"Good. You have half an hour left."

I glanced at Dolph, but he seemed willing to let me continue asking the questions. No surprise, because at the moment I was the closest thing to an expert on magical theory that he had—excepting, for the next half-hour, Alexander. With that in mind, I got back to questions.

"This one's probably also just speculation," I said slowly.

Alexander just smiled.

"Could someone possessed by a demon, who let's say has extensive control over it, use its power to sort of, I don't know, exert mental control over himself in order to fragment his own personality?"

"I have no idea. Theoretically...." He frowned, looking absently over my shoulder and tracing patterns in the air with one hand as though writing. "Theoretically," he continued after a long moment, "they would already be fragmented in some ways due to the demon's own presence. That division might make them more vulnerable to further mental influence, including that of their own magic. If sufficiently clear lines could be drawn between that part and the rest of the person, then I think it might be possible, yes."

"Would that work on a werewolf to separate the human aspects of the mind from the wolf?"

"I've never had a chance to do much research on werewolves," he said dryly, pointedly looking at Dolph. "Due to a shortage of reagents which I hope will soon be remedied. However, standard doctrine says that although resistant to manipulation, they also have a weakness to certain types of mental intrusion due to that very split. Most attackers don't have the knowledge or connection to exploit that weakness, but another werewolf would presumably not be limited in that way. I think it's probable that it could be done, yes." He paused a beat. "Werewolves are also fast healers, however, mentally as well as physically. You would have to do something to counteract that or the split wouldn't last long."

I let out my breath. For the first time, I was starting to think I understood what was going on. The how, at least, if not the who, why, or even what. "What about removing another mind from its body and grafting it onto your own?"

He cocked one eyebrow. "These questions are getting quite specific," he commented. "Perhaps you should just tell me what you think is going on and I can give you my opinion. Tell you what, I'm curious enough now that I'll even waive your time limit."

I hesitated, but what the hell. It wasn't like I wasn't screwed already. So I just went ahead and gave him the highlights of what I'd felt from the demon-infested werewolf, not explaining just how it was that I'd been able to sense it or affect its mind.

Alexander didn't ask. He did turn his attention back to the potion while I talked, but he was clearly skilled enough that it didn't represent a significant distraction for him. Once I'd finished, he let the magic die from his fingers and turned back to face me. "Tell me what you think," he said, and it wasn't a request.

"I think this werewolf used a demon's magic to rip his mind in half to separate himself from the wolf. I think he killed a real wolf and used the resemblance between wolves and werewolves to splice its soul into his psyche between himself and the werewolf part of him to keep that gap from healing. I think he knew that a demon could let him do that, and that's why he got himself possessed in the first place. I think he wasn't counting on how much the wolf—both wolves—would hate it, and now they're fighting

him all the time. I think that as a result his control's gone to shit and the demon has started taking over and killing people." I smiled at the wizard. "What do you think?"

"It's a compelling story," he admitted. "And it's wrong."

I blinked. "What? Why?"

"Not the generality," he said calmly. "The specifics. A demon's power wouldn't be able to do that to an animal. Mild control is one thing, but to exert that level of influence..." he shook his head. "No. No demon could do that. A sufficiently powerful demon could possibly manage to influence an animal. Maybe. But not the kind of extreme, total control that you're talking about. Animals and demons just don't have enough in common. It would be difficult enough with a human."

I slumped, because I had been so sure that I was right. It had explained everything I'd felt. Unfortunately, that doesn't always mean you're right.

"Now," Alexander continued, "I think you're correct, generally speaking. Assuming that you were honest in telling me what you felt—and I'm going to assume you were—I can't think of anything else that explains it as well. Now, at this point, I don't think I have any more information for you." He smiled as brightly and falsely as the nurse who wishes you a good day right after telling you that the cancer is spreading and, unfortunately, there's really nothing they can do about it.

"So that's all we get? You telling us shit we already knew and saying Winter knows better than you do what's going on?" Dolph sounded pissed now.

"Considering what you paid, I'd call it a bargain," Alexander quipped. "But no. I have a few pieces of advice, free of charge. Number one, it's not impossible to do to an animal what you suggested. It's merely impossible for demons. I suspect that a strong witch or an extremely twisted shaman could pull it off. It may be worth considering that angle. Two, it sounds to me as though this werewolf still has control over the demon and both wolves right now. Whether that is just because the demon was relaxed after the murder, I have no idea. However, it can't hurt to think of this thing as a werewolf as well as a demon. Three, *do not* expect that stunt to work again. I suspect that the only reason you're still alive is that your attacker was caught very much by surprise. You also can't expect this thing to respond as a normal werewolf. The demon will be giving it additional mental fortitude, making your dominance games and such essentially worthless."

He smiled again, more honestly this time. "Other than that, burn the body or eat it. Doesn't matter which, but I wouldn't trust it to be dead without one of them. Now, I really need to get back to this, so if you don't have any other urgent and specific questions, good day. And don't forget about the blood."

Chapter Eight

"You know, I think that man is insane."

"More than likely," Dolph agreed cheerfully. "But if Conn thinks he's good, he knows his stuff. That's worth a bit of insanity in a wizard." Which was, undeniably and inevitably, true. Pretty much anything is worth a bit of insanity in a wizard, in fact, because pretty much everyone with magic is at least a bit insane. Hell, even I'm absolutely out of my mind by any ordinary standard, and I barely qualify as having magic at all.

"What clan is he, do you know?" I asked conversationally as we reached the car.

"None."

"Wait a second, none?" I'd never met a serious mage before, but based on everything I knew it was vanishingly rare for them not to have a clan affiliation. Mages tend to specialize, meaning that it can often take several of them to accomplish a single task. Between that and the fact that they have so much competition from things like werewolves and vampires, almost all mages end up joining clans of like-minded individuals.

Oh, don't get me wrong. They have a lot of autonomy. Conn rules his werewolves with an iron fist, and Twilight Princes tend not to be much gentler with their subjects. Even the vampires have some sort of council; I don't know any details about it, largely because vampires give me the creeps, but I understand they act as an executive body of some kind. Whatever the case, all of them have some kind of government. Mages don't. The clans act more like a fraternity; you can join one, or a dozen, depending on your degree of interest. Some of them are massive, and wield enormous political power; others are based around niche interests, and number their adherents in the dozens.

But not to be a member of *any* of them? That was a lot more unusual. Without allies backing you up, even a mage is easy prey for more organized enemies. There just weren't very many mages who could handle that kind of threat on their own. If Alexander was one of them, he was either scary strong, or he had a nigh-miraculous gift for not making enemies. Considering the infamously hazardous nature of mage politics, I wasn't sure which of those would be more impressive.

Dolph shrugged. "None that he admits to, and Father hasn't seen any sign that he's lying. So what now?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "It's nice to know that I haven't totally lost it, but I'm not sure how much we really gained here. I suppose we pretty much have to wait for the next corpse to show up."

He frowned. "I don't like this. We can't keep reacting to this thing forever, and there are only so many deaths we can hide from the cops."

"Agreed. But we still don't know how to track it down, so what else can we do?"

"Wish I knew. We still haven't caught a scent, and at this point I doubt we're going to."

I sighed. "I guess I'll call Aiko then, make sure she's got the current version of the demon-werewolf theory."

Dolph glanced at me. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, actually. Are you really sure you want to bring her into this, Winter? I mean, bringing a stranger into pack business is bad enough; a kitsune, well...."

I frowned. "I don't know. I mean, normally I'd agree with you, but it sounds like she's already in this deeper than I am. Besides which, I sorta like her, batshit crazy or not."

"Granted," he allowed. "And considering how few people you like, that's a fairly impressive statement. But do you have any proof that she's telling the truth?"

"Not really. But..." I trailed off, reaching for the right words. "I just didn't get the *evil* vibe off of her, you know? Dangerous, sure, unreliable, crazy, I'll give you all that. But not evil. Not even particularly malicious. And from what I've read, that's pretty typical for a kitsune. They might screw you over, but they're hardly depicted the way demons are."

"True. And at this point I think we can say with some confidence that she's not our killer." He sighed. "I guess I agree with you, then. At least she's one of the kami. The Pack has a good relationship with her people, so hopefully we can pass this off without looking weak for accepting help."

You know that feeling when there's a word on the tip of your tongue? Where you know the answer, and you know you know it, but you just can't quite bring it to mind?

That's what I felt like when I got home. I called Aiko as I'd said I would, and managed to convey the important bits of my current theory as to what was killing people. She seemed willing to play along with the idea of a demon-possessed werewolf with multiple personality disorder who had undergone a soul-transplant operation, although that might have been the equivalent of agreeing with your senile uncle who thinks he invented the question mark. Or, hell, maybe it was just solidarity in insanity.

I had pretty much called off work indefinitely—which would put a serious dent in my paycheck, but at the moment that was pretty low on my priorities list—so after I called her I went back to trying to figure out what it was that I thought I should remember.

Oddly enough, it didn't feel like something Alexander had said. It was more like he'd reminded me of something I already knew. It hadn't been to do with the relative strengths and weaknesses of demonic magic, it was something more basic than that. In fact, it almost felt like the really important thing had nothing to do with the demon....

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And then I realized what had been bothering me. A few days ago, when he first got into town, Dolph had said something about there not being any reason to suspect a werewolf, because all that we'd found definitive evidence for was a demon.

Why had it occurred to Dolph that it might not be a werewolf? Because the evidence was circumstantial. Why would there be circumstantial evidence if it wasn't a werewolf? Because something was pretending to be one.

But that was ridiculous in the context of what we already knew, right? I mean, a werewolf can't pretend to be a werewolf, it would be pointless....

And then it occurred to me why it might not.

I've always thought that the idea of the Eureka moment was ridiculous, a gross oversimplification of a slower and more boring process, but that's what happened to me right then. I saw, quite suddenly, where I'd gone wrong and, unthinkingly, led everyone else wrong as well.

We'd been going about it all wrong.

"Aiko? It's Winter. Listen, can you answer a question for me?"

"That depends. Does it involve how long it takes to strangle a duck, and will it explain why you've called me twice in the past five minutes?"

I had to smile, regardless of how inappropriate it was at the moment. "No to the ducks, but I might be able to work in an explanation."

She sighed theatrically. "Well that's a shame, 'cause I was looking forward to strangling some ducks to find out. But I guess I can do that some other time, so you might as well ask your question."

"You remember your friend that died? The one you told me about?"

"What kind of stupid-ass question is that? You think I'm going to forget something like that in a couple of months?" Good to know that there were, in fact, things which would make a kitsune truly angry.

"No, no. But I just realized that there was something I didn't know. Your friend, was he also a kitsune?"

"No." Aiko sounded more sad than angry now. I was starting to seriously wonder whether she had bipolar disorder or something, or whether that was even a meaningful thing for a kitsune.

"All right. Sorry to bring it up—"

"He was a leprechaun. Now what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'll tell you when I find out." She hung up without saying goodbye, which was probably better than I should expect after how phenomenally insensitive I'd been.

I couldn't bring myself to feel too sorry about it, though. I was too caught up in the excitement of thinking that I might finally be making some progress on tracking this thing down.

I'm not a cop. Not a detective, not even a private eye. Neither is Kyra, and I'm pretty sure that even Dolph hadn't had a job in the investigative field at any point in his long life. Most werewolves don't. It might seem like the ability to track and identify people by scent and confront dangerous individuals without any fear might be useful in those professions. That's because they would be. But what people tend not to think of is how difficult it is to get the courts to accept those explanations. Most werewolves don't have the patience to put up with the ensuing bullshit.

That lack of experience was probably why it took us so long to look at the victims rather than the killer. In all fairness, though, we started off thinking it was just a random newly-changed wolf with no control, and as a result we hadn't been looking for a motive. Later we knew otherwise, but we'd still approached it in the same way. Now I was thinking differently.

There wasn't a geographic pattern. I was willing to bet there wasn't an obvious relationship between the victims, either, or the police would have caught it a long time ago. They're actually pretty good at their jobs, and I didn't think they would have taken as long as we had to examine who was killed.

But there are angles no police force would have thought to take. For example, I was pretty sure none of the cops knew that the first victim had been a friend of Aiko's. Even if they did, they wouldn't have understood the significance.

I did. You see, there just aren't that many kitsune in the Rocky Mountain region. There are a whole lot of people in Colorado Springs. The chances that they would overlap were fairly small.

Of course, it might still be coincidence. Maybe.

There were a number of deaths in the middle that I didn't have any information on, so I skipped ahead to the first one I'd seen. Which one had that been, anyway? Number six? That felt right.

I hadn't paid too much attention to it. There had been blood, of course. No damage to the room, I remembered that. Defensive wounds.

Wait a second. I'd smelled magic there. At the time I'd attributed it to werewolf—werewolves do sometimes leave a trail of magic, particularly when they're drawing actively on the wolf. But I hadn't smelled that signature anywhere else, so it couldn't have been the demon.

Which meant that it must have been the victim. Who must therefore have had some kind of magic.

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The next one, I recalled, had been the woman. There wasn't anything I immediately remembered as having stood out about it, and I was forced to go back over what I remembered in search of whatever tiny clues I might have seen without realizing just how important they were.

Let's see. The body was reported by a Peeping Tom. No, wait, he didn't see the body. He just saw the door open. Because, I thought, he didn't spy on her. She was up too late for him.

The building hadn't felt lived in. The body had carried the demonic residue, which had overwhelmed my memory of it, but now that I thought about it there had been some odd things about the corpse itself. It had had a strange smell, not quite blood but very similar, well below the range in which a human nose would have detected it. The spinal cord had been severed and the heart removed.

There are only so many reasons to remove something's heart and cut off its head.

Looking back on it like that, I wasn't entirely sure how I had missed it the first time. But somehow I was very confident that, if I had spent a bit more time exploring the house, I would have found a windowless room underground somewhere. The sort of place a vampire might feel at home. Staying up all night was a coincidence; even the pattern of injuries was similar enough to the others that it hadn't stood out, and the almost-blood smell wasn't specific to vamps. Between them, though, I felt fairly confident about my conclusion.

One victim being a member of the supernatural community is coincidence. Even two might occur by accident. When you have three, within a matter of months, well. I don't like math, but even I can do the odds on something like that.

I'd been trying to give Enrico time to come to grips with what he'd seen gradually. Just now, though, my need for information outweighed any personal concerns. If I pulled this off, maybe I could achieve distinction by being the first crime-fighting vigilante whose signature weapon was a cell phone.

"Hey, Enrico? I need another favor...."

About an hour later, Kyra and I pulled up in front of Christopher's house. He lived in a big house, almost a mansion, tucked up among the foothills in the southwestern part of the city. It was a behemoth, expensive beyond belief and hell to heat.

It was also necessary so that the pack had a place to call its own. It's back to that territorial imperative. Theoretically the entirety of Colorado Springs is the pack's territory, but in practice they aren't exactly the only group with a claim on it. The house and its grounds, on the other hand, belonged solely to them. Christopher had inherited it from Roland; it had been one of the few sane purchases that man had made.

Kyra's car looked about as out of place in that neighborhood as I did. Particularly next to Dolph's shiny rental. Even as she parked, Aiko pulled in behind us.

"Hi, Winter," she called, not bothering to lock the car behind her. Understandable, because anyone stupid or unlucky enough to steal from a werewolf Alpha was likely to get exactly what they deserved. "And I presume this is your werewolf friend?"

"Yes, of course," I said hastily, making brief introductions on the way up the front steps.

Predictably enough, we found Dolph and Christopher in the kitchen. That's usually a good bet for finding werewolves. The remnants of a simple meal—turkey sandwiches, if you're curious—were scattered across the table. It was remarkably plain for such an extravagant house, a battered metal table that had been cheap when it was new.

The werewolves sitting at it didn't look significantly better. Christopher looked like he hadn't slept in days. He probably hadn't, actually; recent events must have been even harder on him than me. Dolph wasn't showing it as much, but he wasn't exactly a picture of well-rested health either.

The room seemed like a sort of embodiment of quiet desperation, horror frozen into a disturbingly mundane tableaux.

So naturally I walked right into it without an invitation, shoved the cheap plates aside, slapped down a couple sheets of paper, and sat down on the cheap wooden chair. "We got played," I said without preamble.

Dolph glanced at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"We got played," I said again. "This bastard's had us chasing the wrong lead this whole time."

Christopher raised one eyebrow. "Gosh, I never would have guessed it. What a priceless epiphany you've had now." Good to know he felt good enough to be sarcastic; I was worried for a minute there.

"This is the info on the first victim," I said. "Name of Gregory Cook. Age forty-two, white, male, Anglican. Worked as a dishwasher." I'd been right; the records I'd eventually managed to get out of Enrico had been incredibly detailed.

"How enlightening. In what way does any of that matter?"

"He was also a leprechaun," Aiko said emphatically. All of their statistics had matched hers, although obviously they had also been an elaborate lie.

Dolph froze. "Could be a coincidence," he said, although he didn't sound like he really believed it.

"Maybe," I said excitedly. "But look at this. Second victim. Elizabeth McDonald, female, twenty-nine."

"Wait a second," Kyra interrupted. "I knew her. She started at Pryce's last year."

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"Exactly. I don't know what she was, but I think we can make some guesses. Third death was Eva Schmidt, a Catholic woman twenty-nine years old. Now I don't have any idea who she was, but apparently at the time of death they're pretty sure she was in bed with victim number four, Jack Christenson. As it happens I knew Jack, and he was a fairly decent sorcerer."

"You think there's a connection there?" Dolph mused.

"Well it seems a bit ridiculous to be coincidence, doesn't it? So Kyra, you remember the first corpse you brought me in to look at? Apparently his name was Richard Angelo. Anybody heard of him?"

All I got was a whole bunch of blank looks. I sighed. "Yeah, me neither. But I smelled magic on the scene and I'm pretty sure it didn't come from the demon, so he wasn't a normal human, I can say that for sure. Anyway, the next one was the woman up on the north end, name of Janet Smith. I'm guessing she was a vampire."

Dolph immediately looked at Aiko, who shrugged, while Kyra looked to Christopher for confirmation. He shrugged, too, and said, "I don't know much about local vamps. Demon coulda killed a dozen of 'em and I wouldn't know."

I did mention that they don't get along, right? Not that most preternatural critters do, but werewolves and vampires seem to have an especially bad relationship. Like, homicidal rage and turf wars bad. Things weren't actually violent in this city, but they weren't friendly, either.

"So that leaves two more. The last person it attacked was me, and I think we can all agree that qualifies as attempting to murder another nonhuman. Before that was Ryan Miller, fifty-one year old white male. Unfortunately I couldn't detect anything about him through the stink in that house, marking possibly the first time an investigation was derailed by poor housekeeping—"

I broke off because Kyra and Dolph were both staring at me. Actually—I turned to check—so was Aiko, making that everybody who'd actually been there. Eventually, Kyra cleared her throat. "Ah, Winter, you know I would usually defer to your greater experience and whatnot, but that house smelled fine. And I should know considering I was in fur at the time."

That was insane. I could remember smelling it, mildew and rotting garbage. There was no way on earth Kyra—or Dolph, or probably Aiko either—could ever have mistaken it.

But now that I thought about it, they had been awfully surprised when I reacted to the smell. I could see them being stoic enough not to gag, but being surprised when I did seemed a bit farfetched.

Which meant that it hadn't been a real smell. I did point out that my mind interprets magic physically, remember? The only hard part is when you don't realize something isn't as physical as you think it is.

"Well, that solves that problem then. I think we can guess that whatever magic Ryan was doing, it was pretty ugly."

Dolph grunted thoughtfully. "You realize what that means, right? He has to be targeting them specifically. He must have timed it to the full moon just so we'd assume it was a new wolf and not pay attention to the victims."

"Not only that," Aiko said quietly. "You notice there aren't any werewolves on that list?"

"Maybe he still feels some loyalty to his own kind," Christopher suggested.

The kitsune laughed. "Not likely. Not only did he keep you from finding out about it, he made sure everybody in town hates you right now. From where they're standing, this is obviously a werewolf, making it your responsibility. For you not to do anything about it isn't going to make you any friends."

Nobody had much to say after that. What Aiko had said was both obviously true and incredibly depressing. After a long, awkward moment Christopher offered us...whatever meal was appropriate, I was sorta losing track of time by now...and of course we accepted. It turned out to be leftovers haphazardly thrown together out of the fridge, not unlike most of my meals in that regard.

Alphas don't normally eat leftovers. For that matter, why would Dolph and Christopher have been in here? This room, with its battered furniture and plain appearance, hardly seemed like the sort of place you'd find two powerful, dominant werewolves.

Dolph I could understand; I'd spent enough time around him in North Dakota that I had some idea of how eccentric he could be. Christopher was another matter.

It seems odd to consider, but this was probably the longest I'd spent in his company, ever. Always before when I'd thought of him, he'd been sort of a placeholder. He was Kyra's Alpha, and that was the only way I regarded him. So maybe it was natural that I'd thought of him as being pretty much like any other Alpha out there. A good Alpha and a decent person—thus making him a hell of a lot better than Roland, right there—but otherwise unremarkable.

Now that I'd seen his house I thought maybe I'd been misjudging him. I tend to put quite a bit of importance on people's furniture—absurd, I know, but then it is the closest thing I have to a profession. The funny thing about it is that you can often tell a lot about a person like that. Roland, for example, always had to have the high ground. I saw this house when he owned it, one time, and you could tell just by looking at the layout what kind of a person he was. Every room had exactly one comfortable piece of furniture, and I think we can all guess who used it. Other than that, everything had been built to impress. You know the kind of thing I mean—lots of needlessly elaborate decor, furniture that looks incredible but feels like crap, everything carefully arranged. I could go on, and I only saw it once.

Christopher hadn't changed any of the layout or structural aspects, but the house felt like a completely different place with him as Alpha. The building was designed around one large central room, which we'd walked through to get here. When Roland had been Alpha that room had been centered around a literal freaking throne.

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These days it looked...well, a bit like my house might if expanded to fill the space. Lots of comfortable-looking furniture, couches and bean bags scattered seemingly at random, oriented vaguely toward the fireplace. The paintings and tapestries had mostly been taken down and replaced with a truly remarkable variety of posters. I was willing to bet Christopher hadn't chosen most of them. In fact, something made me think any member of the pack who wanted to could probably hang one. The place felt like a combination lounge and college dorm.

This room, although completely different, said more or less the same thing. A fairly small kitchen, with furniture and appliances that had obviously seen a lot of use. I was willing to bet once again that the kitchen was open for use by any of the pack who wanted it.

Alphas are generally egoistic, maybe even self-centered. In my experience the best Alphas are those who put the pack's priorities first, but even with them there's always this sense that they're aware of their own importance. Conn, maybe, doesn't give me that impression—but you're always aware that he's the one in charge. It's not rudeness on his part, or even assertion. It's just that both parties assume that in the end, he's going to make the decisions. Every Alpha I'd ever seen worked like that; it's just how they are.

Christopher was willing to let us argue and come up with our own plans, even willing to take a back seat in the process. He set up his own house more as a gathering place for his wolves than a home for himself. Even when he was using it, he'd chosen this room rather than a more extravagant or comfortable setting. In all, he didn't seem at all the way I expected an Alpha to be.

On the other hand, when all this was over and if we both survived, he did seem like the kind of person it might be worth getting to know.

I ended up riding home with Aiko, largely because it was a bit too far for even me to want to walk. Kyra wanted to talk to Christopher about something, and Aiko had to go back that way anyway.

It was actually a pretty nice ride, all things considered. I suck at small talk and she seemed disinterested. Either that or she was too busy struggling not to rear-end somebody for laughs; she certainly came close enough to doing so, several times. Of course, the downside of this was that instead I was exposed to her taste in music, which turned out to be even more broad than mine. I don't think I ever want to know where she got the song of gangster rap set to Mozart's "Ode to Joy." Played on a xylophone.

We made it home alive, though, and...I was going to say sane, but you know. I really can't, because I probably don't qualify and Aiko was either loonier than a drunk raccoon or such a good actor it qualified as a mental disorder.

I was expecting her to kick me out at the curb—possibly literally—but she actually came in with me. I wasn't quite sure why, but it seemed rude to ask her not to.

She'd been looking somewhat dubious for several blocks by that time. When she saw the interior of the house, she pursed her lips and looked around for a moment before actually going in. She didn't actually say anything, of course, but it's remarkable how audible a well-executed smirk can be.

"So I think you maybe owe me an explanation or two."

So that was what this was about. "Why'd you wait this long to ask?" I said, genuinely curious.

She shrugged. "Pretty clear everybody else already knew. It didn't seem polite to make you feel awkward in front of them. Now quit trying to change the subject."

"Um...thanks, I guess. What did you want explained?"

She looked at me suspiciously, then seemed to realize that I was serious and rolled her eyes. "Come on. I know detecting magic isn't a normal werewolf trait."

I frowned. "But I already told you I'm not a werewolf."

She waited a second, then said, "And you were telling the truth about it?" in a tone of surprise more appropriate for someone discovering that their six-year-old nephew wasn't lying about having found a winning lottery ticket.

"What? Why would I lie? I mean, it's not like I'd gain much from concealing it."

"Granted," she acknowledged. "But remember I'm a kitsune. I grew up around people who'd tell you the sky was yellow just for the hell of it. So if you're not a werewolf, what are you? And how did you get so chummy with them?"

So then, of course, I had to tell her the whole story. Again. I was seriously considering putting this shit on tapes or something, as many times as I'd been repeating myself lately.

Somewhat to my surprise, I found myself telling her the whole story. Not the limits of my magic—I liked her, but I wasn't quite insane enough to trust a strange kitsune that far. I went ahead and told her all about my mother, though, and then I started talking about my childhood, my life among the werewolves. It was oddly cathartic, maybe because I didn't have any messy emotional connection with her to get in the way.

When I was finished, Aiko sat for a moment and then whistled softly. "Sucks to be you. Nice story, though."

"So does that answer your question?"

"Yeah, I think so." She sipped her tea meditatively. (What? I'm not a complete barbarian. I couldn't pull off a formal ceremony, but I could at least provide tea.) "So do you think we can pull this off? I mean, even if we catch him, sounds like he's all right in a fight. You'd have to be pretty badass to take Greg out." I'd been hearing a lot of names recently; it took me a moment to realize that Greg must be her leprechaun friend who'd been killed.

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"I'm not sure," I admitted. "I've never seen anything that fast. What about you?"

She shrugged. "Throw enough bodies at a problem and it goes down. I doubt he's good enough to kill a whole freaking werewolf pack. Especially not with a kitsune and a...you, for lack of a better word, playing backup."

"You're planning on being there, then?" That might be a lot of help. Kitsune aren't combat specialists in most of the stories, but they can still pull some pretty sweet stunts.

She grinned. "A chance to kill a demon *and* a werewolf without getting in trouble? No way am I going to miss that. So are you and the werewolf chick an item?"

I blinked, because there aren't all that many rapid changes in subject that can beat that. "You mean Kyra? No. I'm not interested in dating a werewolf."

"Oh come on, Winter. Don't you think that's a bit prejudiced? I mean, she—"

"Also," I interrupted off-handedly, "she's a lesbian."

It was Aiko's turn to be caught flat-footed. "Wow. I wasn't expecting that." She paused, and then chuckled. "You did that just to mess with me, didn't you? Nice job."

"Pretty much," I admitted easily. "Although it is true, if you were wondering."

"I wasn't, actually. Lying that well takes practice, and you don't seem like the type."

I snorted. "So am I supposed to be complimented by your insult now, or insulted by your compliment?"

She grinned. "Both, of course." She set her teacup down and stood up. "Well, thanks for answering my questions. I should probably quit bothering you now, though."

"Oh, it was no bother," I assured her, seeing her to the door.

And, once she had driven away, I realized with some surprise that it had been true. That was strange, because my territorial urges (no, they're not exclusive to werewolves. You have them too, you just don't show them as much) should have been screaming at me, with the presence of a near-stranger in my home. Especially so soon after a demon-werewolf thing tried to kill me in an alley.

Huh. I wondered if I should be pleased or worried by that.

Chapter Nine

Another interlude of everyday life, which although boring was nevertheless much needed. Strangely enough, although the situation looked to be if anything worse than before, I felt much better. Maybe it was just that now I was actually doing something about it.

Whatever the cause, after a few hours in Val's shop working on a defective incinerator (don't ask) and a good night's sleep, I was feeling pretty chipper the next day. Relatively speaking, I mean.

Edward called around eight.

"Winter," he said tersely. "I think I know who your murderer is."

"Really? Who?"

"Some wolf from the Boston pack. His old Alpha should be calling you in about an hour." He hesitated. "Look, Winter, don't...don't be stupid out there, you hear me? Let Dolph and Christopher do the heavy lifting on this one. This thing's out of your weight class."

"Oh, don't worry. I have no intention of getting myself killed." He hung up without saying goodbye. I dialed Dolph's number absently, still thinking about Edward's call.

I hadn't expected Edward to be still involving himself in this. Werewolves don't generally intrude on the business of other wolves without a damn good reason, and he didn't have a stake in this.

Which meant he was involved because of me.

I wasn't used to people trying to protect me. I didn't know how to deal with it.

Slightly less than an hour later, the now-standard group was gathered in my kitchen waiting for the phone to ring. It was a bit crowded with me, Dolph, Kyra, Christopher, and Aiko all packed in there, but I was the one getting the call, so my kitchen it was.

Nobody was talking, and the tension was so thick you could have literally cut it with an appropriately enchanted knife. When the phone actually did ring, no fewer than three people were startled enough to actually flinch away from it. I was one; I'll let you guess the others.

"Winter Wolf?" The voice on the other end was smooth and anonymous, a bland baritone with just a hint of an English accent.

"That's me," I replied. "Who are you?"

"Thomas Walford, Alpha of the New England pack in Boston." I kept my gaze on Dolph, who nodded slightly; the name, and presumably the voice as well, checked out. Dolph doesn't know every

werewolf in his father's territory, but it's his job to know the important ones. (I don't really need to say that werewolf hearing makes speakerphone superfluous, do I?)

"Edward Frodsham said one of your wolves is out here causing trouble." I made sure to keep my voice nice and not in any way accusatory. Alphas don't tend to like accusations much.

There was a short pause. "Not mine anymore. I don't know that he's the right one, but Edward seemed to think it likely enough that I should tell you about it." I remained silent, which he seemed to take for assent. "His name is Garrett White. He disappeared about, oh, four years ago now. I figured he was dead, but I suppose he could be out where you are.

"And what makes you think he's our killer?" Aiko asked skeptically.

"Nothing," Walford said acerbically, "since I hadn't heard a thing about it until Frodsham called me asking whether any of my wolves were unaccounted for. But apparently something convinced him, since he told me to call you. So how about I tell you what I told him and you can figure it out?"

He didn't wait for an answer. "Right, so Garrett was married to his high school sweetheart, girl named Kimberly. Six years ago she got to know one of my wolves at work and wound up asking him to sponsor her in. Without asking her husband's opinion. Or even telling him werewolves exist, which seems like a bit of a dick move but hey, maybe he would have understood."

"Except that about two months later she comes back early from a weekend trip to see her family and finds him in bed with another woman. Now, as it turned out, it was his sister. She had to come out for a conference or something, and since it was only one day she decided to stay there rather than get a hotel. He didn't bother telling his wife, since she was supposed to be out of town anyway."

"Of course, when she walks in that isn't what she sees. As far as she's concerned, he's cheating on her with another woman. She saw that and then just totally lost her shit, I mean completely. I doubt he was helping matters much, since she started going furry about the same time he saw her. If you don't believe in werewolves anyway, that much cuts short any explanation you were thinking of making."

"So the next morning, the sister's dead, but she only maimed Garrett and he wound up Changing. Kimberly was so far gone I had to put her down within a week. So when he wakes up, his wife's dead, his sister's dead, and he's a werewolf. That was an ugly scene, let me tell you."

"Anyway, Garrett's wolf was nuts. No surprise there, nobody in their right mind would have picked him for the change, but he kept control pretty solid most of the time, so we let him stick around. He hated being a werewolf, didn't make any bones about it. He blamed the change for his wife and sister, and he wasn't quiet about it. Didn't make himself popular, let me tell you. Eventually he snapped and almost killed his seven year old nephew, and you could tell that was just the last straw. A few days later, he up and vanished, gone from the pack and everything. We figured he killed himself, God knows we'd been expecting it for a while, and we just didn't find the body. But I suppose he could have found a way to break the pack bonds and left."

It's a good thing I'm not a sensitive guy, or all these people hanging up on me without saying goodbye would probably get to me.

"So you figure he's our guy?" Dolph sounded only mildly curious. Of course, from where he was standing, figuring out who was killing people took a definite backseat to shutting him down with extreme prejudice, posthaste, so I suppose I can understand.

"Sounds likely," I said. "I mean, we've got a werewolf with a serious hate on for the supernatural, and I can't imagine there are too many of those around. Although I don't know how much good it'll do us, given that we don't even know what this Garrett guy looks...."

"Winter? What is it?" Dolph sounded slightly more interested now, but only slightly.

I couldn't believe it took me this long to catch it. "Aiko? You said the werewolf you saw was grey, right?"

"Yeah. I mean, he had like some brown patches, but mostly grey."

"The werewolf that attacked me was black."

There was a moment of stunned silence which, as I perhaps should have expected, was eventually broken by Aiko. "You know, in retrospect, it is a little funny that I wouldn't have noticed demonic possession at that range. Just sayin'."

"So you think...what? The first killer was a normal werewolf, and the demon just jumped in on the action later?" Christopher either hadn't reacted to that statement at all, or he had an absolutely incredible poker face. Which shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did, considering that he survived being third wolf to Roland, but still.

"Maybe," I said slowly. "But I'm guessing they're working together."

Aiko frowned. "I don't get it. Why would a demon be working with anyone?"

"See, that's just it," I said distractedly, thinking it through pretty much as I said it. "We've been treating it as a demon, but we're talking about a thought-out plan here, and demons don't do planning. Garrett's the one we need to be worried about. A were with a lunatic wolf but very, very good control fits perfectly with what I felt."

"That doesn't tell us anything new," Dolph pointed out.

"Granted, but don't you think somebody like that might want to spend some time thinking about ways to keep the wolf contained? Especially if he was already convinced that werewolves were monsters just waiting to go on a rampage. Ways like, I don't know, maybe separating it from yourself and grafting something in between to keep it from influencing you."

Kyra opened her mouth, but I forestalled her. "Let me finish. Garrett had a couple years in the pack, right? Plenty of time to do some research on shamanic magic and develop a latent talent. He

obviously hated the pack, too, so once he was sure he could maintain control without them he would have done it. So he arranges an extremely convincing reason for him to want to die. Then, when he actually did the ritual, I'm willing to bet whatever you like that what he was doing to the wolf would be enough to snap the pack bonds like dry spaghetti. Even if it wasn't, he's got enough shamanic magic to do so at this point on his own."

"Then, once he's left the pack, he realizes he still wants some kind of company. I bet if we'd looked, we'd have found other werewolves who wanted to leave the pack, and who were also desperate to be able to control the wolf without a constant struggle. So he contacts them and arranges for them to do the same ritual he did."

"Except at some point, probably within the past six months, he realized that it wasn't getting easier. His wolf had only gotten more insane while confined, and the wolf he'd sacrificed was understandably pissed about it. So now his plan's backfired, which is guaranteed to only make him hate werewolves even more. By now that's transferred over to other supernatural monsters too. He knows that the Pikes Peak pack isn't in good shape, so he comes out here to put it in motion."

"Around this point he'll also have realized he isn't going to be able to pull it off. Killing a human is one thing, but Jack was a damn good sorcerer. No way a normal werewolf could have killed him without making a lot of noise, which Garrett really wanted to avoid. But by this point he's pretty crazy, and he knows about demons from his shamanic training. So he decides being possessed will give him enough power to get the job done, and conveniently also allow him to evade detection."

"I don't know, Winter," Christopher said skeptically. "Even if you're right—and you're making a lot of assumptions there—what guarantee would he have that his minions would agree with him? Wanting to go it alone and having an unhappy relationship with the wolf doesn't make a person a serial killer waiting to happen."

"Why would he care?" I asked quietly. "Demons are good at mind control. Plus, thanks to the weird multiple-personality magic he did to them, they have a glaring mental weakness. Add in pack bonds if he's established them, and it doesn't matter whether they agree with him. They wouldn't have a choice anymore."

"Makes sense," Dolph admitted. "But what good does it do us? Even if you're right about everything, even if his backup isn't exactly happy to be working with him, we can't really take advantage of it."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong," I said, grinning evilly. "Because, you see, they don't have demons in them." I turned and started for the door. "Aiko, Kyra, you mind giving me a hand with this one? It'll take a bit of planning and I want it to be ready by tonight." They followed along behind me, seeming a bit confused but willing enough. Nobody asked any questions. Kyra was willing to do whatever I asked her to, and Aiko was just along for the ride. I'm pretty sure Christopher and Dolph had already ruled out whatever I was up to as a lost cause and moved on to plan V.

Sure, I could have explained it. But what would be the fun in that? I mean, seriously, it's not every day you get the chance to be the guy who knows more than everybody else, make a needlessly complicated plan, and make cryptic comments while you railroad your partners into going along with it.

What? You know you've always wanted to. This was my first opportunity, and I'd be damned if I let it get away. Which isn't all that remarkable considering that I am most likely damned anyway, but the point stands.

"Okay," Kyra said on the way in the door. "So the plan is for fox-girl over there to set herself up as an obvious target, thus attracting one of the deranged mutant killer monster werewolves?"

"That's phase one."

"And what's to keep the demonic one from coming?"

I grinned and pulled the plastic tub out from under the futon. "This."

Aiko snorted. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me. You keep a tub of dangly jewelry covered in crosses in your house?"

"Hey, they aren't all crosses. See, here's a pentagram. And I have some prayer beads in here, too."

Kyra was looking back and forth between me and Aiko with a confused expression on her face. "I don't get it. What good does cheap jewelry do us?"

"Cheap *blessed* jewelry," I corrected her. "I'm not holy enough to bless myself, let alone tacky jewelry. But I do know people."

"And demons," Kyra said, comprehension dawning on her face, "are repulsed by holy objects."

I beamed at her. "Exactly. Aiko, these things are pretty weak, so you'll probably need at least a couple dozen for it to work."

Aiko muttered something and then began grabbing handfuls of the kitschy crap, apparently at random. Admittedly most of it wound up in places jewelry should never, ever go, but that really didn't matter for our purposes. "Do you seriously expect this to work?" she grumbled.

"Honestly, no. I'm mostly counting on Garrett to want to avoid doing his own dirty work where he can. I scared him pretty good the last time we met, and I don't think he'll want to chance something similar happening again so soon. But I don't figure the jewelry can hurt anything."

"Right," she drawled. "And what happens if you're wrong?"

"I'm guessing we all die."

"This," Aiko said seriously, "is a shit plan."

"Obviously. Are you going to do it?"

"It'd be kinda nice to *know* the rest of it first," Kyra interjected dryly.

"Oh, fine," I sighed. "So kitsune are supposed to be good with illusions, right? Do you think you can hide Kyra and me from a werewolf?"

"Racial stereotypes are hurtful, Winter. And I don't know. I mean, I'm not bad at illusion, but werewolves are a pain in the ass to hide from. Maybe if I were, I don't know, a six- or seven-tail...."

Number of tails is the traditional mark of a kitsune's power, and yes, I realize how ridiculous that sounds. Apparently it's a scale of one to nine. I wasn't entirely sure how many tails Aiko had (asking somebody the exact limits of their power is the absolute height of rudeness in in the circles I move in), but it was a safe bet that if she had seven or more she wouldn't have to bother with the likes of me.

"I can cover sight, at least," I said. "And if you distract him a bit, he shouldn't get close enough that we'd have to worry about him hearing our breathing. Do you think you can handle the rest?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "Scent? Yeah, I should be able to get that. If you have sight locked down I'll probably be able to do a bit of work on hearing too. So what makes you think we'll be able to attract a werewolf? 'Cause you better have a good reason if you think I'm wearing this shit in public."

"Simple enough. I figure they have to be picking targets more or less at random by this point. I'm pretty sure Garrett can sense magic somehow, but just in case we'll be real obvious about it. By this time he's probably noticed that you're always near the scene of the murder, so he should already be suspicious about you."

"Shit. Plan." Aiko grinned and wove a simple net out of prayer beads. She looked at me through the holes, and while she was still smiling there was something about the expression that was deeply unsettling. It was too toothy, and her eyes were very cold. "Let's do it."

"This spot look good to you?" Kyra asked.

I shrugged. "Good as any." It was hard to guess where we should be when they were so carefully keeping there from being a geographic pattern to the attacks, but I thought we'd made a pretty good guess. It was a nice alley, shadowy and dank, with assorted and foul smells. We hadn't even seen a homeless person for almost two blocks; there were plenty of warmer, less foul places to crash within walking distance. This alley was too dark to feel comfortable, and wide enough to remove any coziness it might have offered.

Perfect for our needs.

Every attack so far had happened at night, which had conveniently given us a few hours to finish getting ready and (in Kyra's case) take a nap before we came out here. At the moment it was around eleven, and I figured it was about time to get the show on the road.

"Aiko, you'll be over here if you don't mind," I said, gesturing toward the corner formed by a doorway.

She shrugged. "This one's your show. Just tell me what you need."

"Kyra, you're with me." I walked over to the opposite corner from Aiko. It wasn't quite as shadowy as I would prefer, but you make do with what you have, that's what I say.

Obviously a few shadows weren't going to protect us from being detected by a werewolf.

Fortunately, I have magic. It doesn't solve every problem, but it can be a hell of an useful tool.

People always get a certain (and, in terms of the actual historical group, totally inaccurate) image when they hear the word druid. Now, it is true that you can use druidry to commune with nature and shit like that. For example, I frequently use it to commune with predators (although technically that also owes something to witchcraft), that being my only notable talent.

But you can use it to do other things too. It's actually a very broad term. For example, a talented druid with the right set of skills using an appropriate focus might dissociate their awareness from their body, spread their consciousness through their immediate surroundings, and then gather up the various shadows and patches of darkness in the area for their own personal use.

Oh yeah, did I mention I'm a person almost exactly like that? Funny, what a coincidence.

I used to be a lot better with shadow than I was now. It didn't come naturally the way animals did, but sufficient practice can balance that out. When I was working out every day, I'd gotten to the point that I created a focus for the explicit purpose of manipulating shadows. It looked like a simple bronze ring set with chips of obsidian; only if looked at it for several minutes would you notice that the light didn't reflect off it quite as brightly as it should, and that the obsidian wasn't reflective the way you would normally expect it to be.

Strangely, nobody's ever noticed it. Imagine that.

The point is that, although I was severely out of practice, I could still weave shadows around Kyra and myself pretty well. Granted it took me several minutes, whereas once I could have done it in less than one, but still pretty good considering.

It wasn't invisibility. It wasn't even close. The patch of shadows was slightly denser than it should have been, and our mottled grey clothing disguised our outlines quite neatly, but it wouldn't fool anyone with eyes for very long.

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That's the secret of, well, secrecy. The trick isn't to make it impossible to find a person, or learn a secret or whatever. It's impossible to make an absolutely impervious disguise. The real trick is to make sure that nobody looks once, let alone twice.

Aiko walked over and examined us briefly before nodding once. "Not bad. I'll take care of my part and then we settle down to wait."

The kitsune didn't make any show of effort, nor did she take nearly as long as I had. I felt it, though, when her spell took effect. She was keeping the other werewolf from smelling us by the simple expedient of wrapping us in a sort of smell-suppressing bubble thing (I never did claim to be good at illusions). This worked, but it had the unfortunate side effect of cutting off scents from the outside as well, which was hard to miss with my nose. The magic itself smelled like fox, unsurprisingly, with an underlying tone a bit like nutmeg.

I was impressed by how quickly our target responded to the bait. I mean, I was expecting to draw attention, but Aiko barely had time to finish wiping our scent from the area and get back to her position before the attacker showed up. Less than five minutes had probably gone by since I started weaving shadows.

I was just as glad for that. The unfortunate part about the trick I was pulling was that it wasn't something you can just set up and forget about. I was holding the shadows into an entirely unnatural configuration, and they didn't like it. Every moment I spent maintaining the spell was draining my magic. Not nearly as rapidly as when I went mind-to-mind with the demon, fortunately, thanks to the focus, which acted like a colored lens to channel power into the right spectrum without my having to concentrate on that myself. It made the spell a lot easier. But it still took power.

The werewolf rounded the corner at a steady lope. It was, as I'd half-expected, greyish brown, and not particularly large by werewolf standards, nothing like the demon-infested monstrosity I'd encountered. I checked Aiko's face to be sure, but it just told me what I already knew, namely that this was indeed the same werewolf she'd seen before.

It stalked up to her, its jaws split in a grin that had nothing to do with happiness and everything to do with bloodlust. It took its time, walking right up to her. It didn't need to rush. In just moments it was going to kill her, the same way it had killed at least once before.

Perfect. Everything was, for once, going according to plan.

To come straight at her like that, it had to turn its back on us.

Between us Kyra and I could probably have killed it from hiding before it ever knew we were there. It was just a flunky, though; killing it wouldn't do us much good in terms of actually stopping the murders.

We had more ambitious plans for tonight.

I had been planning to let my spell collapse, but it seemed a shame not to use all the shadows for something. So, instead, I hurled them out across the alley. The space between me and the werewolf blurred in a dizzying pattern of light and darkness as my shadows sped across the ground in a way that had nothing to do with nature.

Aiko had been watching the werewolf, to keep from attracting suspicion, but she'd been waiting. At the same moment the darkness surrounding Kyra and me faded, she dropped her illusions. Kyra let out a bloodcurdling scream and started forward.

Remember how werewolves are basically predators? Well, try startling a predator sometime and see what happens. I pretty much guarantee the first thing they'll do is evaluate the threat. In the natural world, even a scratch can become debilitating. Given that carnivores absolutely need to be at the top of their game, every day, it should come as no surprise that they take caution to whole new levels.

This werewolf had just seen a lightshow like nothing it had ever seen before, and simultaneously smelled a strange werewolf less than ten feet away and heard what was clearly the beginning of an attack. It was plenty startled, and it spun to face us in no time flat.

If we were actually attacking it that would have been the perfect response. Its reaction time was really impressive, faster than most werewolves and almost all humans. I doubt we'd have been able to land an attack before it reacted.

Unfortunately for it, this also meant that it was staring right at me from a few feet away. And I don't care how superhuman your reaction time is, if you don't have time to think there's no guarantee your reaction will be an intelligent one.

Here's a piece of advice for all you aspiring supervillains out there. If, for whatever reason, you feel a need to build a crippling weakness into your servants so that you can control them, go for it.

Just remember that you might not be the only person in the world who can exploit it.

I met the werewolf's eye and immediately cast my next spell. It was a little bit like the one I'd used against the demon, in the same way that an aircraft carrier is a bit like a canoe.

There's a world of difference between a spur-of-the-moment spell cast out of desperation and a premeditated spell cast by a mage who's had time to plan and prepare everything ahead of time. If my last attempt at this trick had been a panicky attempt at defense, this was more of a deliberate assault.

I slammed into the other werewolf's mind. Like the last one, it had three distinct presences, although this time I didn't have to guess at what they were. This one's wolf didn't seem to have been as crazy as the last one's before the ritual, and still retained some vestige of sanity even now.

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I didn't bother with it, diving instead straight for the actual wolf—which, thanks to Alexander, I now knew was covering up the most beautifully tailored hidden weakness I'd ever had the good fortune to encounter. I mean, seriously. I couldn't have asked for a better overlap with my own skills.

The wolf let me through with a definite sense of glee, confirming my suspicion that it would also hate its master, and within moments I had bypassed the werewolf's defenses completely. Once I was inside, I cast about for a moment until I found what I was looking for and gave it a sort of energetic twist. Then, with a feeling of malicious satisfaction, I let myself slip back into my body.

As expected, the werewolf was lying on the ground panting in agony. Kyra was covering it with the shotgun just in case, but it clearly wasn't able to present a threat to much of anything right now. I took a moment to stretch, accommodating my mind once again to its real home.

I felt surprisingly good, alive and humming with energy. Nothing like after the last time I'd used my magic. I glanced down at my other ring, smiling a little. The dull, burnished steel band looked no different, but the tiny emeralds were still glimmering a little with the energy they'd just focused, looking like a cat's eyes in the darkness.

When I make a magical focus, I do it right.

On the ground the werewolf had just begun to visibly change. That's what I had done to it, you see: forced the change. It's a pretty cool trick, not least because once a werewolf starts changing it's pretty much impossible to stop until it finishes and reaches the next stable position. I've seldom gotten the chance to use that skill, but the few occasions I can pull it off make it all worthwhile.

Aiko walked over and stared down at it. The thing was clearly in agony—having the change forced on you like that is a horrid experience for a werewolf, not just terribly painful, but demeaning as well. It's absolute loss of control, in a group which prizes control above all else.

Aiko's face registered no pity, though, no remorse. Nothing but a cold satisfaction.

I probably looked much the same. I don't like to think about that much.

"You want me to cut his tendons?" Kyra asked, slipping a silver knife out of its sheath beneath her jacket.

I frowned. "Not yet. I'd rather leave him intact unless he tries to run."

About ten minutes later, a naked and disheveled young man was sitting propped up against the bricks. There were no visible wounds on him, but his black eyes still burned with pain as much as hate as he glared around himself.

He was a werewolf, of course, so I couldn't trust appearances. Somehow, though, I was certain he wasn't much older than he looked, no more than twenty years old. Something about the expression, maybe. His malice was very shallow, lacking the murderous edge which would have made it a frightening thing. It was like the difference between dark and milk chocolate.

I schooled my own expression into cool indifference. Whether he'd wanted to or not, this boy was guilty of at least one murder that I knew of, and he'd just tried to kill Aiko as well. I couldn't afford to go easy on him.

"Here's how this is going to go," I said calmly. "You tell us what we want to know, and you get to walk away alive. You cause trouble and you're not seeing another moonrise. Got it?"

"Screw you," he snarled. "My friends will come for me."

"Quite true," I said, nodding. "I imagine that Garrett, at least, will be aware that something's happened to you. I figure we have about twenty minutes until one of them shows up, though. So here's how this works. If we don't get what we want within ten, we're going to skedaddle. But before we go, Kyra here's going to turn you into extra chunky salsa." She grinned viciously and pointed the ten-gauge we'd picked up from my house suggestively at his head. It was loaded with charged-silver buckshot, and I imagine he could feel the silver even though it was still in the barrel.

His face froze in an instant expression of terror that made him look ten years younger. He was definitely young by human standards, let alone werewolf. Then it firmed back up. "You're bluffing," he said, his voice wavering a little.

I sighed. "You know? I really don't have time to talk you around." Feeding power to my own inner werewolf, I pulled my silver-inlaid knife from its sheath and stepped forward. I grabbed his right arm and pulled it out to full extension. He struggled, but he hadn't yet recovered from the change and he had no leverage. Besides, I was feeding enough magic to the werewolf inside that I was probably stronger than even a healthy wolf in that moment. There was nothing he could do to keep me from cutting a long, shallow slash into his skin, making sure to drag the silver through the wound.

Aiko handed me a black handkerchief. "Thank you," I murmured, wiping the blood off the knife. "Now," I said, raising my voice slightly, "that cut won't kill you. You know that as well as I do. However, I'm hoping it will convince you that we're willing to. You're rapidly running out of time to start cooperating."

"Five minutes," Kyra said helpfully.

The kid's face was frozen in an expression of shock as he stared at the blood running down across his hand. Odds were good it was the most painful injury he'd received in his life; it wasn't serious, but enhanced silver is *very* painful to werewolves. After a moment, his face crumpled. "Fine," he said, defeated. "Ask your questions."

"We know about you and Garrett. How many others do you have?"

He looked at me with shock in his eyes. "How do you know Garrett's name?"

I looked him in the eye and showed a whole bunch of teeth. Not even a young werewolf would mistake it for a smile. "Lucky guess," I purred. "Now answer the question."

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He swallowed and looked away. "There are four of us," he said. "Plus Garrett. I'm the youngest."

Aiko looked at me and shook her head slightly. I agreed with her; we'd had a few more questions planned, but odds were good the kid didn't know anything more than what he'd already said. Garrett had been getting away with this too long to be stupid, and a smart man wouldn't have told his lowest-ranking minion any more than was absolutely necessary.

"Look...what's your name?" I asked, hunching down so that my face was more or less on a level with his.

"J-John," he stuttered, seeming incapable of looking away from the shotgun in Kyra's hands. He'd seen the byplay between me and Aiko, and he thought that now that he was useless to us we were going to kill him.

In some sense he was correct about that. Fortunately—or unfortunately—for him, we weren't quite done using him yet.

"Look, John," I said gently. "We know who you are. We know what you're doing. And you know what?" I smiled and gestured around myself. "We've just about had enough of it. Now, Garrett or one of his lackeys is going to find you pretty soon. When he does you tell him what I just said. He can try and hide, in which case we'll hunt him down and kill him like a rabbit. Or he can stand up and face it like a wolf. His choice." I stood up and started backing away. "Tell him he can send his answer to Christopher."

"W-wait. Christopher who?"

My smile broadened. "Oh, he knows who. You just tell him what I said." I turned and walked away. Kyra was the last to follow, slipping the shotgun back under her coat and pulling the hood up as we faded into the darkness, aided by just a bit of my magic.

Let it never be said that I can't make an impression. Somehow I didn't think John would ever forget this one.

Chapter Ten

"You think he bought it?" Christopher asked.

I shrugged. "John did. Whether Garrett will fall for it I don't know. I expect you'll find out pretty soon. Somehow I think the stunt we pulled tonight's going to get us some kind of reaction." I broke off yawning; it had been a very long night, and even with preparation and appropriate foci I had been throwing around a lot of magic. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to go and collapse for a while."

He laughed briefly. "Not at all. You might have to wake Kyra; I think she already fell asleep on the couch. I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

As it turned out he was right. Kyra managed to drive me home safely, but I still made her promise to go right home and sleep for a few hours. The sun was already cresting the horizon by that time; our werewolf trap had taken most of the night, and I'd spent the rest of it reporting to Christopher. Aiko, being apparently slightly more sensible than me, had left almost immediately.

As for myself, well, I was in better shape than the last time I'd come home after throwing my magic around. I managed to brush my teeth and get undressed before I fell asleep, even—although I did make sure to keep all of the useful things I'd taken with me near my bed. I wasn't really anticipating a retaliatory attack, but it was pretty clear by this point that there was no such thing as an excessive amount of paranoia.

Seven hours later the phone rang.

"Looks like we've got our answer," Christopher said grimly.

I was instantly alert. "What's happened?"

"Message left on my doorstep. Says 'Moonrise tomorrow,' and then specifies a location in the forest west of the city.

"You're kidding. He gave you a formal invite?"

"Looks that way. You think he'll show?"

I frowned. "I don't know. I can't get a sense of this guy, Christopher. I'm sure I was right about what he's doing, but I feel like there's something we're still missing about this."

"Maybe," Christopher said, although he didn't sound convinced. "But it hardly matters at this point. The whole pack knows about this. I can't back down from a direct challenge after what he's done."

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"Fair enough," I said reluctantly. I didn't like rushing headlong into danger, but from what Conn told me about the pack structure in this town it was probably true that Christopher didn't have an option on this one. A more secure Alpha could safely ignore a challenge if they played it well, so that it seemed insulting rather than fearful, but with an unstable pack no amount of spin was sufficient.

I didn't bother getting up; it sounded like the next day was going to have some exciting nightlife, so there wasn't any point going back to being diurnal. I wanted to be well rested, so I figured I'd get some more sleep. I didn't wake up again until almost sunset.

I spent most of the evening and night checking on my equipment. Knives were cleaned and sharpened, although they didn't really need either. Most of my silver was good, but a few of the bullets and needles had gone flat. I set them aside to recharge later. I could have used them—regular silver hurts werewolves too, remember—but I wanted the best equipment I had in a fight this serious.

Eventually I ran out of stuff to deal with—it had mostly just been an exercise in distraction, anyway. I thought for several minutes, and then made a couple phone calls.

It had occurred to me that maybe there were a few things I could get for this fight in particular. I might not have anything like the power a demon-possessed werewolf could claim, but my specialty has always been obsessive preparation. I saw no reason to change that now.

Even if we lost this fight, Garrett wasn't going to be forgetting it anytime soon. I was determined of that.

I was a little nervous going back to Alexander without an invitation. Growing up I'd heard a lot of stories about the punishments mages visited upon those who annoyed them. The basic lesson most of the time was that powerful mages have short tempers, no concept of proportion, and unpleasant senses of humor, and as a result you should avoid pissing them off whenever possible.

On the other hand, he seemed to like me well enough, and there was no question that he was both more powerful and more skilled than me by a wide margin. Which is why, the next day, I found myself outside Alexander's house in the afternoon. I could have asked Dolph to bring me, but he undoubtedly had his own preparations to make. Besides, it wasn't a ridiculously long walk, and it wasn't like I could mistake it for another house.

Alexander answered the door looking about as happy as last time, although I could smell that at least I hadn't actually interrupted him at his magic this time. "What do you want?" he snapped peevishly.

"My name is Winter," I said cautiously. "I was here the other day asking you about demons..."

"I remember. I'm not an idiot. Did you find it?"

"Yes, I think so. Apparently the showdown is tonight."

He snorted. "How like a werewolf to schedule it. I suppose you've come to try and convince me to come?"

"Oh no," I said hastily. Somehow I didn't think that line of effort had much chance of success. "But I was wondering if I could purchase a few things...."

At first he looked skeptical. But once I'd outlined my reasoning to him, and explained what I was looking for, he got to be interested enough that he forgot to keep scowling.

And, eventually, started nodding.

An hour later I walked back out of the house with a spring in my step that had been absent for several weeks. The weapon in my coat pocket couldn't weigh more than a couple ounces, but it felt much heavier than that. It had cost me some things I wasn't comfortable paying, and the process of making it hadn't been pleasant, but if this went right it would all be worth it.

Moonrise was about an hour after sunset. About two hours before, we went for a sort of pre-fight dinner. I believe the idea was that, if we were all going to be dead tomorrow, we might as well have a decent last supper, although it also had a practical side, for me at least. I wanted to have absolutely as much magic as I possibly could for this fight, and that meant working to replenish what I'd spent. Food and sleep were still the best ways to do that.

You might expect that we ate at Pryce's. If so, you would be absolutely wrong. As I've mentioned, I don't have enough money that I can afford to eat out very often, but I still went to Pryce's often enough that it felt sort of everyday. For Kyra, of course, it was more mundane than that by a wide margin.

Instead, we went to the high-end Italian restaurant where Anna worked. It was a pretty subdued party, all of us probably thinking about what the odds were that we were going to be dead by morning. I had to admit that they looked to be pretty far stacked against us. We had the advantage of numbers, and on a personal level I had all the tricks and toys I'd arranged already, not to mention my magic.

Garrett, on the other hand, was virtually a one-man army. Besides which he had at least four werewolves playing backup, plus any other servants or allies he'd gathered that John hadn't known about. He'd chosen the field of combat, which meant that he could have prepared God only knows what kind of traps and advantages.

So yeah. None of us was feeling too cheery at dinner. Aiko cracked bad jokes and ate the most ridiculous things she could find on the menu, but there was a sense of forced gaiety even to her antics. Kyra was all but silent, as was Christopher. Dolph reviewed what we knew and went over our game plan for the night in a hushed voice, his face grim. He had judged the odds about the same way I had, I thought.

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But he was Rudolph Ferguson, the son of the Khan. He was one of the most personally dangerous werewolves in the world, and he had seen centuries come and go.

You would have a better chance persuading a Spartan army to retreat than convincing him to run from a fight. I think he truly doesn't know how to be a coward.

As for myself, well, I guess I was somewhere in between. I wasn't feeling optimistic about tonight, but I'm a stubborn bastard, literally. I refused to allow our enemy to have the victory of making me unhappy. So I was laughing at Aiko's jokes, and enjoying the meal as best I could because, if there's one thing you can learn from growing up among werewolves, it's how to treat food as the most important part of your existence.

And besides, Anna is a very good cook.

After dinner, I got prepped while Kyra was changing in the bathroom. I didn't have any actual armor—I'm just not in enough fights to justify it—but I made do. I wore a heavy leather jacket that, like my favorite Bowie knife, had been a gift from Erin years before. It didn't look much like the sort of garment bikers wear; it was heavy reinforced boiled leather, totally lacking in decoration or a silky smooth finish. Boring brown in color, it was very obviously intended for physical protection rather than any conception of fashion.

I was pretty sure my enemies would be fighting as wolves, so I hadn't bothered borrowing a ballistic vest. It wouldn't do shit to stop claws. Instead I settled for a thick black hoodie under the leather. The temperature didn't really justify it—even after dark in the mountains, at this time of year it just didn't get cold enough to overcome my natural resistance to cold—but the added layers might at least slow down an attacker. The cuffs of the cargo pants were tucked into heavy leather hiking boots. A werewolf could bite through the boots, but not quickly.

The insulated leather gloves were horribly uncomfortable over the rings, but I was likely to need the foci before the night was out, and I couldn't afford numb fingers. A little discomfort was a small price to pay.

After that, there was nothing else to do but collect my various weapons. The Bowie knife, steel inlaid with silver, would ride on my belt during the actual fight, but I wasn't wearing it yet; I didn't want to have to explain it to any cops. I couldn't afford the time it was likely to take. Likewise my 9mm, loaded for werewolf. Usually I would have worn it in a shoulder holster under my clothes, but tonight I was putting a higher priority on easy access than concealment. The shoulder rig would fit over the jacket.

My ten-gauge came next. Extra ammunition for both guns went into the pockets of my pants, including both buckshot and slug rounds for the shotgun. All of it was silver, the presence of so much charged silver making my skin crawl a little. Fortunately none of it was actually touching my skin, so it shouldn't actually injure me.

The ammo was joined by a ton of other things, little tools and toys that I'd been saving up for a long time. I wasn't as personally dangerous as most mages—or, honestly, most werewolves—but I had years of paranoid preparation on my side. Hopefully it would give me enough of an edge to pull this off.

That's the thing about screwing with somebody like me. On a personal level I didn't have the power to threaten most anybody. But if I have time to prepare and I know exactly what I'm going to be fighting, it becomes a different story. It means I have a chance to arrange an arsenal specifically targeted at one enemy. The stuff I was carrying wouldn't be worth much against, say, one of the fae. But when it came to demons and/or werewolves, I was armed to the teeth.

About the same time I finished getting ready Kyra came trotting into the room. She was clearly nervous, but her green eyes were as bright as ever. I patted her fur delicately into place and then went for her armor.

Kyra was going in as a wolf, which would normally preclude equipment. Fortunately, the werewolves have centuries of experience with killing things and—what many of the stories seem to conveniently overlook—they aren't stupid.

That was why Kyra had a collection of heavy leather straps and steel plates which, although it looked like a senseless jumble, belted easily into place. I'd learned to put on the armor years before, and it was a comforting routine, something for my hands to do so that I wouldn't have to think. The armor was a little bit loose on her—the pack owns several sets of the stuff, but they don't bother individually tailoring it. That's why it has buckles and is easily adjustable.

The steel plates were designed to offer as much protection as possible without seriously impeding movement. Large plates settled over the back, flanks, and chest, while the throat was protected by a series of smaller overlapping pieces of metal, leaving her head and legs bare. I noticed with approval that most of the plates had delicate tracings of silver across their surface, making it less likely that another werewolf would be able to grapple her successfully. Kyra was stronger than almost any human, but that doesn't mean much when you're dealing with other superhumans.

That done, I did a quick final check on the contents of my numerous pockets and then started carting all my stuff out to her car. I put the guns, knives, and pouches into the trunk, concealing them by the simple expedient of throwing a blanket over them. Kyra clambered, slightly awkwardly, into the backseat of her car, while I slipped into the driver's seat.

Before we left I went ahead and expended a bit of my magic cloaking Kyra in shadows. It wasn't a huge expenditure—I wasn't doing anything like as subtle or complex as before—and if anybody saw her in her current state we'd be screwed. A werewolf in fur is one thing; a werewolf in fur wearing what looked like a costume designed for somewhere between a gladiator movie and an S&M fetishist club is another thing entirely.

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The designated rendezvous location was a small parking lot in the forests south of Pikes Peak. It was about half an hour's drive from the city, a short distance off the road. In the daytime it was a pleasant enough place, somewhere people parked while they went for day hikes in the woods. I went there fairly often myself.

The growing twilight, combined with my own foreboding, lent it a different air. Shadows grew and stretched across the ground, and the darkened spaces between the trees seemed to hold a thousand enemies. The lot itself was all but abandoned, feeling desolate and cold. I recognized Christopher's car, and Dolph's, and there was one other that smelled like werewolf; other than that it was empty. Of course; if Garrett hadn't arranged for this place to be empty tonight, Christopher would have. The werewolves mostly weren't here yet, and the ones who'd arrived early must have gone out scouting, because there was no one else around.

There weren't going to be any innocent bystanders for this fight.

Kyra seemed to feel anxious too, sticking so close to me as I opened the trunk and collected my gear that I was practically stepping on her. I didn't mind; honestly, waiting around in the empty lot was creeping me out enough I almost wished the bloodshed would start already, just so I could stop anticipating it.

It had been a long time since I had this feeling. Now that I was feeling it again, I was a little disturbed by how familiar it felt.

The leather jacket went on first, followed by the belt. The knife on one side was balanced by a large, tough fabric pouch on the other. I'd picked it up cheap at a military surplus. It had originally been designed to hold magazines for an assault rifle; I wasn't storing bullets in it, but this was still probably the closest I'd ever come to using it for its intended purpose. The interior was divided into four pockets, each big enough to hold a water bottle, although their contents tonight were significantly smaller than that. The extra space was stuffed with padding; I didn't want my weapons breaking before I had a chance to use them.

I slipped the shoulder rig on over my clothing and secured the pistol in it, making sure the safety was on. It was fully loaded with a round chambered, because I figured that if and when I needed it, I was going to need to be quick. The shotgun, likewise loaded, went on a simple black nylon strap that I draped across my chest. I checked once more that I wasn't missing anything, then shut the trunk.

I didn't bother locking the door; any thief ambitious to hit a wilderness parking lot in the middle of the night wasn't likely to be bothered by such a simple countermeasure. Not to mention that they'd be lucky just to get away with their life if this got as ugly as I was anticipating it would.

It was quiet enough that I heard the next vehicle coming long before it arrived. Christopher appeared before it did, a huge grey-white wolf fading out of the underbrush. He nodded slightly toward Kyra, but otherwise didn't react to our presence. Dolph showed up a moment later, equally large but

several tones darker. He glanced at me, amber eyes practically glowing in the gloom, and flashed his teeth.

Was that a human smile translated to an inhuman face? Or an expression of an entirely inhuman bloodlust? It was hard to tell for sure, even for someone as experienced as me.

And, in the end, did it even matter? However any of us felt about it, our job here was pretty clear. At this point there was no way either we or Garrett could avert what was about to happen.

A few minutes later a large, blocky black van pulled into the lot. It belonged to the pack, of course. As it got closer I realized that Aiko was driving; she must have decided not to take her own car.

The interior of the car looked like a snapshot from some Renaissance artist's vision of hell—except, you know, in a car. All of the passengers were werewolves, and none of them still looked human. Half a dozen shades of fur, gleaming animal eyes, lots and lots of enormous teeth—there was plenty there to fear, and I would have been lying if I said I didn't, familiar with werewolves though I was. Several of them had chosen to stick their heads out the various windows of the van, all of which were rolled down to allow just that. And probably also to cut the smell a bit.

The kitsune parked casually in the middle of the lot, ignoring the designated parking spaces that I had unconsciously obeyed. She got out and walked around the van opening doors, letting a small flood of wolf out. Then she walked over to where I was standing while the werewolves stretched and milled about—unsurprising, really, considering that we were the only two capable of speech at the moment.

Her kit was relatively similar to mine, although with a definite Japanese theme. Progressive or not, she apparently had very traditional ideas about equipment. Her scale armor could have starred in a samurai movie, complete with armored gloves and leggings. The boots, at least, weren't armored, although the tightly fitted black leather was still a far cry from my own hiking boots.

As far as armament, she had a literal freaking sword belted on. Not a katana, surprisingly, but its smaller cousin the wakizashi, which was better suited to the close-quarters combat we were likely to encounter here. The other side held a tanto-style knife in an ornately decorated sheath.

I smirked a little. "Bit of a traditionalist, there?" I said.

"You're wearing armor too," she said defensively.

"Granted, but not quite armor like that. I mean, that's gotta be from what, the fifteenth century?"

She glowered at me. "Twentieth. But it's not like I could go into a fight without it. What would my mother say?" She shuddered dramatically. "Totally not worth it."

I laughed. "I'm surprised you're going in human," I said, gesturing vaguely at the werewolves. "I'd have thought you would have changed by now."

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"This may surprise you," the kitsune said dryly, "but a human with a gun beats a fox in a fight more often than you might think."

"You brought a gun?" I said, grinning.

"It's in the van. Speaking of which..." she walked back over and opened the back of the van. She pulled out, in order, a pistol that looked to be of a significantly higher caliber than mine, what looked like a military-model carbine, and a samurai-style helmet and mask that finished up her armor ensemble.

I looked at her and then glanced back at my own kit to confirm that, yep, I totally looked like a wimp compared to Aiko. I was just hoping she could back it up; all the guns and swords in the world won't do you any good if you can't use them.

About that time another trio of mottled werewolves melted out of the shadows and went to confer with Christopher. The scouts whose car had been here before I arrived, doubtless. I did a quick count and found that, counting Kyra, Christopher, and Dolph, there were sixteen werewolves total, more than I'd expected; Christopher had brought over half his pack to this fight.

Werewolves can't talk in fur. It doesn't matter how awesome you are, you can't make human speech come out of an animal's mouth. Doesn't happen.

On the other hand, werewolves have human-level intelligence and plenty of experience communicating in spite of their difficulties. In addition to that, the pack bonds give them something akin to low-level telepathy. So Christopher could reasonably get some information from the scouts, in spite of the linguistic handicap on both parts.

Apparently they hadn't seen, heard, or smelled anything which changed the plan, because Christopher started off down the path into the section of the forest where, theoretically, Garrett and Company were waiting.

Around us, the light of the almost-full moon threw the forest into stark contrast, silver light against shadows as dark as I'd ever seen.

About a quarter-mile down the path, Christopher peeled smoothly off the pack and took off at an angle. That was the signal, and from that point on every few steps another werewolf split off from the group, going to both sides of the path at varying angles.

The note had said only that they would be somewhere within a valley to the north of the parking lot, which left almost fifty acres to search. Within that area we had no way of knowing where to look. Thus, the plan called for a search pattern radiating out from the path. Theoretically, if they were here at all, one of the werewolves would cross their trail eventually. If not, we would regroup at the parking lot around dawn and decide the next move.

Kyra, Aiko and I were near the back half of the line. Before too long, though, it was their turn. I wished Aiko good luck and then she slipped into the trees, vanishing incredibly quickly considering her conspicuous appearance. Maybe it was a kitsune thing. Kyra butted her head against my thigh, staggering me slightly, and then followed her. Shortly thereafter I left the path as well, going to the opposite side as they had.

Off the path it was a different world. Under the trees it was vastly darker, most of the moonlight blocked by the trees. I loved the forest, I'd spent quite a bit of time hiking even in this very region, and my preternatural senses were working overtime. I still had to work hard to navigate the woods without either giving away my position or breaking an ankle. Under the circumstances, either one was likely to be a death sentence.

About half an hour later I heard snarling noises to the north.

They weren't terribly loud. A human would never have heard them. Even I probably wouldn't have, most days. At the moment, though, my senses were straining harder than they had in years, maybe harder than ever, and there weren't any distractions.

If a werewolf had really needed help they would have made more noise than that.

On the other hand, this was the first sign I'd heard of an enemy presence in the area. Even if, as we expected, the enemy had split up the same way we had, I might still arrive in time to do some good. I turned toward the sounds and picked up my pace a little.

A few seconds later, the snarls still hadn't abated when I felt a sudden...what, exactly? Nothing physical, that was for sure. It was clearly magic, but not anything I was accustomed to. It felt almost like my own magic, something tied to physical location, but not quite.

Almost simultaneously there was a brief, very intense light ahead of me, just visible through the trees. A moment later there was a muffled boom of thunder. The snarls stopped for a moment, then resumed, slightly louder.

I froze. Werewolves can't summon lightning. It's just not possible, not for their magic. I hadn't asked Alexander about lightning specifically, but it was hard to believe that an entity of chaos and destruction could manage a spell that complicated, which ruled out the demon. We knew Garrett probably had magic of his own, but he had to have been a shaman or a witch to manage the ritual he had. Neither of those types of magic is any closer to lightning than werewolves are.

Which meant that either we'd grossly misestimated Garrett...or there was another player in this game.

I resettled my shotgun and picked up the pace.

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It took me another minute or so to get to the scene of the fight, which was farther away than I had anticipated. Once I had a clear view of the combat I no longer had to guess what was going on. It was pretty plain.

Only one of the combatants was a werewolf. I recognized him, both from the parking lot and from the few pack events I'd attended. He was a cinnamon wolf, a little on the small side, about fifty years old named Michael. He'd chosen to forego armor in favor of maneuverability, a decision which had likely saved his life from the lightning strike.

He was fighting...something. It was a little taller than me, generally humanoid in shape but obviously not human. It had silvery skin—not pale, actually silvery, and shining in the moonlight. A pair of gossamer wings sprouted from its back, with a wingspan probably better than ten feet.

And it had sharply pointed ears.

Fae. Probably a wind faerie of some sort. I couldn't be sure, but it would fit with the wings, and the lightning, and it would explain the idea of location I'd felt in the magic. It, like me, drew power from the world around it on a basic level, although it was tied down to a single element. If I was guessing correctly.

Whatever it was, it was trying to kill one of the pack. That made it the enemy, and I advanced on it, suddenly regretting my decision to bring only charged silver bullets. Lead would have been more effective against a fae, never mind steel.

About twenty feet away, at the edge of the small clearing they were fighting in, I crossed a curtain of some kind of magic. It seemed to burn painfully as I stepped across it, a brief nonphysical agony, but it didn't try to stop me. Somehow I didn't think it would be so forgiving of leaving, which explained why Michael hadn't tried to run.

Once on the other side, I realized what its other purpose was as well. Concealment. Michael's snarls, which had sounded so quiet even from right outside the barrier, were as loud as I'd ever heard, interspersed with sharp yips and barking that should have been audible from a long ways off. He was obviously trying to make enough noise to summon help, but I was the only one who'd come. Which meant that not only had none of the werewolves heard, but the fae must have somehow cut off the pack bonds for communication as well.

The faerie must have used more than just the one lightning strike, too, because the air inside the bubble was so thick with magic that it was literally hard to breathe. I seemed to hear the rush of wind in my ears, and it was only with difficulty that I could realize that it wasn't actually there. I could smell magic tinted with ozone, as strongly as ever I had.

This was one badass faerie.

It had a perfect opportunity to kill me while I was staggered by the effect of crossing into the circle it had made, but it seemed not to care, instead focusing on Michael. It raised one hand, its face

alien and remote, and I began to feel the same pulling sensation as before. It was about to throw another lightning bolt at Michael, and I was afraid this was going to be one more than he could dodge.

I ran toward the fae, slipping one hand into a pocket as I did. "Stop," I screamed, noticing for the first time that the faerie was floating a good three inches above the ground, although its wings were perfectly still. If they were even large or solid enough to lift it; looking at them I doubted it.

It paused, as though surprised, and turned to face me, lowering its hand as it did. "Why should I?" it said, its voice buzzing in a way no human's could. Its eyes were huge, taking up more than half its face, and intensely green without white, iris, or pupil. Up close it looked like an insect, totally removed from anything that could be called human.

"He is no enemy of you or your people," I said, praying that it wouldn't notice my hand in my pocket.

It cocked its head sideways, the motion eerily inhuman. Human necks don't...bend like that. "He and his have killed two of my people," it said, the buzzing more intense now. "He is my enemy until he is dead." It turned back to the werewolf, obviously dismissing me.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I said with more defiance than I really felt. This fae was beyond my weight class in the same way that Mike Tyson is beyond that boxer you knew in high school.

I slipped the knife—an ordinary pocket knife, no silver inlay or anything, about three inches long—out of my pocket anyway. Because when push comes to shove, I never did know when to back down.

It glanced back at me, and though its mouth didn't move I knew that it was smiling, or whatever the equivalent is for insectile wind fae. "Do you think that toy will be enough to stop me?" it said, sounding—as far as I could judge—genuinely curious.

I swallowed. "No." And then I pulled my *other* hand out of my pocket, and tossed a handful of ball bearings at it. I'd brought them on a whim—they certainly wouldn't be much use against a werewolf—and was currently very grateful for my own inability to go without an unnecessary weapon. They can come in handy when your estimate of the situation turns out to be worthless.

I didn't throw them all that hard, and it didn't look like a particularly impressive attack. Only one of the little balls even hit the fae, and it bounced off harmlessly. The others passed through the air surrounding it.

Some of the fae—Val, for example—have no trouble with iron. Others find it irritating or even painful, the way werewolves react to silver. But there are also quite a few who find it a great deal more harmful than that, creatures that can't even stand to be in the same room with it.

This fae turned out to be one of those.

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The power the fae had been gathering dissipated in an instant, and it screeched in pain. The sound was painfully high, buzzing, and sounded like nothing I'd ever heard. At the same time its cushion of air collapsed, dropping it several inches to the ground. Its inhuman face held no expression at all, but I like to think it was shocked anyway.

I dashed across the intervening space. I had a very limited time before it recovered, and when it did I was probably dead. I'd only made it this far because I'd surprised it, and it hadn't really expected me to try anything.

I reached it before it recovered, though, and once I did I reached out and grabbed its head with my left hand. My right positioned the knife at its throat, just barely drawing blood. It was a pale, almost greenish color, smelled a little bit like lime juice, and burned painfully on my skin.

"Leave," I said, hoarse with exertion and emotion. "Your word that you'll leave, and dismiss your magic from this place, or I cut your throat right now."

It froze. Then, in the same buzzing and strangely emotionless voice, it said, "You have my word. I will leave this forest for twenty-four hours, and I will make no effort of magic in this forest in that time."

I tightened my grip. "And you drop all grievances against this werewolf."

"Yes. I swear."

"Good." I let it go and stepped back.

A moment later, both the fae and the magic in the air vanished. I waited a moment to be sure it was really gone, then folded the knife and dropped it back into a pocket. I was breathing hard, more from emotion than exertion. My hands hurt where the fae creature had bled on them, but the pain seemed to be fading and I couldn't detect any actual damage.

Michael came over and nudged my thigh, whining softly. "Hey," I said, rubbing his ears. "You been going around killing faeries or something?"

He whined in a slightly different way, one that meant no. I can't explain the difference, but to any werewolf—or anyone raised around them—it was unmistakable.

"Huh," I said, frowning. "That one seemed pretty sure about it. You do something to provoke her?"

No.

"All right," I said. "You better go find your Alpha."

He licked the blood off one of my fingers and whined again.

"No, I'll be fine," I said, waving that hand to prove it. "But somebody needs to tell Christopher what just happened, and you can find him a lot quicker than I can."

He left reluctantly, but he left. I wandered over to a tree and leaned against it, thinking. Somehow I didn't think that rushing out looking for another fight was a good idea.

That fae had been looking to kill Michael. That much was unmistakable, but at the same time it hadn't seemed like a targeted assassination attempt. The wind fae had been toying with him before I got there. Werewolf or not, there was no way either of us could have survived a serious fight with it. That made it seem more like the revenge mission it had claimed it was on.

But that made no sense. Not only had Michael denied involvement with any fae murders, it didn't fit with what I knew of him at all. I hadn't spent much time around him, but he seemed like a decent person. Kyra always spoke well of him, too, which was the highest praise he could really ask for.

I laughed grimly as I suddenly saw what was going on. Because there *had* been at least one murder of a fae that I knew about, that of Aiko's leprechaun friend. It was a safe bet, too, that there had been at least a couple more that the fae had concealed from the police.

They would have known it was a werewolf. Garrett had been sure to leave plenty of clues pointing in that direction. But would they have been able to tell which werewolf it was? I doubted it.

So what if Garrett had then, say, challenged them to a throwdown here, tonight? On the same night the pack was coming to kill him? Even if they knew that Christopher was as much a victim as they were, there was no guarantee that they would be able to distinguish his wolves.

To me, the things that had been done to Garrett's wolves were painfully obvious. I would be able to distinguish them on the basis of their magic alone. Christopher's wolves all knew each other, and could identify each other on the basis of the pack bonds as well.

The fae had neither of those advantages. They weren't even aware that there *were* any werewolves other than their enemies here.

The pieces of Garrett's plan fell suddenly into place. We hadn't outmaneuvered him; he'd been leading us here from the start. If I hadn't provoked him, he would still have arranged to drop that challenge somehow. The fae would have more than one person here, and they would be killing werewolves more or less at random. Christopher's minions would be confused, but pacifists don't make it very far as werewolves. Attack them and they fight back.

Werewolves would die. Fae would die. It gave Garrett a perfect opportunity to injure all of his most hated groups. Even better, it stood a decent chance of straining relations between the werewolves and the fae on a larger scale. Especially now that Dolph was involved. If Conn's son were killed by a fae, it might have very serious repercussions.

In fact...it occurred to me that the timing on this couldn't be coincidence. Fae and werewolves killing each other, and causing a massive diplomatic incident at the same time, all while Conn was trying to negotiate an alliance between them? There couldn't be many things Garrett wanted more.

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I was in no shape to do anything about it. One fae had practically killed me, and there must be quite a few in this forest. My chances of even surviving didn't look good.

I forced myself back into motion anyway, because I'd just realized one more thing. This plan was far too complicated to trust to chance. Garrett had to have his people here now, orchestrating the whole performance so that Dolph or Christopher wouldn't use his personal and political clout to stop the fighting.

They were here. And if I could kill them, I might still be able to salvage this.

I checked my pockets and slipped back into the night.

Chapter Eleven

I wasn't worried about individual fights anymore. I had bigger problems on my hands.

I heard the sounds of at least three battles as I walked through the woods, but I couldn't interfere. If the fae involved were anything like the last one, I stood next to no chance of surviving an actual fight with any of them. There was nothing I could do.

So I walked by, knowing that I was leaving my allies to die, and hating myself for it. But I couldn't let their sacrifice be for nothing, and if I made use of the time they'd bought me, I might still be able to do something about it.

It's moments like this that I hate what I am. But I didn't have time for self-pity either.

I climbed a small hill, and then scurried up into the branches of a tree for a better view. I made it high enough to have a good view of the valley. I couldn't see much—inhuman eyes or not, full moon or not, it was the middle of the night in a forest. I did see a few sparks of light. One, right near my position, flickered like a campfire. Another one, closer to the parking lot, flashed once with an odd green light like nothing I'd ever seen, and then went dark.

Two fights at least. Maybe as many as four, if I counted the other two I'd heard—I was assuming one of the ones I'd heard had been the fire fae I'd seen just now.

That wasn't what I'd come to see. But it was good to know.

I pulled my knife out again, holding on to the tree carefully with the other. I slipped my glove off and pricked the tip of one finger, drawing just a bead of blood. I didn't need phenomenal power for this; I needed precision.

A lot of cultures have stories about blood being used in magic. If you see, say, a pentagram surrounded by a whole bunch of runes, all drawn in blood, most people don't have to think to know what's going on. It's either a very kinky party or some kind of black magic ritual.

And it's total bullshit. Blood, although useful in some spells, is hardly intrinsically powerful.

Life, on the other hand, is pretty much the embodiment of power. It's where magic comes from, where my power originated. Blood is just a convenient means to get to that power. Your blood is tied to your life, metaphysically, so tightly that you can use one to get at the other.

It's not pretty. But it's strong. And fast. And when you're short on options, cutting yourself starts looking like a pretty nice choice—although I draw the line at using somebody else's. That road leads nowhere good.

Under any normal circumstances what I was doing would have been impossible. But the moon, and my power, were near their zenith, and I was augmenting that by drawing just a bit on my own life.

Besides that, predators were my specialty, and I'd had enough exposure to this one that I thought I might be able to work it out.

I closed my eyes to concentrate better, and gathered up power. Some of it came from myself, some from my life; I augmented it with magic drawn from my surroundings, which was my favorite source when I had a chance to use it. I shaped into my oldest, most natural spell.

I looked for the minds of the things closest to me. I looked for predators.

Immediately I felt them, a thousand minds all just waiting for me to come and say hello. My magic wanted to do what felt natural, go skipping among them to feel what they could. I resisted it, instead refining my spell, focusing on just the ones that interested me. I incorporated that sense of wolf-werewolf-unnatural into the structure of my working. Then, most difficult of all, I twisted the whole thing so that it was tied to my sense of sight rather than directly to my mind.

I opened my eyes, and smiled. It had worked. The spell had been designed to present them to me as sparks of blue light. I could see five total, just as John had said. One was to my left, the same place I'd seen the green light a moment ago. Another was across the valley and a little bit north of the first. The third was in the center, right off the path, a little north of me. Then one more on the opposite slope, directly across from me, and the last one further in than any of the others on the same side as I was.

They'd distributed themselves quite neatly. My immediate impulse was to say that Garrett would be the last one, the furthest from the parking lot, but I had no way to know for sure; I didn't have enough of a connection to demons to look for it specifically. Besides, they all had to die.

The first one I assumed was fighting the fae that had produced the green light. I couldn't be sure that the fae would kill it, but if it was anything like the one I'd seen it would make mincemeat of most any werewolf. The second was in an area that should be thick with werewolves from Christopher's pack. They would have to be enough to kill it.

That left three for me. I picked the one directly across from me, and went a-hunting.

It took me close to fifteen minutes to make it to the creature's position. I didn't bother casting the spell again—I wasn't possessed of infinite magic, and I was guessing that they'd be eager to kill me by now. Even if they weren't looking for revenge after what I'd done to John, I was pretty sure that I represented an inconvenience to them by now, maybe even a threat.

So instead, I just made it to the right area and began wandering about, making no effort at concealment. I wasn't concerned that I might be walking into an ambush.

In fact, I was counting on it.

I felt it coming long before it actually reached me. These altered werewolves weren't as painfully blatant as the demon-possessed one, but they were obvious enough to my senses that they didn't have a prayer of surprising me. I smiled coldly and opened one of the pouches on my belt.

The werewolf charged me from behind. I waited until it was within ten feet before spinning to face it, drawing my silver-inlaid knife as I did. It had obviously received some amount of briefing on what to expect from me; it had been pulling up even before I turned. It was careful to avoid making eye contact, too, removing the weapon I'd been using on them until now.

Here's another lesson in tactics for all you aspiring supervillains: never, ever assume that your enemy is stupider than you are. You might be right, sure—heroes tend to be a little bit stupid, so you've got pretty odds—but the cost if you're not is likely to be severe.

For example, I was smart enough to recognize that Garrett would likely have coached his pets about what not to do. Sure, I would have loved to have been able to simply catch this werewolf's eye and force the change, but I hadn't been expecting that I would get to.

Ten feet is not far enough away to keep a prepared individual from hurting you. It would have done better to just keep charging and hope to bowl me over before I could cast a spell.

I slipped one hand down into the pouch I'd just opened and dug out a handful of powder. Through the glove, the silver content wasn't high enough to do more than make me itch.

The werewolf did not have the same reaction when I took a pair of long steps forward and threw the powder in its face.

It screamed, a horrid inhuman sound, and clawed at its own face in agony. I'd just gotten charged silver in its eyes and nose, and there isn't much you can do to a werewolf that hurts it worse than that. It inflicted horrific damage its own face trying desperately to get the silver off, and failing miserably. It couldn't concentrate through the pain long enough to either attack me or initiate the change so that it would have fingers to work with

I had wanted to kill at least one of them without attracting attention. That plan was shot to hell now, so I didn't bother trying to keep it quiet. I snapped the pouch closed and lifted the shotgun to my shoulder.

"I'm sorry it came to this," I said quietly, sadly. "It isn't your fault that you're broken. But I only know one way to fix you."

The brown werewolf froze and then looked up at me. I saw, now, that it was a female, which changed exactly nothing. She looked me in the eye, as she had remembered not to do before. It was too late for her to win this anyway, and I could see resignation in her eyes as she realized this. She paused a moment, and then nodded, once.

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It was quick. That much, at least, I could do. A werewolf can survive a lot of things, but a ten-gauge shotgun loaded with charged silver from five feet away isn't one of them.

I bowed my head. "Rest in peace. Wherever you are now, I hope it's a better place than this one." I felt like I should say something more, but I had no idea what it should be. I didn't know what religious ceremony she would have preferred. Hell, I didn't even know her name.

So instead I stood there for a long moment with my head bowed, and then turned away to go kill another of them.

Another quick repetition of my seeking-spell showed little change. The werewolf that had been fighting the fae didn't show up at all. Presumably it had lost the fight, and the faerie had finally gotten tired of playing games and killed it outright. The others were in much the same positions they had been before.

Next up was the one in the center of the valley. The simplest way to get there would be to go back down to the path and follow it up. On the other hand, they would almost certainly see me coming.

Another hollow boom of thunder sounded behind me, making up my mind for me. Screw stealth. I was in a hurry, and they could watch me coming the whole damn way if it would get me there faster.

I had to go fairly slowly down the hill, but once on the path I made it up by running. I was out of breath pretty soon, but I pricked my finger again and drew power from the blood to feed the wolf, keeping my body strong and healthy.

That's why blood magic is dangerous, see. Not the blood loss—although, technically, I suppose if you used it often enough you might get anemic. Not the temptation to horrible deeds, either, although I do live with the knowledge that I could be vastly more powerful by stealing life from others.

No, the real danger is that it takes away your limits. That's the whole point, really; it lets you go beyond the limitations on what you can normally do. Sounds good, but sometimes limits exist for a reason, and using blood magic to circumvent them is always a risky proposition. It's easy to lose track of just how much power you're using, especially for someone like me who can use it to keep themselves from feeling the effects of exhaustion, and the supply isn't infinite. Use too much, and...

Well. You're drawing on your own life force for power. You can do the math.

Right now I didn't give a damn for the price. I just knew I needed to end this.

I didn't have to wonder where the werewolf was this time. He was lying across the path directly in front of me, apparently just waiting for someone to come along. In fact, he had obviously heard me coming; he was looking straight at me as I approached hesitantly.

Unlike the last one, he also seemed to have no problem looking me in the eye, even once I was within what they knew to be the range of my abilities. I hesitated briefly, wondering if this was some kind of trick or something, then shrugged and worked the same magic I had on John. I didn't have time to try and play dime-store psychologist to a loopy werewolf.

It worked like a charm. He started changing immediately, showing even less resistance than John had. I stepped forward, drawing my knife as I moved. I was planning on killing him before he made it to human, but even in the midst of the change he managed to hold up one almost-hand and glare at me with eyes slowly shifting from yellow to blue.

Even in his helpless condition, the strength in those eyes was impressive. I considered going ahead and killing him anyway, then shrugged again and settled down to wait. This encounter was weird enough that I thought it might be worthwhile to see what he had to say.

Besides. He would be in human form, and I still had a shotgun. I could kill him after the change as easily as during it.

He was fast. Very fast. It didn't take him five minutes to go from wolf to completely human. I approached cautiously as he lay, panting with effort, on the ground. "Hey," I said as casually as I could manage. "Shouldn't you be trying to kill me?"

He laughed, a strained and painful sound. "Oh, but I am. It's just that right now I can't." His voice was weak, and he was still panting; changing that fast had clearly cost him something.

I smiled, realization dawning. "Garrett ordered you not to change, didn't he? That's why you were waiting for me."

He smiled back at me. "Garrett ordered me to watch the path, and I did. He ordered me not to change, and I didn't." His smile faded. "He ordered me to kill you, and if you take too long here I will have to do that too."

I crouched down, making sure I had my gun ready. I wasn't going to disregard that claim. "You don't agree with Garrett, do you? That's what this is about. You can't actually break his orders, but so long as you follow the letter you can circumvent them."

He nodded jerkily. "Yes, that's exactly right." His eyes, though dull with pain, gleamed. "But he didn't order me not to talk. He thought he didn't have to, since I would be trapped as a wolf."

I frowned. I had to make this count. "Is he further down this path?"

The werewolf nodded. "Yes. He is waiting for someone to come and kill him."

"Wait a second, he wants to die? Why?"

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He laughed. "Because if he dies, there is no proof. He dies, everyone who knew what has happened dies here as well. No one can prove that it was a rogue group of werewolves who did this. If any of my compatriots survive this fight, they will kill themselves."

"Thus sparking war between Conn and the fae," I said slowly. "Because they'll think he sanctioned the murders for some reason. Especially because both Christopher and Dolph are here tonight. The fae won't know they came to stop you."

He nodded again. "Exactly."

It was an incredibly grandiose plan. I couldn't even imagine how hard he must have worked to ensure that everyone had exactly the right amount of information about what was happening. Granted it was insane and murderous, but still. You had to respect that kind of ambition.

I couldn't think of anything else I needed to know, though. So instead I simply looked at the werewolf lying in the path and said, "Why were you helping him, then? It's clear you don't agree with what he's doing here."

He shrugged. "I didn't know, at first, what he was doing. You have to realize, when he started there wasn't this...hate in him. The hate, the murders, they all came later." He sighed. "At first it was just the wolves. The others, they're young. They came to him because he promised that he could give them control. Me, I'm an old wolf. I came for the same reason I became a werewolf in the first place. I'd rather be a wolf than a man. It wasn't until later I realized what a perversion I'd become, and by then there was nothing I could do about it. Garrett, he...you can't not do what he tells you to, you know? I don't understand it. I'm a dominant wolf. Not even the Khan could make me do something I didn't want to. But Garrett can."

"I understand," I said quietly, thinking of demons and magic and all the ways you can pervert a good thing.

He fixed that disturbingly intense gaze on me again. "I've gone too far for saving," he said, without a trace of anger or regret. "And I can't let you past. Garrett left no room for me on that. If you don't have any more questions, best you kill me now and keep going."

"Just one," I said. "What's your name?"

He smiled. "It's been a long time since somebody called me by my real name. But why not? I might as well die with it. A long time ago, they called me Erik."

"It's been an honor, Erik," I said quietly, stepping closer and readying my knife. I crouched beside him, resting one hand on his brow. "You ready?"

He hesitated. "Please don't...don't tell anybody? My Alpha, my family, they all think I died a long time ago. It's...better, that they think so. You won't tell them I did this? That I was a part of this?"

"No. I give you my word."

He smiled, still looking straight into my eyes. His were completely blue, now. "I'm ready, then. Luck."

I reached down and gently sliced his throat open.

It didn't take him long to die. He never closed his eyes, or looked away from my face. Likewise I didn't look away, or pull my hand off of his forehead until I was sure that he was dead.

Nobody should die alone. It was the least I could do for an old werewolf who, whatever he might have become near the end, had died a good man.

Then I stood up and cleaned my knife, my motions mechanical. I was tired, so tired. I'd used too much magic, and I'd been drawing too hard on blood to make up the difference. I wanted to rest. God, I wanted to rest so much.

I forced myself forward anyway, moving on down the path. I wasn't running now; I couldn't seem to muster the energy required.

So instead I walked away, leaving Erik's body lying in the dirt. I hadn't felt so empty since Catherine died. I'd seen too much death.

But there was one left, one werewolf who had gone so far that maybe he wasn't a person at all anymore. Maybe, after I killed him, I could finally rest.

Or, you know. I'd be dead. There wasn't a lot of in-between there. Actually, as exhausted as I felt, dead was looking more likely than not.

On the bright side, I'd be resting either way.

Chapter Twelve

It felt like a very long walk.

I have no idea how long it took me. By that point I had pretty much lost track of time completely. I didn't bother with casting another seeking spell, or even going toward where it had told me Garrett would be. I felt confident that he would be looking for me.

As it turned out, I was entirely correct. He made no effort at concealment. He knew that I would feel him coming long before he was in range, or else maybe he just didn't care anymore. After all, his grand scheme had already reached fruition; at this point there was nothing left to do but die.

Of course, he would be trying to make sure I died first.

Anyway, when he came he didn't try and hide it. He just strolled right down the path toward me, a massive black wolf that stank of demon. I thought he'd actually grown since the last time I'd seen him; his shoulder had to come halfway up my ribcage.

He sat down thirty feet away and stared at me, his eyes glowing an unearthly orange. That was new. He, like Erik, met my eye without fear. Unlike Erik, I knew exactly why he was doing it; it was a challenge, a statement of raw bravado. He was offering me the advantage, out of sheer confidence that it wouldn't matter.

I didn't take the opportunity. I was pretty sure he was right. I couldn't hope to take him down the same way I had before.

Instead, I kept walking forward at a steady pace. When there were twenty feet left between us, he stood up, growling mockingly. I casually flipped open my big belt pouch as I walked. At fifteen feet he charged, eerily silent now. He covered the distance unbelievably fast, faster than anything should be able to move.

Fortunately, I'd been waiting for exactly that move. I dove out of the way, simultaneously pulling the water balloon out of the pouch and throwing it.

I'd mistimed it slightly, and most of the water splashed off of him. Enough connected, though, to bring him to a stop, looking very confused about what had just hurt him.

I'd had a friend bless the water the day before. Faith hurts demons, even when delivered by a water balloon.

I rolled to my feet, having traded places with Garrett, and immediately pulled the second water balloon out of my pouch and hurled it at his face. He was standing still, and this one hit square, getting holy water all over his face. It must have hurt almost as badly as the handful of silver dust I'd thrown in the female werewolf's face earlier.

Unlike her, he didn't even pause. He flung himself directly at me, unnatural strength propelling his bulk across the ten feet between us without touching the ground. The move caught me off-guard, and I had to fall backward to avoid it. His rear claws passed within inches of my face.

I scrambled to my feet and spun to face him, leaving my last water balloon lying in the dirt. Garrett had too much momentum from his leap to stop on a dime, and was still recovering. I managed to raise my shotgun to a reasonably good position and get a shot off as he turned to face me.

It wasn't an accurate shot. Most of the silver probably missed him completely. At least a little of it hit, though, clipping his hind legs. He didn't even appear to notice. He seemed to have learned his lesson; rather than charging he moved forward at a slow stalk. I backed up, aiming and firing again.

He blurred sideways, probably literally faster than a bullet. Rather than his face, the buckshot hit him in the side.

It did hit him, though; I could smell the blood. He'd just taken a direct hit from a ten-gauge shotgun loaded with charged silver, and it didn't even slow him down. "Immunity to pain" was starting to sound like a pretty weak description of this thing. It was like the Terminator on steroids.

I let the shotgun fall back against my chest—at this point it was pretty clear that a headshot was the only thing that had a chance of killing him quickly, and there was no way he was going to let me get one. Instead, I slipped out the heavy vial that was in the last section of my pouch, the secret weapon that made me think I had a prayer of winning this.

It was made of fairly thick glass, thin enough to break but sturdy enough that it hadn't done so yet. Or, hell, maybe Alexander arranged matters so that it wouldn't break until I wanted it to or something. I had no idea what the limits of a wizard's powers were.

In the near-dark, it didn't look remarkable, a small glass bottle filled with a clear liquid indistinguishable from water. In Alexander's lab, well, that was a different story. There, I had been able to see that it had a sheen to it like an oil slick, and when I held it up to the light it had refracted light like a prism.

I threw it hard at Garrett's chest. As I'd expected, he didn't bother dodging. The glass shattered spilling its viscous contents across his fur. I kept backing away, waiting for the potion to take effect.

At first I didn't think it was going to. He kept coming, moving a little faster now, sure that he had me on the ropes—which he did. Then his steps got to be a little uneven. He shook his head once, again.

My heart sank. It was working, all right. Just not fast enough. I would be dead by the time it had done enough to Garrett. Alexander had warned me this might happen, but I hadn't really believed it until that moment.

I kept moving on autopilot, backing away from him and pulling my next trick out of another pocket. It was a simple web made of a couple strands of prayer beads, hung with several pieces of

blessed jewelry from my tub. I threw it forward, catching Garrett across the face. One of the strands looped around his ear, and several more crisscrossed his face. He shook it off casually, not breaking stride.

And then I stumbled. It was inevitable, walking backward downhill on uneven ground. Actually, I was a little surprised it had taken this long. It wasn't a big thing; my left foot traveled a fraction of an inch further than I had anticipated. I recovered my balance in less than a second.

Garrett had been waiting. It was enough.

He went in an instant from his slow prow forward to another blindingly swift charge. His head caught me in the middle of the chest and flicked me up and back with as little effort as it took to throw a piece of rice across the room, sending me flying through the air. I managed to land fairly well, but it was still disorienting. I felt a flash of pain from one ankle, which actually helped me focus again, but it was already too late.

By the time I figured out what had just happened, a black werewolf was staring down at me from less than six inches away with glowing orange eyes. Slaver literally dripped from its open jaws onto my throat, disgusting and terrifying at the same time. Maybe, if I could have drawn my knife, I could have killed it. Even if I could somehow strike Garrett before even his unnatural speed got him out of the way, though, there was no way I could get at my knife.

Well. I supposed I would be settling back on my first tactic after all.

I think he actually wanted me to, because he could most certainly have killed me before I recovered my wits otherwise. I won't ever know what his motivations were—curiosity? arrogance? a desire for death?

Whatever the cause, he made no effort to stop me from meeting those mad orange eyes and working the same magic I had before.

Disconnection. A sensation of rushing wind without movement. And then...

Remember all that stuff I said about how insane Garrett's mind was? Forget it. Compared to its current state, that was stable. *Now* it was insane.

It still felt like a battleground. Before, though, it had at least had discrete sides. Now those were fragmenting. Both the human and wolf components of the original werewolf were breaking down, pieces of each conflicting with each other. The human still held dominance, but now it seemed to be fighting itself as well as everything else. Of the real wolf, the only clean presence in that mire, I could find no sign.

The demon, for what it's worth, felt exactly the same.

I didn't bother trying to fight. I'd seen the futility of that last time, and the situation had only gotten worse since then. Besides which, the only way I'd won the first time around was with the last-minute intervention of the wolf, which clearly wasn't on the agenda today.

Instead I went for the suicide mission which I had, in some sense, been building up to this whole fight.

Here's the thing. All along, Garrett had controlled the demon rigidly. The way he had bound it to himself, like the arrangement he had made between himself, his wolf, and the wolf he had murdered, had been designed to put him in the dominant position. Even now that his mind was starting to collapse, it was under control thanks to the way it had been bound.

But his control was obviously weakening now. What's more, the more he drew on it, the more influence it gained. I'd inflicted enough pain with the holy water alone to send even most werewolves running. Add in the silver wounds, the charges and leaps and dodges, and...well. He'd been calling on the demon's power a whole lot tonight.

Then I hit it with Alexander's potion. I wasn't a wizard, nor even a particularly well-educated druid, so I didn't know the details of how it worked. But the idea was that it would release a coordinated spike of chaotic energy that would degrade the ordered structure of the shamanic magic that governed how the possession worked.

So, long story short, the walls holding the demon in place were very weak already. I threw myself at them, expending magic recklessly in an effort to rip them down. Garrett had obviously been unprepared for that tactic, and in his current state it took him a while to organize a response. Eventually he managed it, though, and began to metaphysically tear into me from behind. I ignored his efforts, focusing on the boundaries around the demon until eventually—

Finally—

They fell.

The demon, which was now both the most powerful and the most coherent entity left, roared out of its enclosure with a howl of glee that, had I actually possessed a body at the time, would have given me the worst goosebumps of my life.

I had been expecting it to eradicate me, and Garrett as well, and then take the body on a rampage. The most I'd been hoping for was that it would give the fae some small reason to believe what Conn would try and tell them.

Fortunately for everyone concerned, I'd underestimated the extent of the demon's hatred for the one who had bound and constrained it for so long. It swept over Garrett with as little concern as the ocean has for the grains of sand on the beach, smashing the pieces of his fragmented personality together into a single misshapen whole, man and wolf together.

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It held him—them?—like that for a long moment, casually blocking every attempt they made to break free. I sensed its regard on me, and only my sheer and absolute exhaustion kept me from trying to run away from it.

We know your kind where I come from, it whispered into my mind. Unlike pretty much every other mental communication I'd ever heard, it took the form of a distinct voice. A voice reminiscent of snakes gliding over stone, true, but nevertheless a voice. *Thanks. Tell you what, I owe you one. When you need a favor, just call.* There was a sense of laughter, all the more horrific for the genuine amusement it conveyed. *I'll hear you. Goodbye, for now.*

Then, without doing anything to me at all, it vanished, taking Garrett with it.

I floated, exhausted, in that quiet not-space where Garrett used to be for what felt like a very long time, except that time also had only a very loose relationship to the state I was in. I might have floated like that until my physical body died if it weren't for the last piece of the mind I was inhabiting.

The wolf did not use words, unlike the demon. It's simplest to express the communication between us in them, though, so here goes:

Wolf: What happened? Did the evil thing go away?

Me: Yes. I couldn't feel you here earlier.

Wolf: I hid. Hid for...very long time. (pause) What will happen to me now?

Me: I don't know. I don't think there's anything I can do to keep you alive. (hesitation) I think you might have died a long time ago.

Wolf: ...Yes. I remember. (memory of being tied down; great pain, then darkness. The next thing it knew was its captivity here) Will that happen to me again?

Me: I don't know. I've never died.

Wolf: I'm afraid. I don't want to die again.

Me: I know, but we all have to die someday.

Wolf: ...Yes.

Me: Goodbye then.

Okay, yeah, that sucks, but you get the idea. I wanted to stay, offer any pathetic comfort I could to the poor, doomed wolf. But I could feel the not-space we were occupying already beginning to collapse around us, its structural integrity decaying without the presence of the mind that had created

it, and knew instinctively that if I were still here when it faded completely I would be as dead as Garrett was.

I stretched my mind back toward my body, shocked at how hard it was, and eventually managed to get back where I belonged. Then, suddenly, I realized what I could do.

It was insane, and not in that oh-that-was-awesome way. It was stupid. It was a bizarre trick that should have been impossible, especially because I was doing it spur of the moment without any practice.

But, somehow, miraculously, I made it work. I found the last fading connection between my mind and the not-place where Garrett's used to be. I stretched out with the last of my power and held it open. It felt like I was being ripped apart. But I held, and beckoned.

And, just before my strength gave out, the wolf slipped past me. Thanks to the things Garrett had done to it, it was more a creature of mind than body, and thus this mode of travel was as natural to it as walking now that it was no longer bound to him.

I released the connection with a sort of exhausted, agonized relief. I could feel, in the instant between my releasing it and it fading completely, when the not-place that had been Garrett's mind collapsed. Without a connection to my mind it was bereft of any support, and it imploded faster than thought.

So died Garrett White, a man who became something both more and less than that. His reach exceeded his grasp, and too late he realized the price that the power he sought would exact. At the very end of his life he was nothing more than another victim, but for all of that I can't find it in myself to regret the fate that he found.

Chance made him a werewolf, but it was by his own choice that he became a monster.

When I came to, we were lying on our back on the ground. Garret's body, unmarked but nevertheless very dead, was lying on top of us. We shoved it off, the effort taking all our strength, and managed to climb to our unsteady feet.

We had not been as lucky this time as the first time I went toe-to-toe with the possessed werewolf. He hadn't torn our throat out, but at some point he had apparently raked our body with his claws. The leather jacket had kept him from ripping our guts out, but we had a couple of long gashes on our chest and legs, deep and bloody. We had apparently sprained or broken an ankle in the fall as well—for the moment it didn't matter at all which—because we couldn't put any weight on our left foot at all.

I paused. Then, focusing through the pain, I thought hard, *You're welcome here, but this is my mind. We are not going to become the same screwed-up thing Garrett did.* The wolf was momentarily confused, then there was a flash of understanding and it receded somewhat.

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I—what a lovely pronoun, I— twisted—painfully—and pulled out the last thing I would need from beneath the jacket: a flare gun, into which I loaded the green flare I was carrying. I wasn't sure if there was anybody left alive who would recognize the prearranged signal for Garrett's death, but I had to do something. My fingers were shaking so hard it was a struggle to perform even this simple action. Eventually I managed it, and then fired the flare straight up.

I didn't stop to watch it as I hobbled over to the nearest tree and collapsed against it. Logically, I knew that if I stayed here in my current state I would die.

Practically, I knew that there was absolutely no way I could manage to walk out. I was utterly drained, physically, magically, and emotionally, and if I started back toward the parking lot I knew I would collapse long before I got there. My best chance for survival consisted of staying here, where they would hopefully know to look thanks to the flare. Even if I were found by an enemy, it would be no worse than trying to walk out.

Fortunately this coincided with my powerful urge to just collapse. I'd been pushing so hard for so long, it felt incredibly good to rest my legs, even with all the injuries I'd sustained.

Our last thought before my eyes slipped closed was that, really, the forest smelled very nice at night.

I was unconscious for a lot of what happened after that, so this is the best reconstruction I can make from what I heard in the aftermath.

At some point Dolph, who was every bit as capable of logic as me, worked through Garrett's plan and changed back to human form. The fae and the pack were both enraged by that point, but he was still Conn's son. He was dominant enough to back down every werewolf in the pack, including Christopher, and he had been active in supernatural political circles to one extent or another for a couple of centuries. Enough of the fae recognized him that he managed, somehow, to convince them that the pack weren't their enemies.

He was helped in that endeavor by, of all people, the same wind fae that I had threatened to kill and driven off. She—it turned out that strange insectile face was female—had been very confused by my actions. Incapable of continuing to fight anyway, she had gone to confer with the pack, not realizing that the Alpha was in the same place she'd just left. When she found that most of them were out in the forest hunting the same target the fae were, it didn't take her long to put two and two together.

Getting a binding oath from a fae is in many ways similar to the problem Garrett had commanding Erik. If they give their word they *will* keep it, guaranteed. However, they're only required to obey the letter of their oaths. That had turned out to be a very lucky thing this time, because nothing she'd sworn to me prevented her from sending messengers back to the scene of the combat.

Apparently, rather than getting pissed at me for assaulting and binding her, she was amused at my tenacity, impressed by my willingness to risk my life for a stranger, and grateful for my helping her see what was going on. That was good news for me, because Val told me later that her voice carried serious weight among the fae. Like, Twilight Court level weight.

Which means that these days I'm owed a favor by both a powerful demon and what I am coming to believe is in fact a Twilight Prince. I'm not quite sure which one is more trouble, but I know it'll be dark days if I'm ever desperate enough to call either of those markers in. One of the lessons I learned growing up was that the only thing worse than doing a favor for a fae is accepting one, and I'm pretty sure that goes double for demons.

Unfortunately, it took quite a while to make peace between the two groups. Before Dolph and the Twilight Prince managed it, nine werewolves and two of the fae had died. Michael was one of them, ambushed by another fae before he ever made it to Christopher.

Logically, I knew that my efforts had a very important influence on the Twilight Prince, and had been integral in preventing more deaths. Emotionally, well, emotions are not noted for their logic. I felt like a failure.

Kyra, thankfully, didn't get in a fight with a fae at all. She had been the first one to find one of Garrett's wolves, the one that I never encountered at all. She'd dislocated a shoulder and broken her forearm in the fight, and her chances of survival had looked pretty grim until Aiko showed up with another member of Christopher's pack and drove her attacker off. After that, well, she was in no condition to fight. She changed to human—moving with a damaged arm is easier than with a crippled foreleg—and hightailed it back to the car without sustaining any more injuries.

Aiko and her backup pursued Garrett's wolf. The werewolf with her, whose name I will probably never know, was attacked and killed by another of the fae. Aiko, as a nonwerewolf, had apparently been ignored by the fae much the same as I was, and managed to catch her target.

I don't know how the fight went. But I do know that Aiko came back uninjured, and the werewolf didn't come back at all.

Anyway, not too long after the fighting ended—and after all the participants managed to understand that the fighting had ended, which took considerably longer—Dolph saw the green flare. He insisted on going to check it out personally. Luckily Garrett's body was lying in the path, impossible to miss; otherwise I think Dolph would have run right by me, and I was too unconscious to attract his attention.

He says that if I were anything other than what I am, I probably would have been dead before he got there. I'd lost a lot of blood, and between that and how hard I'd been pushing myself I was in bad shape. He gave me rudimentary first aid at the scene, and then carried me three-quarters of a mile back to the lot.

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Apparently I was important in breaking off the fight then, too. Both some of the more outspoken fae and a sizable majority of the werewolves were in favor of making common cause against their enemy. Although the idea of fae and werewolves tag teaming Garrett's pack is admittedly a pretty awesome concept for an action movie, I was just as glad that Dolph could convince them that with Garrett and at least three of his abominations dead, it was more important to get out of there and tend the injured. I can see how having my bleeding, unconscious body on hand would help make that point.

My partially-werewolf nature kept me alive long enough to reach the hospital, and my something-else nature kept me from dying of hypothermia or frostbite. My reserves were too low to actually mend the damage, though, and I spent almost a week in the hospital hooked up to an IV before I woke up.

I didn't object too hard to that. As far as I was concerned, it was a small price to pay.

My injuries were fairly substantial. I had two heavy gouges to the chest, four and six inches long respectively and both about an inch deep, and another slash across my right thigh four inches long and two inches deep that missed my femoral artery by a fraction of an inch. My pouch of silver dust had apparently spilled all over my left hand when I passed out, and by the time Dolph found me it had inflicted a moderately severe burn. It didn't help that he couldn't really clean it off until we got back to Aiko, who was the only one aside from the fae who could touch silver with enough physical control to clean it without injuring my burned skin further. My left ankle turned out to be broken, as did at least three or four ribs from where Garrett hit me. I'd slammed my head into the ground when I landed—which explained the disorientation I'd experienced—and the doctors were blaming my unconsciousness on a severe concussion.

Personally, I was pretty sure that it had more to do with being magically overdrawn, but I wasn't arguing. So long as the docs had something to blame that wouldn't point them at werewolves I was perfectly happy with the situation.

That's one of the many reasons I don't use blood magic unless I'm absolutely desperate. It's easy to think that, just because you can use it to fuel magic the same as your own power, it works the same way. It doesn't. When you draw on that source, you're pulling power from the same well of energy that keeps you alive.

I hadn't taken enough power out of it to outright kill myself, but I'd still drained it by a dangerous amount—not that there's really a safe amount to take. It's generally agreed that weakening your own life force by any amount is a Bad Idea. Small amounts, it's true, mostly have minor effects. You might have a headache for a while, or feel exceptionally lethargic. Take more and worse things happen. A coma like the one I'd been in was very close to the point at which organs start shutting down.

The other key difference is that the power blood magic lets you tap doesn't replenish itself the same way a person's magic does. When I'd fought Garrett the first time, I'd only used my personal power, and although I'd been exhausted, I was completely recovered within a couple of days.

Your life force, on the other hand, takes a long time to recover from heavy use. In my case, for example, it took a week to replenish enough to even support consciousness. It was over a month before I was back at full strength.

Apparently—although I only found out about it after the fact—there was initially some suspicion over my injuries. Probably because several of them looked like the recent murders, and I seriously doubt that even Dolph could come up with a sane explanation for them.

I would have expected Christopher to take care of that, but he never needed to. Shortly before I woke up the problem went away, with no explanation.

I was pretty sure I knew what had happened, but I didn't explain it to anyone. It was none of their business anyway.

The day after I woke up Enrico came to visit in the hospital. He didn't make any mention of having pulled strings to get the police to stop asking questions. We had the socially acceptable conversation for any person in those conditions—you know, the old "How do you feel?", "Are you getting better?", "How the hell are you not dead yet?", that sort of thing. Then, very quietly, he said, "It was a werewolf, wasn't it?"

I nodded slightly, glancing at the open door.

Enrico took the hint and closed it. "You haven't told anyone?" I asked nervously.

He shook his head. "I don't know about this, though, Winter. If they're killing people...I can't stand by and let that happen, you know?"

My lips twitched in an anemic smile. "Obviously I can't either, eh?" I said, gesturing vaguely at my surroundings. "I wouldn't think about it like that, though. The werewolf who did this isn't going to be killing any more people ever again. I can promise you that. And it was other werewolves who made sure of it." I paused. "Look, Enrico...what he did? It's nothing a human couldn't do, is it? I mean, sure, he ripped people to pieces instead of just shooting them, but that doesn't change how dead they get. And I *know* there are humans who have murdered more people than he did."

Enrico pursed his lips. "True. And you're sure the other werewolves wouldn't kill somebody?"

"Not unless he needed killed. Like this crazy son of a bitch did." I shivered slightly, and it wasn't as much of an act as I would have liked; it would be a long time before I forgot the feeling of that demon-infested mind.

He nodded once, decisively. "I can live with that." He stood up and walked to the door. "I'll see you around, Winter. Hope you're feeling better."

And that was the end of it. I was released from the hospital a day or two later, having made a follow-up appointment I already knew I wasn't going to be keeping. My injuries went down as just one

more suspicious note in a file that already had plenty. I made the tabloids for a day or two before they moved on to juicier targets, and I was forgotten as fast as they could print the new headlines.

It was, at least for the moment, over.

In one of the few cases of poetic irony I could really appreciate, Garrett's efforts to undermine werewolf-fae relations turned out to have exactly the opposite effect. Conn, long since an M.D. with a focus on spin, used the near-disaster at his meeting with the Twilight as an example of why a good relationship and open communication between the Twilight Court and the Pack were important.

With that as a backdrop, the measure passed unanimously. It was decided that the werewolves would reveal themselves first, with Conn having total discretion as to when that happened so long as it was within a year. He's still waiting for a good opportunity to go forward with it. I'm enjoying the interval of relative peace; once he does I'm expecting a lot of excitement for a while.

And, as always in the aftermath of a crisis, life goes on. Between chasing Garrett and my hospital stay I'd missed most of a month of work. Without asking me—because he knew what my probable response would be—Dolph arranged for Conn's pack to pay for both my medical bills and the missed work.

I wanted to refuse, but the truth is I really needed the money. And, in some ways, I suppose he did owe me. So I grumbled a bit and took the cash.

I'd spent a long time evaluating my life, both before and after the fight with Garrett. And, without much hesitation, I'd decided it was time for things to change.

I'd spent way too long hating myself. Hell, I'd spent too long hating *life*. It was one thing to recognize that some of the things I'd done weren't the right things to do. But it was time to move on. Not just from Catherine—although that was a big part of it—but also from my own status as an outsider. I was sick of refusing any social contact just because I couldn't be a werewolf.

I'll never be human. I'm not going to pretend I'm suddenly okay with that. The truth is that some part of me will always wish that things were different. But these days I've stopped paying so much attention to it. I think maybe it's time to accept what I am rather than keep fighting it. It took me years to realize, but the truth is that what you are is what you are. You can kick and scream all you want, but you can't change it. Or, alternatively, you can accept that this is the hand you get and make the best of it. Nobody can tell you which you should do.

But I know the choice I made, and I believe it was the wrong one.

I've been spending a lot more time with my friends. Well, trying to at any rate. The habits of a lifetime aren't easy to shake, and the honest truth is that I never did have any social skills to speak of. But I've been making an effort, and they seem willing to tolerate it no matter how badly I screw up.

Kyra, of course, is high on the list. I saw a lot of her in the hospital. Her own injuries weren't nearly severe enough to require a stay there, not for a werewolf, but broken bones heal slower than flesh wounds and a waitress with a broken arm is pretty useless. She had plenty of time to visit me. Thanks to the deaths in the fight, she's currently the second most dominant wolf in the pack—the first female to ever hold that position as far as I know. Conn initially thought he should send someone out to replace her, but I talked him out of it.

As far as I'm concerned, she'd make a better Alpha than most. And, hell, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want that to happen a little just so I could see the look on Conn's face.

Aiko and I have also been getting along surprisingly well, considering that we only met due to a macabre coincidence related to her friend's death. Actually, considering our respectively bizarre psychologies, maybe it wasn't that surprising after all. I'm still not quite sure how to take her mood swings and eccentricities, but then I don't exactly have good social skills myself.

Anna and Enrico still don't know a lot about what's going on. In fact, as far as I could tell Enrico had kept his word not to tell anyone about the werewolves, including his sister. That makes things harder, but I'm looking forward to the day pretty soon when the things I'm hiding from them are public knowledge. Until then I make do with lying to my friends, the way I have most of my life. The sad part is that it really does get easier with practice.

And that's that. Before I'd even woken up Dolph flew back to North Dakota. He has his work cut out for him preparing the world for werewolves. I have no doubt that he had plenty of situations just as bad as Garrett waiting for him. Honestly, stuff like that isn't as uncommon as we could wish; this one just happened to affect me.

It didn't take a very long time for my world to change completely. Before this started I had pretty much left my heritage behind. Now, well, some of my best friends are a werewolf and a kitsune. I have Conn's number saved to my phone, and Dolph's as well. The day after Dolph left I called Edward to apologize for treating him so badly the past decade or so. He took it pretty well, by which I mean that he made it to the second, pathetically awkward sentence of my apology before he collapsed in laughter.

I paid off my debt to Alexander, as did Dolph. Since then I've started taking lessons from the wizard. He's not the easiest teacher in the world, but he knows his stuff, and I don't. It's only an hour or two a week, but I'm still learning quite a bit. And, let's be honest here, that's probably the most either of us could stand of the other.

The events of that last, hectic night suggest that I have the potential to be a lot more badass than I've ever given myself credit for. I'm starting to think maybe it's worth the effort to develop that potential. Not that I'm planning on getting into brawls with demonic werewolves again. As far as I was concerned, one round of *that* was enough for a lifetime.

Epilogue

For me the end of the story didn't come until about a week after I got out of the hospital.

Are you sure this is what you want? I thought, making sure to form the question distinctly.

Very, was the firm response. *I like you, but this body is all wrong.*

It had taken the wolf remarkably little time to learn to form thoughts into words, something I had never known another animal to do. But then, after his experiences, he was hardly an animal as I understood the term. After spending months on end living, bodiless, inside the mind of an insane werewolf, and then with a demon as well, I had no idea quite what it was that he'd become.

On the other hand, he didn't seem to feel a need to go on random killing sprees, so I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt while we both figured it out.

I'd spent the last week researching and figuring out what to do about him, and I was pretty sure I had the answer. It had been surprisingly easy to find a Siberian husky of an appropriate age.

Which was how I'd found myself here now, staring down at a litter of puppies. There were only three of them, curled up in various states of sleep next to their mother, a lovely silvery animal. *Which one?* I asked.

That one, came the firm answer, and he flashed an image of the biggest puppy in my head. It was young still, just a couple months old, but already promising to look every bit as beautiful as its mother. It had inherited her coloration as well, so far as I could figure.

I shrugged mentally. *Your choice,* I thought, reaching down and delicately stroking the pup's head. My power had recovered enough that I didn't have to think to touch its mind along with its fur. Its simple, happy thoughts slipped easily into my mind. At the moment it was mostly preoccupied with how nice it felt to doze with its siblings, although it was also putting some thought to how much it enjoyed being stroked, especially around the ears.

In the same instant the wolf moved gently out of my mind and across that connection to the puppy. It touched its mind, and seemed to slot instantly and perfectly into place. It couldn't have fit better if the two had been made for each other.

And, who knows, maybe they were. I'm not a theologian, but it seems to me that if there is a God this was the least he owed to that wolf.

I don't really know whether what I was doing was right. I'm not a priest, or a philosopher, or even a particularly moral man.

When it comes to predator psychology, however, I'm about as expert as anyone. And, in my experience, this puppy was old enough to have formed a distinct personality and a discrete mind. That was the only reason I was willing to do this.

It was hard to be absolutely sure without having ever practiced, but theoretically the wolf wouldn't have any detrimental effect on the dog. He had a fair bit of experience at keeping himself unobtrusive in someone else's mind, and I'd made sure to impress on him how important that was now. I felt confident that, after what he'd been through, he wouldn't take the idea of subjugating another being's mind lightly.

"That's the one for me," I said to the mother's owner, a friendly young woman who seemed torn between pride in the dogs and sorrow that they would soon be leaving.

She smiled at me, belaying the complicated morass of emotions I—largely through the dogs—could smell. "She's a beauty, isn't she?"

She? I thought at the wolf.

How was I supposed to tell? he—or maybe she, at this point—sent back indignantly. *They all look the same at that age, and it's not like your nose is worth anything.*

Too late now, I replied, struggling to keep from laughing. I couldn't think of any way I could get him back out at this point, and I wasn't sure I would even if I could have. After all, they had fit together so nicely, and it wasn't like he should even have a direct connection to the body.

"Her name is Snowflake," the woman said.

I managed, with some difficulty, to smile rather than smirk. "It's a good name," I agreed. "Call me in a couple weeks and I'll come back to pick her up." The dog was mostly white and I guess I can see how you would come up with a name like that, but it still seemed a little inappropriate for a husky. Add in the wolf that was now sharing that body and it became genuinely hilarious.

I was grinning as I walked out the front door. I liked the wolf, but I couldn't deny how nice it felt to be alone in my head again. It was a bit like the feeling when family leaves. You love them, sure, but it still feels good to not have company for a while.

It was a lovely fall day outside. The air was crisp, heady with the promise of snows to come not too long after my birthday. For now, though, it was still mild, with just enough of a breeze to be pleasant. I had to fight the urge to whistle as I walked off down the sunny street, even though I can't whistle any song containing more than one note.

Life, by some strange miracle, was looking up.

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