

# **Seasons Change**

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## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

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Emrys Vaughn

Dedicated to Hanshi Charles Caldwell. May he never learn that I called him that.

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### Chapter One

It was a bad day from the beginning.

It started when I got to work and my boss elected not to show up. He usually wandered in late, sometime around nine-thirty or ten, and at first I thought he was just a little later than usual. By eleven-thirty, though, I was forced to acknowledge that he probably wasn't coming at all.

That wasn't terribly unusual—but usually he would have called me.

Worse, I'd just spent the past three hours trying to get an antique radio to work again only to discover that nothing I could do was ever going to fix it. Somebody had apparently decided to remove several of the more important components. There was no way it was going to function without having at least three or four parts replaced, the cost of which was likely to be prohibitive.

Most places I would have immediately assumed that the owner had been conned and started feeling sorry for them. Unfortunately, Val's reputation—and his willingness to take on any job, no matter how strange—inevitably attracted jokers who thought that giving us a truly impossible task was a wonderful prank.

It was a professional hazard, and a relatively minor one at that. You get used to it after a couple years. Honestly, it probably wouldn't have bothered me at all except that I'd not only spent hours of work pointlessly, Val would almost certainly have known within a few minutes that it was junk. He's been doing this a lot longer than me.

So by around noon I was annoyed, frustrated, and had a lovely headache building. Just when I'd decided to ignore the stupid radio for the moment and let Val figure out what to do about it—teach him to ditch work—somebody started pounding on the front door.

I went to answer the door. The shop proper, a large if crowded old garage, was separate from the reception area. I was expecting it to be a customer, and I'd already plastered my hi-how-can-I-help-you smile over the scowl that was more in fitting with my mood when I opened the door to the front room.

I'm not very good at that, so it was probably a good thing that it wasn't a new customer. Fortunately for me Kyra was an old friend, and she knew me well enough that she wasn't likely to be put off by my mood unless and until it progressed to actively homicidal. In which case odds were good she'd offer to help.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" I asked curiously. Kyra was a waitress at a local bar catering primarily to the nonhumans of the area. I've never actually figured out her schedule—personally I suspect that the staff at Pryce's changed the needlessly convoluted schedule on a regular basis, just to

screw with my head. Although I suppose it's possible that I'm taking the whole thing a little bit personally.

"Nah," Kyra said, shaking her head as she wandered around pretending that she was interested in the antique magazines on the tables. She and I both have...issues with social interaction. By which I mean that I have zero social skills and she has serious psychological problems. "Monday's my day off."

I frowned. "I thought that you had Thursday off."

"C'mon, Winter. I've told you this a dozen times, I swear. That's only on even-numbered weeks. Except in February, then I have both of them off but I work an extra shift on Sunday."

I believe I've made my point.

"So you came to visit me? I'm touched."

She snorted. "Don't flatter yourself. I have a job for you." She pulled a much-folded sheet of paper out of her back pocket and handed it to me.

I took it and looked it over. It was a bit hard to read—Kyra isn't a doctor, but you'd never guess it from her writing. Eventually, though, I figured it out. Then I read the whole thing again trying to figure out where I'd gone wrong.

"You want fifteen tables?" I asked incredulously, looking up from the paper.

"That's right," Kyra said. Her blue eyes were bright, sparkling with mischief.

"And, ah," I said glancing back at the paper, "sixty chairs?"

"Or thereabout," she confirmed, nodding happily. "I'm looking for a variety of sizes on the tables, but seating an average of four or so."

I pursed my lips. "That's a rather large order."

"Well sure," she said. "But I don't need them until the end of March. It's just now January. That gives you plenty of time."

"Yeah," I said dryly. "But I think you're kinda missing the point here. I mean, don't take this the wrong way, but what the hell are you buying fifteen tables for?"

"I'm opening my own restaurant," she said.

I blinked. Then I looked at her face to try and figure out if this was some elaborate prank. She was smiling, the expression fiercely proud and yet at the same time somehow uncertain, as if she still couldn't quite believe it herself.

"How'd you get your hands on that kind of money?" I demanded. Kyra's job pays, as a general rule, even less than mine. And I'm not exactly swimming in cash.

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"Well," she qualified, "It's not exactly mine. The pack is bankrolling it, and their corporation is going to be the one who technically owns the place. But I'm going to be running it."

The pack she was talking about was the werewolf pack. Oh yeah, did I forget to mention that Kyra was a werewolf? Sorry. Once you spend a certain amount of time dealing with the supernatural you start to think of that sort of thing as being...not unimportant, exactly, but certainly not the only important part of their character. So you don't think of people as being first and foremost a species. It would be like thinking of your friends primarily in terms of their racial origins. Which some people actually do, but never mind that.

"That's...good news?" I hazarded. Kyra's relations with the rest of the pack aren't exactly the best in the world.

"It's better than working as a waitress for the rest of my life," she said acerbically. "Now, you know more than I do about what'll work for the tables—at least I hope you do—so I won't tell you how to do that. But I would like—"

At that point her phone started ringing. She looked at me apologetically, then pulled it out and answered it. And it was at that point that my day went from a moderately unpleasant but basically unremarkable day at work to...something significantly worse. Because the person on the other end was Enrico.

I met Enrico a couple years before I met Kyra. He's a cop, but that didn't really have much to do with our relationship until a couple months ago. Both of us wound up being involved in a series of murders (which of us dragged the other one into it is open to interpretation), and in the course of events he wound up learning about the existence of werewolves. So far I'd been dodging the ramifications of that, but I wasn't kidding myself that the situation would last.

"Kyra," Enrico said politely. "I don't suppose you know where Winter is?" I heard him, of course. A cell phone is not a good way to have a private conversation around anything with preternaturally keen ears. And, while my senses aren't quite as acute as a full-blooded werewolf's, a cell phone conversation is child's play.

Kyra looked at me and quirked one eyebrow, a faint smile hovering around the corner of her lips. I nodded slightly, and she said, "Actually, he's standing right here. Did you want to talk to him?"

"I don't think I need to, considering that I'm sure he can hear it anyway." Enrico's voice held only a trace of amusement. "Could he—actually, both of you—come look at this for me? I know he doesn't like to deal with the police, but this mess reminds me of this autumn...."

Kyra glanced at me again, any trace of amusement in her eyes replaced with worry. I nodded again, and she told Enrico that we would be there. He rattled off an address, which I didn't bother listening to. It wasn't like I was going to be driving. Kyra was the one with a car.

I went ahead and locked the shop door, then turned the sign to CLOSED and locked the front door behind us. I wasn't particularly worried about theft—there aren't very many people desperate enough to rob a repair shop, and even if somebody did odds were good that between us Val and I could track them down. And odds were even better that they would regret it immensely. It never hurts to be careful, though. That's my motto.

Admittedly I am better at making up mottos for myself than sticking to them. But it's the thought that counts, right?

"This can't be a coincidence," Kyra said about a minute after we got in her car.

"What's that?"

She waved one hand vaguely. "The address. It can't be coincidence."

"Oh. I wasn't listening. Where are we going, anyway?"

She gave me an exasperated look. "I don't know the place specifically, but it's not more than three blocks from the pack's main office."

I considered that for a moment. "You know, I think maybe that isn't a coincidence. Especially what with the murders this autumn being a setup designed to get at the pack."

She didn't look away from the road, but I could see her roll her eyes at that. "Gee. I wonder."

Kyra and I both tend to react to stressful situations in weird ways. She acts tough and pretends it doesn't matter to her. I...actually I'm not sure how to describe how I react. It varies a lot, but it generally involves inappropriate and badly timed jokes. This would be more pleasant for everyone involved if my sense of humor wasn't maladjusted.

Unlike most of the crime scenes I'd seen, the police had clearly found this one first. There was a squad car out front, and I was pretty sure all three of the other vehicles in the lot were unmarked police cars. The building was a little bakery, just close enough to downtown that it probably did good business weekdays. I thought I might have been in it once or twice before—I don't make it to that part of town often, but I like sugary baked things. If I'd seen it I would have gone to check it out.

Enrico was waiting for us just outside the door. As usual, he looked nothing like a cop—I'm not entirely sure if he even owns a uniform. He was wearing his respectable face today, and passerby could easily have mistaken him for the building's owner. He was glancing around nervously as we pulled up, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

What the hell? I'd never seen him this edgy before. Even when he'd first seen Kyra transform, and had almost certainly been afraid for his life as a result, he hadn't seemed this overtly anxious.



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Whatever he was feeling, though, it didn't show in his voice. "Winter," he said, sounding as casually cheery as always. "Kyra. Can't believe you're still driving that hunk of junk. How do you keep it running?"

"Whenever it looks like it's trying to die on me, I take one part and execute it as an example to the others." Kyra wasn't as good as Enrico. Her words were lighthearted, but something in her voice betrayed an underlying tension.

"Sounds like an effective method," Enrico said seriously. He glanced at me. "You ready?"

"Not at all," I said cheerfully. "Let's do it."

I followed Enrico up to the door of the bakery. At his signal I stopped a ways back, while he went inside and exchanged a few words with the uniformed cop just inside the door. I couldn't hear what they were saying—my hearing is good, better than human, but not that good.

After a few seconds he turned and beckoned at me through the glass. I shrugged at Kyra and walked up. It felt just like old times; open the door, smell blood wafting out, make sure you don't show a reaction to it. Not that different from what any other person in such a situation might do. Although I'm pretty sure most of them would be trying to conceal nausea rather than hunger.

I glanced around on the way in. I'd been in any number of crime scenes before, but this was the first time I'd done it legally. There were a number of police officers standing around, much like you'd expect, although somewhat to my disappointment they didn't seem to be doing anything more exciting than standing around talking in hushed voices.

I guess I should know better, but somehow it's always a letdown when you get a glimpse of something that people tend to think is dramatic and it turns out to be all boring and mundane. Happens all the time, believe me. You have to keep in mind that as exciting and dramatic as something sounds to you, odds are good it gets stale quick when you're doing it professionally.

For once the victim wasn't hard to find at all. He was lying in a pool of blood on the floor right in front of the counter. More blood was spattered liberally around the room. It was...a lot fresher than I would have expected. The blood was still bright crimson, and hadn't even really started to dry yet.

I won't bother describing the corpse for you. You can probably imagine it just fine, and if not you don't want to know. Let's just say that the family would very definitely not be having an open casket.

I glanced at Kyra, who nodded slightly. She stalked closer, trying not to make it obvious that she was looking for a scent. She didn't do an especially good job—I mean, she wasn't like snuffing the floor or anything, but anyone who knew what to look for would see what she was doing right away. Fortunately the other cops weren't people who knew what to look for.

I did more or less the same thing, albeit in a less literal sense. I wandered around the room, looking at the scene and pretending I knew what to look for. The room was a bit damaged, but not too

bad; just a few chairs broken, one table overturned. I could have been mistaken, but I was pretty sure there hadn't been much of a fight here.

As I was walking I encountered...something.

I'm not going to go into my heritage. It would take a while to detail, and the story is both icky and embarrassing for everyone concerned. Suffice to say that my mother was a werewolf, my father was some sort of supernatural beastie, and I only superficially resemble a human. Most of the time it's nothing but some minor awkwardness, but I did inherit a handful of useful abilities. One of them is being able to sense magic. It's an unusual gift which, the vast majority of the time, is absolutely useless.

This was one of the other times. As I wandered around the room I caught a definite whiff of magic, which for reasons unknown and possibly unknowable my mind interprets as physical scents. It stung, the way it sometimes burns your nostrils when you go out on a really cold day and inhale through your nose.

That was all fairly normal. That's how I perceive magic, generally. At the moment I wanted more information, so I lingered and tried to look reasonably normal while I brought it into better focus.

Have you ever been out some night, away from the city lights, and realized that your hearing was working way better than it really ought to? If not, don't worry; most of the time it's not exactly fun. This may surprise you, but wandering alone in the forest at night is actually really freaking creepy.

Anyway, the point is that you're not actually hearing more acutely. It's more a matter of your mind focusing on the things you hear, because your eyesight isn't working as well. Like Daredevil, but less permanent. The cool part is that, if you concentrate, you can do the same thing intentionally. Even if you're talking about weird magic senses instead of hearing.

I'd been practicing lately, and it only took me about fifteen seconds to tighten my focus enough to get some more detailed information. The magic smelled a bit like black pepper, with undertones that were delicate and intertwined enough that I didn't even try to sort them out, much less map them to the closest mundane equivalent. It didn't especially matter anyway. I took just long enough to get a vague idea of what I was smelling, then turned my attention back to the rest of the room.

None of the cops seemed to have noticed anything funny about my actions. Enrico had, and was watching me intently, his face a blandly disinterested mask so good I couldn't even guess what he was thinking. Kyra was looking vaguely in my direction and trying to look bored, with reasonably good results. When she noticed that I was paying attention she met my eye and shook her head very slightly.

She hadn't been able to get a scent. No surprise there; I'd been expecting it since I first noticed the smell of magic.

Then, almost by accident, I actually saw something while I was wandering around. It was hard to notice against the background of blood splattered around the room, but some of it was clearly not random. The paw print on the tile floor, for example, almost certainly hadn't happened by chance.

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I am not an expert tracker, and much of what I do know revolves around scent tracking. You didn't have to be particularly knowledgeable, however, to recognize it as a canine track—and an exceptionally large one. With a little bit more knowledge you might well recognize it as a werewolf print.

You know what the problem is with telling yourself that things could be worse? It never takes the world long to congratulate you on your insight by proving you right.

Kyra, Enrico and I left shortly after that. I wasn't entirely sure how many of the police officers had really even noted our presence; certainly none of them tried to speak to us.

"So why didn't you call me directly?" I asked quietly as we loitered around a short distance from the bakery. It had been bugging me for a while, but this was the first opportunity I'd seen to ask without running the risk of being overheard.

Enrico gave me a weird look. "I did. No answer."

I frowned. "Really?" I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and checked it. "Huh. No battery." I shrugged. "Happens to everyone, I suppose."

"Yeah, well. You see what I mean about last autumn?"

"Yep." Back in August, a handful of werewolves led by a demonically possessed wolf of remarkable insanity had gone on a relatively brief but memorable killing spree. It ended up with them having killed eight people directly that I knew of, and caused the deaths of at least another five or ten. Enrico had seen a few of the bodies involved, which had been rather...messy. Not as bad as this one, but messy.

"So was it the same killer?" he asked quietly.

Kyra snorted. "Definitely not."

"You sure of that?"

"Absolutely," I said firmly. "Come on, Enrico. What's the problem?"

He sighed. "We never got a decent answer to what was going on there. So, when this came up, everybody just assumed it was related."

I frowned. "But it doesn't match the pattern at all. I mean, the moon won't be full again for three weeks. And that was fresh, which means it happened during the daytime."

Enrico shrugged. "It's close enough." He hesitated for a long moment. "Look, Winter. I know you've had your reasons for not talking to me. And hell, maybe they're good ones, I don't know. But I really think it's about time you tell me what's been going on for the last few months." He gestured vaguely back toward the bakery. "There's people dying here, man."

I glanced at Kyra, who provided exactly no support. She'd produced a candy bar from somewhere, and was munching on it. And smirking at me. It wasn't quite popcorn, but the intent was still pretty clear. No help coming from that quarter.

"Nothing you could have done about it," I said to Enrico.

"Maybe not," he acknowledged. "There's plenty of things I can't fix. But I can't really know that unless I have some idea what's going on. Can I."

I sighed. "I guess not." I paused, then relented. "I'll tell you if you really want me to. But," I said, holding up my hand to forestall anything he might have said, "you have to understand something. Once you learn about this stuff...there's no going back, you know? You can't just walk away from it, ever. It doesn't matter how bad it gets."

He considered that for a moment, and I could tell he was taking me seriously. "I think that's true of everything, though, you know? Everything you learn changes you, and once you know something you can't just get rid of it. Even if you could, you wouldn't be you anymore, you know what I mean?"

"I guess so. You're sure then?"

He nodded firmly.

"Great. I'll call you when I have a chance to talk about it—it might take a while."

He hesitated, then nodded again. "Just as well, I suppose. I need to get back to work." He walked back toward his car, one of the unmarked ones in the lot.

We watched him go, then Kyra murmured, "What are you in such a hurry about?"

I glanced at her. "Oh, I thought you might like to go have a chat with the fellow who did that." I jerked my head slightly toward the bakery.

"Yeah, that sounds great, but in case you've forgotten I couldn't get a scent."

"I know," I said, nodding. "Somebody laid down a pretty neat spell in there. Did up an illusion to mask the scent. I think there was something supposed to block any attempt to trace them with magic too."

"Damn," she muttered. "It's like Garrett all over again." Garrett had been the insane, demonically possessed werewolf in August.

"Actually," I said, "not quite. We'll probably never know quite how Garrett kept you from tracking him by scent. Whatever he did, it was an instantaneous sort of thing. You do the ritual or whatever, the magic happens, and then it's over."

Kyra frowned. "Okay. And this one?"

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My lips split into what was probably a rather feral grin. "This time, they used a lingering effect. You cast the spell once and it sort of hangs around and keeps working. That's why the illusion still fools you, even though they cast it a while ago. The idea is that by the time the structure of the spell decays enough to be nonfunctional, the trail's already gone cold."

Kyra's eyes glittered, and she smiled coldly. "Let me guess. You can break it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe so. In this case, though, that would be a waste of effort." I grinned a little wider. "Because I can follow it."

"Should I get in costume, then?" Kyra was asking me whether she should change into the wolf. We seldom referred to that directly. Part of it was a sort of ingrained paranoia—we probably didn't have to worry about being overheard right now, but werewolves tend to be a little extreme that way. Part of it was probably also because Kyra hadn't yet completely gotten over the trauma of her first few years as a werewolf. I don't know why talking around the subject should make things easier, but somehow it did.

"Not this time, I think," I told her. "I need to go home and get a few things first. And after that, you'll probably still do better as you are."

She gave me a confused look. "Why?" she asked. "You know I'm not exactly good at fighting as a human."

"Because," I almost spat, "we're looking for a faerie."

Here's the story of the fae—which, incidentally, I only learned a relatively short time ago.

If you've ever looked for information about fairies, or anything related to them, you know that it's easy to find a hundred or two contradictory sources in about five minutes. The reason for this is relatively simple. There are a hundred or two—or a lot more—different kinds of them, each of which is at least a little different from every other.

According to my teacher, who although he's an eccentric and somewhat deranged old man is usually right, the fae didn't even exist as a more-or-less coherent group until about 1000 A.D. That might seem like a long time, but if so it's only because you're looking at it from a mortal perspective. There are plenty of fae who are older than that, personally.

Before that they all sort of just agreed not to kill each other, unless they happened to be at war (which, being fae, they often were). For the most part, though, it worked out pretty well. The *liosálfar*, *svartálfar*, and *dokkálfar* didn't get along, but they managed to stay out of each other's business. The *Sidhe* and the *Fomorians* got along like a house on fire, but for the most part the fighting had died down to just an occasional skirmish.

Around the turn of the millennium, though, it became clear that humanity was there to stay, and had become a pretty serious force through sheer numbers. Actually, it had probably been clear for a

couple centuries before that, at least, but immortal beings can be a little slow to react to change. Some of the older werewolves still think telegraphs are newfangled.

So, at that point, a few of the real movers and shakers among those who would eventually be the fae got together and realized that they had more in common than there was separating them. More importantly, they had a common interest. So it was decided, eventually, that although they didn't have to like each other (or even stop going to war with each other), it would be better for all of them if they established a few basic rules for it.

Fast forward a thousand-odd years, and you get the fae. There's enormous variation among them—not surprising, when you consider their origins—but they do have a few things in common. Almost all of the fae have a serious aversion to iron, which is the only reason they worry about humanity at all. All of them share a few magical skills, too—illusion so good as to be indistinguishable from reality foremost among them.

I haven't spent much time around the fae. My boss is one of them, and that's about it. It doesn't take a genius, though, to figure out that if you're smelling an illusion spell good enough to dupe a werewolf completely, and it has a lot in common with the only fae magic you've ever smelled, and the fae are notoriously skilled with illusion, just maybe there's a fae involved somewhere.

Which is why we had to go back to my house first. See, being a generally paranoid bastard, I had a pretty decent assortment of weaponry on hand. I had no real reason to expect to fight one of the fae, but I still had quite a bit of armament designed for that purpose. That's just how I think. I've got so many contingency plans by now that I can't even *remember* them all.

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### Chapter Two

About thirty minutes later, we were standing next to Kyra's car about a block from the bakery. I'd trailed the scent that far before we left, partially to make sure I could and partially so that the cops would be less likely to notice us coming back. I'm not exactly an expert on police procedure, but I'm pretty sure that they get suspicious about things like that for some reason.

"Okay," Kyra said calmly, almost managing to cover the waver in her voice. She opened the trunk of her car, which was apparently held shut with duct tape, and pulled out a smallish black suitcase. I'd packed it myself, and it had to weigh eighty pounds, but she handled it like nothing. There are a few perks to being a werewolf. "What all have we got here?" She opened the suitcase to reveal enough guns, knives, and less easily recognized weapons to equip a small army, or a third-world family. Kyra whistled appreciatively. "Nice."

I grinned and reached in to grab my favorite ten-gauge shotgun out of the bag. At the moment it was loaded with specially prepared iron shot I bought from another werewolf I knew, and was virtually guaranteed to ruin pretty much any faerie's day. "Take whatever you want," I said to her, making sure nobody was coming.

"I think that's everything," she said a few minutes later, having equipped herself with a pistol, another shotgun, at least two knives, and probably close to ten pounds of iron and steel in various forms.

"All right," I said, slipping one more knife into a pocket and zipping the suitcase shut. I put the significantly-lighter suitcase back in the trunk and pulled out a couple of heavy black trench coats. "Let's go." It wasn't a perfect disguise, but we should be all right unless we had to enter an official building or go within thirty feet of a metal detector. Or a magnet—there are certain downsides to hunting something violently allergic to iron.

The fae had been thorough—very thorough. There wasn't one gap in his magic that I could tell, and he'd kept it up long after I would have expected most people to let it fade. We followed it on foot—it had to be on foot, unfortunately, because I couldn't catch the scent reliably in a car—for one mile, then two. In spite of his masking spell our quarry had apparently been feeling rather nervous, because his track looped, backtracked, and crossed itself to a frustrating extent.

When it eventually straightened out it headed—no surprise—into a part of town bad enough that it probably wouldn't look out of place in Detroit.

"I feel like I'm in a gangster movie," Kyra said, sounding somewhat bemused.

I glanced at her, and I had to admit I could see her point. Black trench coat, black boots, black gloves (weighted, incidentally, so that they would function a bit like brass knuckles without being nearly

as obvious), set against a background of abandoned lots and boarded-up windows—I could totally imagine somebody casting her for the role. "Not bad," I said finally. "But the hat needs a little work."

She pulled the intensely purple baseball cap off her head and looked at it, as though making sure nobody had stealthily replaced it with a different hat since she put it on. Then, putting it back on—backwards, of course—she said, "What's wrong with my hat?"

"Nothing," I said dryly. "Although it does suggest that you've been taking fashion lessons from Aiko." Aiko was a kitsune we both knew who happened to be totally and certifiably crazy. She also had all the taste of...actually, I can't think of any appropriate way to finish that sentence. I'm coming to suspect that there is no appropriate comparison for Aiko.

Kyra snorted. "Not likely. Besides. It is totally gangster. Not like yours."

"What?" I shook my head. "You're insane. A black fedora is, like, the most gangster looking hat there is."

"Well, sure," she said, rolling her eyes. "But only if we've somehow gone back to the nineteen-twenties and nobody told me. Nobody wears a fedora anymore, Winter."

I was about to make a (probably lame, considering that she was more or less right) rejoinder when I noticed something different about the scent of the magic I was following. It is, incidentally, sort of difficult to track something by scent, especially when you're not used to it. The beginning was sort of rocky, but by now we probably didn't even look especially drunk.

Anyway. I can't say exactly what had changed about it, probably because words for that sort of thing don't actually exist. The closest I can come is to say that it felt deeper somehow, more complex. It was a subtle thing, very easy to miss.

"Hang on a second," I murmured to Kyra. It took me a moment to determine in which direction the new smell was strongest, but once I did I paced towards it without hesitation. Kyra ghosted along behind me without having to be told, and I knew she was holding a weapon under her coat.

The smell of magic was coming from a small, run-down house that blended in perfectly. The walls were covered in at least a dozen layers of graffiti, almost completely obscuring the brick.

This close to the source, the underlying aroma of power had almost completely overwhelmed the spell I'd traced here. It was unquestionably the work of the same person—that heavy aroma of pepper was woven all through it—but there were so many layers to it that I couldn't initially sort them apart, let alone actually figure out what they were for.

"This the place?" Kyra asked in a whisper—which was ridiculous considering that we were still outside the building, yet nevertheless felt totally appropriate.

I nodded absently, stepping back a pace to study the building. As I'd expected, under the layers of gang signs and crude art, the base layer of spray paint contained a number of traditional mystic



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symbols. Stars with varying numbers of points, glyphs and runes, intricate patterns of knots...somebody had really gone all out on this one.

"What is it?"

"Not sure," I whispered back. "I think it's mostly more concealment. There's definitely a block on scrying, and a heavy-duty version of that scent-wiping illusion we already saw. Oh, and another to make it seem unremarkable—you know, so ordinary your eyes slide right over it if you're not looking for it specifically."

She frowned. "Anything to actually keep us out?"

I studied both the symbols—which had, for the most part, only a tangential relation to the spells, but whatever—and the scent, which I had largely sorted out. "Don't think so. Part of what they were trying to do with this was to keep any mages from noticing them, and warding spells are a definite step backward in that department. I think they were counting on obscurity to protect them."

She grinned wickedly. "Wanna go tell 'em it didn't work?"

"Sure," I said, unbuttoning the front of my coat so I could get at the weapons I had stashed underneath more easily. I pulled the shotgun out, chambered a round, and flicked the safety off.

Kyra kicked the door in, which seemed totally unnecessary, but hey. Whatever made her happy.

I'm a firm believer that violence should be, first and foremost, fun.

On the other side of the door was...nothing at all. A small, dark room, almost a closet really, that smelled vaguely musty.

There was one other noteworthy feature in the room, a simple wooden door directly opposite us. It was firmly closed, but there was a warm light leaking out from underneath.

I glanced over the room, seeing a whole bunch more nothing, then looked at Kyra. She shook her head and mouthed the word "No," telling me that she hadn't seen, heard, or smelled anything either. I shrugged, then stepped through the doorway. No sense waiting around outside.

Nothing bad happened to me, which suggested that I'd been correct and they hadn't had a single ward around the building. I slipped across the empty room to the other door, Kyra following so close behind me she was practically stepping on my heels. I paused, then reached out and gently opened the door.

On the other side was what looked like a kitchen, larger than the room we were in but still on the smallish side. It didn't have any windows, and the light turned out to be coming from a pair of lamps. They illuminated a man sitting at the cheap table playing solitaire with what I was willing to bet was a hand-illuminated deck of Tarot cards.

He wasn't thin. I'm thin. Kyra's thin. This man was outright gaunt, practically skeletal. His jet black hair was long enough to brush his shoulders, framing sunken eyes, cheekbones prominent enough to look a little unnatural, and a sharp jawline exaggerated by hollow cheeks. I hadn't made any noise, but in the same instant I saw him he raised those sunken eyes to look at the door where I was standing.

There didn't seem to be any point left in secrecy, so I pushed the door the rest of the way open and stepped through, pointing the shotgun at the man in the chair. Kyra followed me in, casually covering the other door with her own gun. I could feel her presence, in the back of my mind, thrumming gently with her anxiety. To anyone else, though, she would have seemed the very essence of calm.

The thin man didn't seem a bit uncomfortable with having two heavily armed individuals suddenly in his kitchen, or even by the shotgun pointing at his nose—which was, in itself, a little discomfiting. He smiled and nodded politely before flipping the next card over. "Not bad," he said, sounding totally nonchalant. "I wasn't really expecting you for, oh, at least another twenty minutes." Then, without raising his voice or changing his tone at all, he said, "Now would be good, I should think."

His transition was so smooth, I actually had my mouth open to ask him what he was talking about when I realized that he wasn't talking to me. Which, in turn, made it rather obvious what he meant. Unfortunately for me, it was too late by then to do anything about it.

There was no chance to fight back, not even to fire the shotgun. There also wasn't, as I'd somehow expected, a flash of light. There was just a sharp impact to the back of my head, a burst of sudden and intense pain, and then swiftly falling darkness.

An indefinite length of time later the world came, reluctantly, back into focus. I blinked once or twice, shook my head to clear it—ow, bad idea—and then suddenly remembered where I was and laid still again.

I was, from what I could see, lying in the same kitchen I'd seen last. My hands were restrained behind my back somehow, I couldn't see them without moving, but I seemed to be otherwise all right. I couldn't have been there long, because my arms hadn't been stuck in place long enough to get stiff.

My weapons had been taken, of course, and they'd been remarkably thorough about it. By which I mean that I'd been stripped to the skin, which made me intensely uncomfortable on all sorts of levels. I don't normally have problems with nudity, probably because I'd grown up around werewolves and they put virtually no emphasis on it, but...well. There's a reason that naked can also mean vulnerable.

And I was feeling plenty vulnerable right now.

A quick glance showed me Kyra, similarly bound. Her hands were held by what looked like a novelty set of handcuffs made from some sort of crystalline substance I'd never seen before in my life. I thought she was still unconscious, until I saw a quick glimpse of an icy blue eye on fire with raw hatred.

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She was awake, then, and pissed as hell. Unlike me she'd been smart enough not to give that fact away to our captors.

As though on cue, the same casual voice said, "Ah, you're awake. Good. Sorry for the rough treatment there, but it was a security precaution I'm afraid I had to take."

Since there didn't seem to be any point in pretending otherwise, I rolled to an awkward sitting position, ignoring the intense protest from my aching head as I did. The source of the voice proved to be the same man as before. Well, almost the same man, anyway.

It took me a moment to realize what was different about him. He was still thin, his features still sharp and gaunt, but no longer to the point of absurdity. His eyes, I noticed inane, were a rather disturbing pale grey, almost indistinguishable from the sclera.

We'd been had. He'd probably made himself look like that—seem to look like that, I reminded myself, because he was almost certainly the faerie we'd been trailing and that meant that this was as much a lie as his former appearance—purely to make sure we'd be too focused on him to notice that we were walking into an ambush.

He looked down at me for a long moment from where he was seated in the same chair as before, as though studying my features. Then he nodded once, sharply, and said, "Mr. Wolf, I presume? And that makes your associate Miss Walker, correct? I apologize for your current condition, but it seemed wisest. And, considering Miss Walker's abilities and your own rather singular nature, I don't expect that it will cause you any lasting harm."

"Go to hell," I spat. I tried to literally spit at him, too, but found that my mouth was too dry to manage it satisfactorily.

He frowned down at me, the expression disconcertingly like that of a disappointed father. (Somebody else's father, I mean; I've never met mine.) "Come now, Mr. Wolf. There's no need for that sort of thing. Oh," he added, "and Miss Walker? You can stop pretending to be asleep now."

Kyra hesitated briefly, then shrugged herself into more or less the same position I was in. She's good at hiding pain; I knew her head had to hurt as badly as mine, but not even the slightest echo of it showed.

I sneered at the man. "You're kidding. You expect us to cooperate with you when you just took us prisoner?"

He arched his eyebrows. "Oh, not at all. In fact, from my perspective you're the ones at fault here. After all, you barged into my home, bringing with you an arsenal including a significant amount of iron, and proceeded to threaten me with a shotgun without so much as exchanging a greeting." He paused to take a sip of something I couldn't see from an opaque mug. "What I've done to you is well within the appropriate response to such a thing, I should say."

"We had cause," I said, struggling to rein in my anger at the man. "You killed that man this morning."

"Ah," he said, showing teeth in a sharklike grin. "And the baker was a friend of yours, then? A long-lost cousin, perhaps?"

"And do I have to know a man to take offense at his death?"

"Touché," he said, smiling a bit wider. "Would you like a piece of advice, though? You should move on. The incident this morning is hardly the point of this conversation. I understand that you're upset, and I can appreciate your reasons. At this point, however, your anger is counterproductive."

"A conversation?" I asked incredulously. "That's what you call this?"

"Of course," he pointed out. "Think about this for a moment, Mr. Wolf. You must surely be aware that there are several large men nearby who, if I should for some reason require assistance, will quickly arrive to provide it. And while silver is notoriously inimical to your kind, mine is quite fond of it." He took another sip. "If I wanted you dead, Mr. Wolf, you would never have woken up. I think you are intelligent enough to recognize that."

Confusion had gradually overtaken my anger. I wasn't entirely sure what I had been expecting, but it hadn't been...this. "So...what?" I asked, genuinely bewildered. "You went to all this work just to set us up for a chat?" I shook my head. "No way. If you wanted to talk that bad, there have got to be easier ways than this."

His lips twisted slightly. "Indeed. And you may rest assured that, if it were my choice, none of us would be here right now. My employer, however, felt that this was an effective way of communicating their message." He paused, and a ghost of a smile flickered across his face. "You know, I'm really quite surprised that it worked. They said you were rash, but I must admit I never expected the two of you to be so arrogant as to actually attack me alone." He took another drink.

I waited for him to continue, but he seemed to have said all he cared to, so eventually I asked, "What message?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. The instructions were very specific, however. You're to tell your Alpha that he already knows the message, and that now he also knows the price of ignoring it." He stood up suddenly, draining his cup. He reached into one pocket and pulled out an old-fashioned toothed key made from the same crystalline material as the handcuffs, placing it dead center on the table.

"I'm confident you'll be able to free yourselves," he said calmly, setting his cup over on the counter. "You'll find your possessions, including your weapons, in the front room." He waved vaguely at the only other door from the room, which Kyra and I hadn't seen beyond at all. "I recommend that you not do anything stupid. Please remember that I allowed you to find me this time, and the only reason you're still alive is because I wasn't hired to kill you." He nodded politely to each of us on his way out the door.

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It seemed like a short eternity passed between when the door closed and when I dimly heard a car start on the street outside. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and levered myself to my feet.

"Well," I said as levelly as I could manage at the moment. "That was..."

"Unpleasant?" Kyra suggested.

"I was going to go with 'anticlimactic', but that works too. Hang on a minute and I'll get those handcuffs off."

It was a bit of a trick grabbing the key with my hands behind my back, but I managed it, and had Kyra freed moments later.

"I am going to find that bastard," she murmured as she unlocked my handcuffs. "And I am going to kill him." Kyra's voice was soft, almost gentle, but quivering with barely-restrained rage. Kyra has issues. Being imprisoned, being made to feel helpless...suffice to say that it hit on a lot of them.

"Sure we will," I said softly, making sure my own voice showed no trace of either my building anger or the current of fear running underneath it. Neither was a wise emotion to show around a pissed-off werewolf whose psychological scars had just been prodded with a sharp stick. "Only not quite yet, all right?"

Kyra closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, they were still flat and cold, but they had lost the sense of imminent danger lurking just beneath the surface. "Of course not," she said, her voice sounding normal now. "What do we do now?"

"First things first, we get dressed. Then," I frowned. "Well, I guess we need to talk to Christopher."

Government among werewolves, although not much like what you're probably used to, isn't terribly complicated either. It's basically a hierarchical dictatorship where your position is determined by personality traits which, although they do change to some degree, are largely inborn. You know, like high school, except not as soul-crushing and petty.

The most dominant wolf is called the Alpha, and the way the system works is pretty much that what he says goes. There are certain limitations, of course. It's not common, but occasionally, if the Alpha manages to really piss off his pack they'll rebel. And, at least in this part of the world, there are higher-ups who intervene if things get really bad.

Generally, though, the Alpha has a lot of leeway. Within the pack he can do very nearly whatever he wants. And yes, a lot of the time it gets exactly as ugly as it sounds.

In Colorado Springs the Alpha was a young—by werewolf standards, which meant only sixty or so—wolf named Christopher Morgan. He took over a few years ago from one of the Alphas gone so epically bad that the Khan, who theoretically governs the Alphas of North America, Iceland, and Japan, actually stepped in to take him out. Along with a good-sized portion of his pack, who had been equally bad.

Christopher's a decent person. Better than he should be, maybe, considering how often an Alpha has to make unpalatable decisions. Back when Roland was Alpha, Christopher did a lot to mitigate his insanity. He protected the other wolves, especially the newly Changed, including Kyra.

He lives in a nice neighborhood on the southwestern edge of the city, up in the foothills of Pikes Peak. Unfortunately, that was currently a synonym for "on the other side of the city from us."

Neither Kyra nor I particularly wanted to walk back to her car. Neither of us was actually injured—the mercenary, damn him, had been right—but my head was throbbing, and in spite of how little I'd actually done I was feeling rather tired.

My phone said it was a little past four. I thought a moment, then called Enrico. It was a little early, but his work isn't exactly a nine-to-five desk job. I might get lucky.

"Hey," I said when he answered. "You still at work?"

"No," he replied guardedly. "Why?"

"You haven't changed your mind about...what we talked about earlier?" The line probably wasn't tapped, but paranoia was an ingrained habit with me.

"Not at all," he told me, with not an ounce of doubt in his voice.

I grinned. Looked like Enrico was going to be learning about the spooky side of the street sooner than I'd thought. "I was wondering if you could give me a ride," I told him. "And then there's someone you probably ought to meet."

About twenty minutes later, Enrico pulled up in front of us. It was still fairly early, but it was January; it was already practically dark. "Hey, Kyra," he said as we got in. "You two look ridiculous." We were back in full gangster regalia, excluding that purple hat. I don't care what Kyra says, I will never believe that a purple baseball hat is appropriate attire for a gangster. Regardless of time period. Pimps, maybe, but not gangsters.

"Nonsense," she said, taking her hat off. "This is my serious face."

Enrico glanced in the mirror and, without her hat, finally got a glimpse of Kyra's face. And the bruises starting to show. I'm not entirely sure whether she had caught on before me and started to turn, or if they just had to hit her more than once to put her out of the fight, but she was showing the results

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of our encounter a lot more than I was. Her left temple was turning a shade of purple not entirely unlike her hat, and I thought she might be developing a black eye too.

"What happened to you guys?" Enrico said, glancing over at me as well.

I managed a tired smile. "Long day. Don't suppose you have any aspirin?"

He looked at me with worry in his eyes. "Not on me. Look, Winter, should I be taking you to the doctor?"

I shook my head, because I am apparently an idiot incapable of figuring out that an action causes intense pain without multiple repetitions. Then, wincing a little, I said, "No thanks, we'll be fine. If you could just give Kyra a ride back to her car, and then we can go and talk to the man I mentioned earlier."

"You sure? Head injuries are nothing to joke about."

"I'm sure," Kyra said firmly.

Chapter Three

When we got to her car, I got out with her. Enrico, either taking my cue or still worried about her, got out and walked over to her car as well.

The first thing I did was open the trunk and get the suitcase out. Thankfully, nobody had come and stolen it—the consequences if the police were able to link the contents to us were likely to be very bad, and I wouldn't want to put that much weaponry in the hands of a criminal either.

Kyra glanced around perfunctorily, then shrugged out of the coat and dropped the shotgun, which she'd unloaded before Enrico got there, into the bag with a grunt of relief. I followed suit, then began removing the various knives and such that I'd brought.

"What the hell are you thinking?" Enrico said, quietly but very emphatically.

Kyra snorted. "I the hell am thinking I'm tired, grouchy, and would rather not be wearing this stuff any longer than I have to at this point. What's it look like I'm thinking?"

"This is illegal!" he hissed back. "Do you have any idea how much trouble we could be in for this?"

"Actually," I said mildly, pulling off my pistol and placing it into the suitcase as well, "most of this stuff is legal and licensed. Although not necessarily to me, I admit."

He looked at me and narrowed his eyes slightly. "And—completely ignoring the question of why you even own it—what were you doing with it?"

I grunted and took the spare ammo out of various pockets. "Tell you later." I frowned and looked down at the suitcase. "Okay, I think that's everything." I hefted the suitcase and put it back into her trunk, following it up with the trench coat. "If you wouldn't mind dropping it at my house, I can sort it all out later."

Kyra nodded. "Yeah, no problem. Call me when you're ready to finish the job."

Enrico and I watched her start the car, which made a horrible sound that was totally in character for it, and then drive off, heading towards my house on the western edge of town.

"Will she really be all right?" he asked me.

I nodded, turning to go back to his car. "Yeah. Give her a good night's rest and she'll be good as new. Trust me."

"What about you?" he said quietly, getting in the car opposite me.

I smirked at him. "Oh, I'm always all right."



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He looked at me doubtfully, then shrugged and started the car. "If you say so. Where to next?"

"The man we're going to see lives down near the Broadmoor. I don't remember the address, but I can find it once we're in the area."

He gave me a concerned look. "You sure you don't just want to leave it for another day, Winter?"

"I'm fine," I said, exasperated. "Tired, that's all."

He sighed. "All right then. So who is this guy you want to see so bad?"

I frowned. "You remember I told you there're other werewolves in this town, besides Kyra." He nodded, and I continued, "Well, pretty much all of them belong to the local pack. It's sort of like a governing body crossed with a fraternity. There are a lot of rules, and if you break them the consequences are likely to be pretty bad, but that's not all they're about. They hold group events, provide support to the members, that sort of thing." That's how Kyra keeps afloat on a waitress's pay; every werewolf has to contribute funds to the pack, sort of like a private taxation system, but part of what they do with it is make sure that all the wolves at least have enough to get by.

"Okay," Enrico said after a moment. "I think I get it. So he's one of them?"

"Well," I hedged. "Sort of. Werewolves like hierarchy—knowing who's in charge, what everybody's role is. Right now, Kyra's the second-highest in the pack."

"Ah," he said. "And this man is...?"

"Her boss," I said shortly. "The most dominant wolf in the city. Alpha of the pack."

His lips twitched. "You're kidding. They actually call him that?"

I nodded. "Yep. His name's Christopher Morgan." I paused. "There's a few things you have to know before you meet him," I said carefully. I didn't want to scare Enrico, but...werewolves aren't just humans who occasionally turn into wolves. Forgetting that, especially around an Alpha, tends to be hazardous to your health.

"I figured as much," he said calmly. "Hit me."

I had to think for a moment how to approach it. I'd never really had to explain all this before. "I guess it all comes back to the hierarchy thing," I said eventually. "Werewolves like to know who's in charge, and in this city that means Christopher. Don't do anything to challenge that."

"So, what? Don't try and tell him what to do?"

"That's part of it," I agreed. "But there's more to it than that. Don't try and intimidate him, or pressure him for information. Don't make eye contact for more than a second or so."

Enrico paused for a moment. "Okay, I think I get it. But what's with the eye contact thing?"

"It's a confrontation thing." I frowned, grasping for words. "Werewolves...aren't entirely human. They've got a whole bunch of instincts from the wolf side. Their instinctive reaction to prolonged eye contact is to see it as, I don't know, I guess you'd call it a challenge."

"Huh," he said meditatively. "I guess I know what you mean. But why do you keep saying they? Aren't you a werewolf too?"

I snorted. "Not quite. What I am is...complicated. I'll tell you about it later, this is our turn."

Enrico was silent for a moment. The houses, big buildings with yards and trees in this part of town, loomed in the gathering gloom as we passed. "So what's he like? I mean, I get it he's important, but what kind of person is he?"

I didn't have to ask who he meant. "I don't know. Dedicated. He'd do anything for his wolves. You might get to meet a couple of them, too—there's usually at least one or two of them there this time of day. Turn right here." He did, navigating his way along the twisty uphill road. I don't know why the people who plan out classy neighborhoods seem to like nonsensical road layout so much. "I guess you could say Christopher's a good man who's stuck with a hard job," I finally said in answer to Enrico's question.

"That the place?" Enrico said, nodding toward the house. It was a big place, huge really, three stories tall and proportionally wide. The windows, of which there were an impressive number, glowed cheerily in the dusk.

"That's the one," I agreed, undoing my seatbelt. He parked on the street out front and got out, looking the building over with a calculating expression on his face, as though he were considering how much he could get for burgling it.

"He's doing all right for himself," he commented to me.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Actually, though, the pack bought the house. Most of the time I think they use it more than he does." I led the way through the wrought iron fence and up the shallow flight of concrete stairs to the front door. Enrico followed in my footsteps, much more precisely than he actually needed to—unlike some Alphas, Christopher refuses to booby-trap his house. I opened the door without knocking and entered directly into the main room of the house.

Christopher's house is built around a single enormous room that takes up pretty much the whole ground floor of the building. Back when Roland owned the house, it was modeled after a medieval throne room, including—I kid you not—a genuine throne. And yes, he sat in it to conduct pack meetings. These days it's as far from that as it's possible to be without serious structural changes. You could easily mistake it for a particularly awesome lounge. There's a big fireplace on one wall, which most of the furniture is vaguely oriented around, and which at the moment had a lovely fire going.

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At the moment, as I'd predicted, the room wasn't empty. There were three werewolves, two male and one female, arranged on various couches or bean bags watching South Park on the enormous television hanging on one wall. I recognized all of them, by sight if not by name.

"Hey, Winter," one of the men said. He was a newer werewolf, probably younger than me, named Scott. "Here to see the boss?"

"Yep," I said. "He around?"

"In the study," the woman said without looking away from the TV. I knew her, but couldn't seem to remember her name at the moment.

"Thanks," I said, leading Enrico to one of the staircases placed on either side of the door. Christopher's study was on the top floor, which is the only section of the building he pretty much reserves for himself. The rest of the house is, if you're on good terms with the pack, essentially public property. If Christopher finds you on the third floor, though, you'd better have a good reason to be there. And God help you if you're actually in his bedroom or something.

Everybody gets territorial. Werewolves (and me, but that's beside the point) tend to have much stronger territorial urges than the average human. Alphas' are a bit stronger than that. And thanks to the way the pack laws are set up, it would be well within Christopher's rights to kill you if you trespassed on his personal space. And yes, that applies even if you do it by accident.

I made my way to the simple wooden door and knocked on it. Christopher, somewhat muffled by the door, called out "One minute." Less than fifteen seconds later, Christopher opened the door and waved us inside.

Christopher was a thin, tall man with dark hair and eyes. Werewolves, who thanks to their healing abilities are functionally immortal, never really get elderly. There's quite a bit of variation, though; some werewolves, including Kyra and Conn Fergusson, the Khan who governed all the wolves I'd ever met, look like they're in their late teens. Others might look as old as thirty or even forty. Christopher was somewhere in the middle; at a guess you'd probably guess he was in his late twenties. The truth is somewhere closer to sixty or seventy.

"Winter," he greeted me as he walked back around his desk. It was a real behemoth, mahogany stained dark with decades of use. And yes, I do get most of my money making furniture. "What brings you here?" He paused briefly. "And who's your guest?" His voice, friendly enough for the most part, got about ten degrees cooler for the last part.

"Bad news," I said shortly. "But I should probably introduce you first. Christopher, this is Enrico Rossi. I mentioned him a while ago...."

"I remember," Christopher said shortly, but without the coldness that had been there before.

"Right. Enrico, this is Christopher Morgan, Alpha of the Pikes Peak Pack."

They shook hands and made the appropriate polite noises while I thought about how to present the events of the day to Christopher. "Would you mind waiting outside for a minute, Enrico?" I asked eventually. "Something I need to discuss with Christopher in private, if that's all right." It would be a lot simpler if I didn't have to explain every third word to Enrico at the same time.

He gave me a look which suggested that he was not entirely happy with this turn of events, but his voice was pleasant enough. "No problem," he said evenly. "I'll just go introduce myself to those folks downstairs." He could have saved himself the effort; werewolves tend to put more importance on nonverbal communication than humans, and Christopher was experienced enough that he had definitely caught the subtext there.

Once we were alone, I immediately pushed the wooden door shut. It wasn't a foolproof defense against eavesdropping, especially not with werewolves in the building, but it was better than nothing.

"What happened to you?" Christopher asked bluntly. "You look like shit."

I grimaced. "An object lesson in the stupidity of arrogance. It started out with that death by the pack office." I paused. "You do...?"

His face twisted as though he were biting a lemon (cliché, I know, but he really did look like it). "Yeah, I know about it. You were saying?"

"Enrico called me in to look at it. It reminded him of that mess with Garrett, so he thought I should know about it. Kyra was, by total coincidence, with me at the time, so we both went to check it out. She couldn't find anything, but I smelled fae magic pretty clearly. An illusion of some kind, which I think was specifically meant to block a werewolf's sense of smell."

"I see," he said calmly. "And you didn't call me about this because...?"

I hesitated. Why hadn't I called Christopher? It would have made a lot more sense than going charging in with just Kyra for support. "I'm not sure," I said eventually. "Didn't occur to me, I guess. Anyway, we went to remind him that killing people and framing a werewolf isn't polite."

"I'll bet," he murmured, a smile playing around the corner of his mouth.

I cleared my throat. "We were, unfortunately, unsuccessful in that regard." I really, really wanted to leave it at that. Unfortunately, there was a chance that Christopher would be able to get some sort of useful information out of what specifically had happened. "The trail was laid deliberately, I think specifically to make sure I was the one who came. We followed the trail about two miles to a building—Kyra can probably get you the address—which was covered in more fae magic. Anti-detection spells, as far as I could tell."

"How serious are we talking here?" he interrupted.

"Um. Pretty good, I think. He had a blending charm over the whole building, plus scent masks and something to block scrying attempts."

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"Safe to say it was a significant amount of effort, then. And probably a serious operator behind it."

I shrugged. "I think so, yeah. Anyways, there weren't any wards around the place, so Kyra and I went on in. The fae who did the illusions was in there waiting for us under glamour." Glamour was a specific word for a magic of the fae, which walked the line between illusion and outright shapeshifting. "He engaged us in conversation, then signaled his people to take us from behind."

Christopher smiled thinly. "Knocked you out, did they?"

I flushed slightly. "Yeah."

He snorted. "Lucky you didn't get worse than that, as stupid as you were. Go on."

I continued the story. "When we woke up we'd been disarmed and they had us handcuffed on the floor." I wasn't going to mention that we'd been naked. That was both embarrassing and, under the circumstances, absolutely irrelevant. "He made small talk for a few minutes, then got around to why he'd done it."

"Which was?"

"To convey a message. His employer—I have no idea who that is, by the way—told him this was a good way to lure me into a trap, and that was a good way to get a message to you."

Christopher chuckled. "Oh, come on. That's ridiculous. There are much less difficult ways of getting me a message."

"I know," I told him. "Although actually, I think his words were that the employer thought it would be an effective way to convey the message. I guess sending a card just wouldn't cut it for this one."

"Right," he said dryly. "So what's the message?"

I shrugged. "He said he didn't know. And he was definitely fae, so that's probably true as far as it goes. He just said to tell you that you already know the message, and that now you know what it'll cost if you ignore it."

"Hm. Cryptic and ambiguous, yet at the same time almost totally useless," Christopher said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I'm guessing the price bit has something to do with the murder, but beyond that I haven't got a clue."

"That's because you haven't thought it through," he said, tone sharpening slightly. "The location of that death makes it clearly a challenge. As do the obvious suggestions that it was a werewolf, when in fact it was not." He paused to think. "I'm guessing this was a fae opposed to the treaty with the Khan. If

they can arrange deaths so clearly linked to werewolves, and they're willing to do so just to get you in their power briefly, there's no way we can go public."

"Um." I hadn't even thought it through that far. "Makes sense."

He shook his head slowly and rubbed his temples in a way that suggested I wasn't the only one with a headache. "That's one matter, then. And the man you brought with you?"

I shrugged. "He wants to know about the supernatural world. Given that I got him involved in the first place by having Kyra transform in front of him, it seemed like something I ought to do, you know? So I figured I might introduce him to you, so if he has any questions about the werewolves in town he knows who to ask." I shrugged again. "If you'd rather not that's fine."

"Actually," Christopher said, standing up and walking out from around his desk, "I'd like to talk with him. I've been meaning to ask you to bring him here, in fact."

Well. That sounded bad. "Why?" I asked cautiously.

"Tell you in a minute," Christopher said over his shoulder as he went to find Enrico.

Shortly thereafter, the two of them came back into the room. Enrico sat next to me, while Christopher went back behind the desk and pulled a file folder out of a drawer. "So Winter tells me you helped us out with the incident this autumn."

Enrico considered that a moment, then shook his head. "No sir," he said as respectfully as I'd ever heard him. Apparently he'd taken that warning to heart. "Didn't do it for you."

Christopher chuckled. "Honesty is a rare virtue, Mr. Rossi. But it doesn't matter why you were doing it. You helped the pack, and we won't forget it. If you ever need a favor, ask. I can't promise that we'll be able to help you, but we can certainly try."

Enrico shrugged. "Thank you, then."

Wow. He had no idea, none whatsoever, the value of the gift he'd just received. A statement by the Alpha, made like that in front of witnesses, is binding. Not just to them, either; the whole pack goes by it. And although Christopher hadn't technically promised anything, he hadn't specified what a favor meant either. Which meant that, pretty much whenever he wanted, Enrico could have thirty-plus werewolves to help him out with something.

Thirty werewolves can accomplish a hell of a lot. Not just physically, either; that represents anywhere from several hundred to a few thousand years of experience and accumulated knowledge. That's a pretty darned useful resource.

"Now," Christopher said calmly, pulling a few sheets of paper out of the folder. "If you're willing to help us a little further, I think we can be of use to each other."

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Wait a second. What was this? Enrico was a great guy, sure, and I have no doubt that he's skilled at his job, but...he's not exactly a major player. As far as I knew he wasn't even particularly well connected. What was Christopher talking about?

"I'm willing to hear you out," Enrico said cautiously. "But I can't commit to anything until I know the specifics."

"A laudable attitude," Christopher said, smiling. "Winter tells me that you're concerned that the police have no way to deal with crimes which are, shall we say, outside the scope of the natural world." At Enrico's nod, he continued, "So are we, although for different reasons. I presume Winter has told you about the plan for werewolves to go public within the next few months?"

Enrico turned to stare at me. I pretended that I had suddenly developed an intense fascination with the wall.

"You didn't tell him." Christopher's voice was heavy with disappointment. He sighed. "That's between the two of you. I'm sure he can explain it to you. Anyway, some of us feel that the process will be easier if there are already humans in prominent positions who are ready to help make sure things go smoothly. Are you following so far?"

I nodded. Enrico said "I think so. But what's that have to do with me? I mean, I'm glad to know about it and all...." Here he broke off to glare at me for a moment. "But I'm hardly in a prominent position."

"I'm aware of that," Christopher said, glancing down at the papers briefly. I wondered idly if they were a dossier on Enrico. "However, that's not the only important thing. What we're trying to do is, basically, to convince the world that we're valuable citizens. That's easier to do if there are people ready and willing to talk about the good we can do."

"Still not seeing the connection," Enrico said dryly.

Christopher's smile this time was a shade more...predatory than before. "One of the avenues we are considering to that involves the police." He slipped another sheet out of the folder and studied it for a moment, continuing to speak as he did so. "I have a list here of werewolves willing to assist the police. I think you will find that they can be most...useful."

Enrico blinked. For that matter, so did I. "Really," Enrico said, his tone carefully blank. "That's...interesting. But I still don't see why you should be telling me this."

"Because this would require that certain people be aware of our existence ahead of time. If they think that we're ordinary detectives—or ordinary K-9 dogs, for that matter—what have we gained?" He shrugged eloquently. "Nothing."

"You'd have done some good," Enrico pointed out.

Christopher laughed. "True enough, but...look. Mr. Rossi, you strike me as a man who can appreciate an honest answer. We aren't doing this out of charity. Granted, most of these wolves," he gestured vaguely at the sheet of paper, "are in it largely to help people, but what I'm proposing isn't a gift. It's an exchange. And, in order for that exchange to work, the people we're counting on for support have to know what they're supporting. If we wait until after the public revelation to ask them, they're likely to see it as a betrayal of trust to have been kept in the dark."

Realization dawned on Enrico's face. "And you think I can get that for you?" He shook his head. "Sorry. I appreciate what you're doing here, but I can't help you. I don't know who you think I am, but I don't carry that kind of weight in the department."

"Perhaps not," Christopher acknowledged. "But I think you're more capable than you realize. I'm not looking for someone to persuade people—we'd just be asking you to, oh, make connections, you might say. If all goes well, and you're interested, we might set you up as a liaison of sorts. Most of the police, you realize, we would not want to know more than is absolutely necessary. Certainly not the identities of my wolves—including those you already know." Christopher's voice wasn't quite threatening, but it was still clear what the consequences of disregarding that instruction would be. Well, clear to me anyway. It helps to have spent the major portion of your life interpreting what werewolves say and don't say.

Enrico frowned. "I'd...have to think about it. That's a pretty major commitment you're asking for."

"Yes," Christopher said, nodding empathetically. "I know. We don't need an answer yet. In the short term, perhaps you'd be interested in meeting with the chief of police? I'd like you to go with my representative. To...smooth things over, you might say. There are people I could use, but I'd really rather not bring them into this quite yet."

Enrico looked at him incredulously. "The chief of police? You're kidding, right? I can't just get a meeting with him. I mean, I guess I could, but it'd take time...I'd have to give reasons for it...." He trailed off uncertainly.

Christopher grinned a little, like a kid contemplating a truly awesome prank. "I don't think that'll be a problem. How's your schedule for, say, tomorrow afternoon? If that doesn't work for you, don't hesitate to say so. We can reschedule it. I'd like to get this done soon, but anytime this week should work."

Wow. To get that kind of treatment, the pack must have laid down serious money. Either that or they had major dirt on the chief—or, considering how werewolves work, probably both. Most of the werewolves make me look excessively trusting.

Enrico looked a little bit stunned. "Tomorrow's fine."

"Lovely. What about you, Winter?"



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I blinked. "Wait. What about me?"

He rolled his eyes. "Come on. Who did you think was going to be my representative?"

"I'm ineligible," I told him.

"Why? You're a dominant member of the pack. The law dictates that, in matters affecting only one pack, the Alpha can select any dominant pack member to represent the pack's interests. It's customary for the Alpha to handle things himself or delegate it to his second, but technically not required."

I pointed out the obvious flaw in his logic. "I'm not a part of the pack, Christopher. That invalidates me from anything except individual representation, internal conflict, and the arbitration and mediation clause. This doesn't come under any of those." And yes, those are actual rules. The Khan has a code of laws for his wolves almost as complicated as actual, federal law.

"You're a part of the pack if I say you are," Christopher said. He saw the look on my face and sighed. "Mr. Rossi, it seems that I need to have a discussion with Winter. Would you mind giving us a bit of privacy?"

"Not at all," Enrico assured him, smirking slightly at me as he left.

"Thanks. Now," the Alpha said to me as the door swung closed, "what's your real problem? And don't start citing the code at me, we both know you don't give a shit about it."

I glowered at him. "You're asking me to represent the pack when I'm not even a werewolf," I said quietly. "How am I supposed to do that? Why should I want to get involved when I'm not a part of either group?"

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration," Christopher said dryly. He shook his head. "I wasn't kidding, Winter. I do consider you a part of this pack. God knows you've done more for it than plenty of the werewolves who claim to be in it. And I think you view yourself that way too."

I snorted. "Not hardly."

"Oh? Then tell me why you brought this message here yourself instead of leaving it to Kyra." He waited a moment, just long enough that it was clear I wasn't going to answer, before continuing. "Face it, Winter. You care what happens to the pack. You've involved yourself in pack business more times than I could count, for no personal gain that I can see. You've had plenty of opportunities to back out, and yet you haven't, not even when Garrett was looking likely to kill the lot of us. That's more than I ask of my wolves, and it's more than most of them would give."

I considered what he'd said for a moment, and couldn't find any fault with it. "That doesn't change the fact," I said in a near whisper, "that I'm not a werewolf. Nor am I eligible to apply to become one." I'd tried that once. It ended...very, very badly.

He shrugged. "So what?" He grinned when he saw my expression. "Technically, there's no requirement for pack membership. Only convention says that only werewolves are admitted. Legally, I can admit anyone I want."

"The pack wouldn't stand for it."

He grinned even wider. "No? Tell me, Winter, did they stop you when you came in? Challenge you at all? Maybe ask why you wanted to see me?"

I frowned. "No," I said slowly, "they didn't."

"So they let you in to see the Alpha, and not only did they not feel a need to escort you, they didn't even ask why you were here. With a stranger in tow, no less." He shook his head. "Well, well. Seems my pack already thinks you're one of them."

My frown deepened. What he was saying was...true, more or less. That was the sort of treatment only another member of the pack could expect. With a stranger, or even an allied werewolf from another pack, they would certainly have at least wanted to know who I'd brought with me. So why hadn't they?

Was Christopher right?

He let me dwell on that for a minute, then continued. "You're my second's best friend. She would kill for you, or die for you, without being asked twice. Two thirds of my pack know you, and almost all of that number like you." He shook his head again. "No, Winter. My pack wouldn't stop me. In fact, there are no fewer than seven wolves—I won't name names—who have asked me why I haven't done this already."

I blinked. Seven wolves? I wouldn't have guessed that many of Christopher's pack even remembered who I was.

"So who's left?" Christopher asked cheerfully. "The Khan? He likes you. Hell, he'd take you in himself if you so much as asked. He'd back me on this and you know it. So let me think a minute...that makes it the law, the pack, the Khan, and the Alpha in favor. Anybody else you want to bring into it?" He laughed. "I don't know why you're even arguing with me on this, Winter. You've already as much as admitted that you want to be a pack member. Why would you try and talk me out of it?"

"Even if I did agree with you," I said slowly, "it seems to me that you're still making a lot of assumptions about what various people will think. Don't you at least need to announce this to the pack?"

He chuckled. "What makes you think I haven't?" He laughed again at my expression of shock. "I proposed the measure at the last meeting, and the agreement was practically unanimous. Technically I don't even have to do that; the only part of the process that requires a meeting is the formal announcement of membership, and I have up to a week to do that after you're inducted. Which,

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incidentally, also requires no pack presence. Don't you love a dictatorship?" He leaned forward, his expression intent. He wasn't laughing now. "Given that you haven't actually raised any personal objections—or just told me to screw myself, which is more what I would expect of you—should I assume you're willing?"

I thought about it a moment. Then I shrugged. "What the hell. Why not." I felt a sort of shudder run down my back as I said the words. I had a sudden premonition that what I'd just said would be a lot more important than I had given it credit for, a feeling that had nothing to do with magic and everything to do with plain old intuition.

Christopher smiled again, showing teeth this time, although there was no humor in his eyes. On the contrary, everything about him seemed as deadly serious as I'd ever seen it. "Wonderful. Now, the next full moon isn't for three weeks—unfortunate timing there—so the actual ceremony will have to be delayed. Pending that, though, welcome to the pack, Winter Wolf."

I shivered again. I was already starting to regret that particular impulsive decision, and I'd hardly even finished making it. One of these days I have to learn to think things through.

"So how's tomorrow afternoon work for you?" he asked brightly.

I glowered at him across the desk. "Fine. Any other surprises?"

"Just one. Do you mind taking Kyra with you? Chief Jackson has a reputation as somebody who believes his own eyes better than anything. I think having her actually change in front of him is probably the best way to convince him you're not full of shit."

"She has work tomorrow." I might have a hard time remembering her schedule, but I could manage it for a day at least.

He waved my objection off. "She has the afternoon off. I cleared it with Pryce this morning."

I raised an eyebrow. "That seems like quite a commitment, given that you didn't know until just now that the Enrico and I would even agree, much less that we'd have tomorrow free."

He shrugged. "I was fairly sure you'd both be willing." He grinned. "And I checked your schedules for tomorrow."

Chapter Four

"Domineering ass," I muttered as I left, in a voice carefully pitched not to carry even to werewolf hearing. Christopher already knew what I thought of his high-handedness, but there are certain forms to observe.

Enrico fell in beside me as I walked out the front door. "Should I take it you'll be accompanying me tomorrow?" he asked, smirking.

I glowered at him. "Yes. And Kyra's coming with us too."

"I guessed as much." I turned to look at him in surprise—I wouldn't even have guessed she was coming—and he shrugged. "What? Every time I've seen you when you're asking me to get involved with weird shit, she's right next to you and in it up to her neck. Why would this time be any different?"

I supposed I could understand the logic there. Twisted logic, granted, but at least it was there.

"So where to next?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Up to you." I checked the time, and found that it was just past six—it only felt like the middle of the night. "If you have time, we could go get some food and I can give you your first lesson on what life's like on the real wild side."

He gave me a concerned look out of the corner of his eye. "Are you sure you don't want to go home instead? I mean, I know you keep saying you're all right, but you still look like shit. And you're making lame jokes again, which is never a good sign. It can wait."

"After the day I've had, you think I want to go home?" I snorted. "Not likely. I think a decent meal is the least I can ask for by now. Besides, I'd much rather you at least got the intro before that meeting tomorrow."

He sighed, but he didn't argue, so I was going to count it as good enough. "If you say so," he muttered in a register I knew I wasn't supposed to hear. "Where did you want to go?"

I grinned a little as a thought occurred to me. If Enrico wanted to learn, he might as well jump right into things.

"There's a place not too far from where I live. I don't think you've been there, but it's where Kyra works...."

Pryce is sort of an interesting guy, even by my standards. Not interesting the way most people are—if you're looking for edifying conversation, feel free to keep on looking, because he's not interested. No, Pryce is interesting because he's a bit of a conundrum.

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He doesn't have a last name that I know of—unless Pryce is his last name, in which case his first name is a total mystery to me. A lot of things about Pryce are a mystery to me. I've never been there that he wasn't, not at seven before I go to work or two in the morning when I've gone to sleep. When, and even if, he sleeps I don't know. He's not human, I'm pretty much certain of that, but I don't have any idea what he is. Unlike most members of the supernatural crowd Pryce is fiercely nonpartisan.

That's reflected in his clientele. All of the staff, and almost all the customers, are to one extent or another inhuman, but there's no one group that can claim any kind of control over the place. There's also a strict policy of neutrality; you can do whatever you want outside his door, but throw one punch inside and your life isn't worth small change.

Normal people don't go there much. Pryce refuses to advertise, and he might even have some kind of spell to keep ordinary humans away. From the outside, his bar looks about the same as the abandoned buildings that are his neighbors.

So Enrico had a certain amount of reason to look concerned when he saw it. Pryce's bar is not in a good location. It's not even a bad location. It's more like the kind of location where even the muggers go in pairs. You'd have to be a bit crazy to start a business there. Enrico looked a bit doubtful when he saw the area, and more so once he realized where I was actually taking him.

"You sure that head injury wasn't worse than you thought?" he asked. "Because I think you've got the wrong place."

I snorted. "You're not nearly as funny as you think you are, wise guy. Now come on, you'll see in a minute."

I led the way up to the old warehouse Pryce built his bar in. It's one of several buildings of the same type, spaced around an empty lot he uses for parking. As far as I could tell his is the only one that's actually in use, but from the outside you'd never know the difference. There's not really anything to set it apart, not even a sign hanging over the door. His building, for whatever reason, is never marked by the graffiti that was so prevalent in the area, but you couldn't tell in the dark.

It goes without saying that the lot wasn't lit. Not even municipal bureaucracy is stupid enough to bother putting streetlights in an area that sketchy.

When I pulled the heavy, anonymous wooden door, though, it was like a whole different world. The interior wasn't brightly lit, but next to the darkness outside it seemed like it.

Enrico followed me down the short flight of stairs into the actual room, looking somewhat bemused. It wasn't exactly crowded, but it also wasn't empty. There were maybe twenty people sitting at the various tables, eating an impressive variety of food and conversing quietly.

The long bar, a beautiful piece lovingly crafted from walnut, was more sparsely populated. There was one group of three or four people sitting at the end near the door, and one old man at the other end sitting alone and drinking heavily. I didn't watch him long enough to be sure of that last part,

but I was willing to bet that it hadn't changed from the last time I'd seen him. He's a regular at Pryce's and every time I've seen him it's the same story: sitting alone at the bar, going through bottle after bottle of liquor and then leaving without talking to anyone. He never looks drunk, either, no matter how much he's consumed.

I recognized a few of the other patrons, too. Aside from the old man, one of the people playing pool in the back was a werewolf I'd talked with a few times, and the other was a pleasant young woman I was passingly acquainted with who happened to have a reasonably potent magical talent. A couple people eating at the tables who I knew to some extent exchanged nods or greetings with me as I passed.

The people who come to Pryce's don't like each other, necessarily, but...there's a sort of us-versus-them feeling there. Some of the people who go there, like the werewolves, belong to a larger group, but it attracts a disproportionately large number of the people who—like me—are involved in the supernatural community, but are still basically independent of the major factions. And believe me, that puts you in a tough position.

Enrico and I took one of the corner tables, with not many people around. That's not entirely abnormal among Pryce's customers, many of whom value their privacy. One of the waiters, a thin-faced man who looked like he was eighty and moved like he was twenty, was by almost immediately to drop off menus. Moving just as quickly, he vanished to go deal with something else.

Enrico looked around, a slightly stunned expression on his face. "This is incredible," he said quietly. You'd think, with the number of people in there, it would be at least a bit noisy, but it wasn't. I don't know whether Pryce uses magic or just good acoustics, but whatever it is it works. You could barely hear the sounds of the bar as a background murmur.

"What is?" I asked.

He gestured vaguely at the room. "This. I mean, to think that something like this is just here, you know? It makes no sense to put something like this out here."

I shrugged. "Pryce doesn't have to make sense."

"Pryce?"

"The owner," I said, nodding at him where he stood behind the bar. He was a big man, better than six foot and built like a muscular barrel. There was enough gray in his red hair and beard to pass for any age from forty to sixty, the same as the five years I'd known him. Exactly the same, in fact.

"Huh," Enrico said. "The owner usually work the bar?"

I snorted. "Always. He doesn't trust anybody else with it." One of the other servers came by to get our order. Enrico had already studied the menu thoroughly, although you wouldn't have known it even if you were watching him closely. He's very good at looking casual, whatever he's actually thinking.

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"So," he said, sounding just as casual. I wasn't fooled. Everything about him said he was getting down to business. "If you're not a werewolf, what are you?"

I sighed. I don't like to talk about myself, but he deserved an honest answer. And besides, I had agreed to tell him later. I just hadn't expected it to be this soon.

"It's a complicated answer," I said after a moment's thought. "But I guess the important part is pretty simple. Do you believe in magic?"

He laughed. "Come on, Winter. I just asked you whether you were a werewolf, and I meant it seriously. I think that's pretty much a given at this point."

I shrugged. "You'd be surprised how many people believe in one but not the other. Not always for the reasons you'd expect. Anyway, we'll call that a yes. Now, lots of things have magic, all right? Werewolves, for example. Some of the people who have magic are, otherwise, indistinguishable from human."

"Otherwise?" Enrico interrupted. "You mean that they're not human?"

I shrugged again. "Depends how you define human. In the biological sense, they're totally human. Mentally, well, magic does things to you. And some of the people with magic use it to do things to themselves that definitely disqualify them from humanity." I paused to see if he had any other questions, but he seemed to be keeping up all right so I kept going.

"Right, so people like that have a lot of names. Technically they're called different things based on what kind of magic they have, how strong they are, sometimes even what philosophy they have...suffice to say that it gets really complicated sometimes. For now, if you just call everybody with magic a mage, you'll get along all right. Food's up."

He blinked. "That was fast."

"Pryce runs a fast kitchen."

"So I'm guessing you're one of them? The mages you mentioned, I mean," Enrico said shortly thereafter, in between bites of his steak sandwich.

"Not quite," I told him with a grin. "I did tell you it was complicated. But I'm close enough to a mage, yeah."

He meditated on that for a minute. Or maybe he was just eating; I know I was. Eventually, though, his curiosity got the better of him. "What's that supposed to mean, then? Are you human or aren't you?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Depends on your point of view, I suppose. Humanity is...not as clear cut as humans imagine it to be, you know? I'm more human than some, and less so than others."

"Yeah? That's the best you can do?" Enrico's voice was still quiet, but had gained an unpleasant edge. "I've put up with this for a long time now, Winter. I understand that you don't like to talk about yourself, but I've had just about enough of your cryptic bullshit." His voice had risen steadily throughout, and by now he was nearly shouting. "So why don't you give me a straight answer for once?"

You ever had one of those moments where you say something that maybe came out a little stronger than you intended, and by some unfortunate coincidence everybody hears it? And then everyone in earshot just sort of stops to stare at you, and all the conversations stop all at once? And you're sitting there looking around, and you realize what just happened, and you just know there's that "oh shit" expression coming over your face?

This was a lot like that, except I wasn't the one who said it. Oh, and also it was a lot worse than you've probably ever had the misfortune to experience.

Just about everyone in the bar stopped—stopped talking, stopped eating, stopped drinking...just stopped. The buzz of conversation, not loud in the first place, quieted to the kind of total silence where you could literally hear a pin drop. And almost everyone turned to look at us. It was obvious that most, although not all, of them had heard what Enrico had said, and the few who hadn't were being rapidly filled in in hushed whispers.

"Shit," I said, thinking furiously. I could see, out of the corner of my eye, that the pair in back had stopped playing. The werewolf, a nice fellow named Roger, was spinning his pool cue idly in one hand and he was smiling, but his eyes were cold and his weight was poised to move quickly. His partner wasn't even bothering with the pretense; she was standing dead still, her cue leveled and pointing, from across the room, straight at Enrico's face.

"Listen very closely. Do exactly what I tell you, and for God's sake don't ask questions. I'll tell you later, okay?" I told Enrico in an urgent whisper. He looked like he wanted to argue, but he must have had some idea of how much colder the atmosphere in that bar had just gotten because he didn't argue. "Stand up and get out, now. Don't say anything to me, don't stop, don't talk to anybody. Get outside, get in your car. I'll be out in a minute. Got it?" He nodded again. Then he pushed his chair back and stood, the noise shockingly loud in the stillness.

Most of the people had gone back to whatever they were doing, and background noise had started up again, although I thought I could detect a certain change in it. Quite a few people, though, were still watching every move Enrico made as he walked back to the door. Several people drew back from him as he passed, and although I couldn't hear it I was pretty sure a couple of them said things to him that were less than polite.

It felt like hours passed before the door swung shut, the hollow boom resounding through the still-quiet room. After a long pause, the tension finally faded, and I let out my breath. Enrico had no idea how lucky he'd just been. If he hadn't gotten out when he did, there was a good chance he would be regretting it right now. Intensely.



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I waited a few minutes, long enough not to look like I was following him out. And also to get a couple to-go boxes for the food, because it had been a long freaking day and I still hadn't had a decent meal since lunch and I wanted my food, darn it.

"So what was going on in there?" Enrico asked as I slid into the seat next to him.

I snorted and set the food on the floorboard between my feet. "Me saving your damn fool life, that's what." I shook my head. "See, this is why I don't like to involve people in this stuff. You try and treat it like it works the same as the world you understand, and it doesn't. I guess I understand, but it never ends well. There are different rules in my world, and if you don't understand that it goes badly for you."

"Have you done this before then?" Enrico asked cautiously.

"I guess you could say I've done it a couple times, yeah. Introduced a couple people to this stuff. Given that they're all dead now I wouldn't say that's a good thing, though." I shook my head again, wearily. "Start driving. You don't want to be hanging around when they start coming out."

He frowned and started the car. "I think you're exaggerating things a bit."

I snorted again. "See, that's exactly the problem I'm talking about. You're used to a world where people take the police seriously. Where you have backup. If you want to last more than five minutes with these people you have to get it through your head right now that this isn't that world." I sighed. "I guess we go back to my house now. We need a place to talk, and this was clearly a bad choice."

His frown had deepened. "Would the people in there really have reacted that badly?" he asked, pulling out of the parking lot.

"Absolutely." I sighed again. "Look, Enrico. Werewolves and such don't have a lot of respect for the law. I guarantee you there were five people in there who could have killed you, and nobody would have ever found the body. At least. It probably wouldn't be the first time, either."

"Shit," he muttered under his breath.

"It's not too late to back out," I reminded him. "Christopher would understand. So would I, for that matter. If I had the choice I might still back out."

"But they'd still be out there, wouldn't they?" He shook his head. "No. I won't live in ignorance. I don't care if it would make me happy."

I grinned. "Good for you. I'm sorry if my explanations seem cryptic; I'm...not very good at this."

He looked at me. "I thought you said you'd explained it to people before."

"Um. Sort of. I've gotten a couple people involved in it, but I don't think I've ever actually explained things to them."

"Why not?"

I frowned and looked out the window. "Because they were dead before I had the chance, for the most part."

That pretty much stopped the conversation.

Fortunately, Pryce's is pretty close to my house. I live way out on the western edge of the city, or—depending on how you count it—past the edge of the city. My old, battered cabin doesn't have any neighbors, probably because nobody in their right mind would consider it a valuable property. I don't have convenient access to anything—especially because I don't have a car, and I hate to bike in the city—but it wasn't remote enough to really have nice surroundings or anything like that.

I guess, from most people's point of view, it's a crappy place to live. I don't look at it that way. It was isolated enough that I had solitude pretty much all of the time, which was important to me. Plus, thanks to the money that I'd had when I first moved out to Colorado, I own the cabin and the lot it sits on. Not paying rent counts for quite a bit.

Enrico parked on the street out front. There weren't any other cars or people in sight; just a broad, barren expanse of scrubland and crabgrass. The terrain was such that, in the dark, you couldn't really see the lights of the city, making it feel oddly secluded from the rest of the world.

Still carrying the food, I managed to unlock the door after a couple tries and let myself in with Enrico close behind me. I flicked the lights on, making a mental note to replace the burned-out bulb later, and grabbed a couple of plates and glasses from the cupboard. I turned around to find Enrico, who had never seen the interior of my home before, looking around himself with an expression of sickened fascination.

"Holy crap, Winter. You actually live here?" he asked, staring at one of the chairs arranged around the kitchen table. I'd made it years ago, before I really had the hang of it, but it looked better than you'd expect, if you could ignore the fact that one of the legs was about six inches shorter than the rest, so I have to use a phone book as a shim to get it to sit straight.

I snorted. "Not everybody can have the glamorous lifestyle of a police officer. Come on." My house didn't originally have a living room, but I don't really need a second bedroom, so I converted it into a combination of living room and storage area, with a bit of office thrown in on top. Once inside, I set both plates down on the small coffee table, along with the glasses and a pitcher of iced tea.

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The heap of silvery fur curled up on the couch, otherwise known as my recently acquired dog, looked at me over her shoulder as I walked in. I thought her icy blue eyes held a certain tone of reproach, which given her unique nature was probably not actually in my imagination.

"Hey Snowflake," I said, collapsing onto the couch next to her. "How's it going?"

She twisted around and shoved her head at me, her expression begging me to scratch her ears. I laughed and obliged her. As always the contact brought with it a sudden rush of sensation; my fingers sliding through her fur, the mouth-watering aroma of the meat I'd brought back with me, an itch on one shoulder that was too much trouble to scratch.

That was all fairly normal for animals, at least when I'm the one we're talking about. That's...what I do, you might say. What I am.

What was less normal was the thought—animal, true, but nevertheless a definite and distinct thought—that slid into my mind underneath as I shifted my fingers over to her shoulder. *You were gone a long time*, it said. I don't want to say that the tone made it a question, because this form of communication had nothing to do with hearing. That's the best way I have, though, to express the way the ideas associated with the words just appeared inside my head.

*It was a long day*, I thought back. I left off scratching her and leaned forward to grab my food. "So where were we?" I asked Enrico.

There was a long pause, then I looked up to see him smiling sheepishly at me. "Honestly I forgot. Guess that thing in the bar drove it out of my mind."

"Oh yeah," I said, pouring myself a glass of iced tea. "I can see why."

"So what was all that about?" he pressed.

I shrugged. "Basically? You broke the rules." I saw by his face that he didn't understand, so I elaborated. "The supernatural crowd tends to respect privacy a lot more than most people. You can ask all the questions you want, but if somebody doesn't want to talk, that's it. You drop the subject and move on."

He waited for me to continue. When it became clear that I didn't intend to, he asked, "That's it? That's why people were freaking out?"

"Yep, pretty much. Everybody could tell by that last sentence that you were pushing for more detail than I wanted to give. We take that sort of thing seriously."

"Why? I mean, I'm all for privacy rights but isn't that a little extreme?"

*He's bothering you*, Snowflake whispered in my head. *Should I kill him for you?*

*Of course not. He's a friend,* I sent back. Fortunately, she was still resting her head on my lap; I don't need a physical connection to establish a mental one, but it helps a lot, and I was tired enough right then that I wanted all the help I could get my hands on.

<sniff>. *You never let me kill anybody.*

I had to work to keep from smiling as I responded to Enrico. "Yeah, maybe so, but..." I paused. "Supernatural life isn't exactly pretty. Pretty much all of these people have at least a few memories they'd rather not consider."

"So does everyone," Enrico said dryly.

"Not quite in the same way," I responded seriously. Then, seeing the doubtful expression on his face, I tried a different tack. "Look, maybe an example might help. What would you think if somebody were to walk up to you tomorrow and start asking you questions. How many weapons are there in your house, how skilled are you with them, where are they, do you keep them loaded, and so on. And they just won't go away. What are you going to assume?"

He thought about it for a minute. "Well, I guess I'd assume that they were planning on doing something to me."

I nodded. "Why?"

"Because there's no reason they'd need to know that kind of thing unless they were planning on attacking me or something. I get what you're saying, Winter, but there's a bit of a difference between that and just asking what you are, don't you think?"

"Is there?" I shrugged. "You have to realize that most of these people are pretty paranoid, because the ones who aren't tend not to last very long. The more you know about somebody, the more effectively you can take advantage of their vulnerabilities. Take Kyra, for example. You could hurt her a lot more than a lot of people, just because you know she's a werewolf."

He frowned. "What, like silver bullets or something?"

I nodded. "Right. You don't even know what being a werewolf *means* and you can still think of using silver as a weapon, just because you happen to know that she's a werewolf. So, from the perspective of these people, if you start pressing for more information, you're trying to kill them."

"I guess I can understand that, then. Still seems like a bit of an overreaction, though. I mean, it's not like I was asking them."

"Yeah, well, most places they wouldn't have cared. General consensus is anybody stupid enough to answer questions like that deserves what they get. But at Pryce's..." I frowned, struggling to express what I meant. Some concepts just sound ridiculous in modern English. "The supernatural world is old-fashioned. Really old-fashioned, in some ways. Part of that is the obligation a guest has to his host, and vice versa."

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Enrico nodded as though he'd expected as much. "But wouldn't that make it less serious? Since I was your guest there?"

"You were my guest, that's true. And that meant you were breaking another taboo by violating your obligation to me, but that's beside the point. See, in another sense, both of us were Pryce's guests there, right? So he also had a right to claim grievance with you, if he wanted." I frowned. "This is the tricky part. You've never been there before, so from their perspective you're an outsider. I'm a regular."

"So what you're saying," he said slowly, "is that they were reacting to an offense to one of their own. Sort of like...they might not like you, but as soon as someone else challenges you on their home turf it turns into an us-versus-them kind of thing."

"Yeah," I said, surprised at his insight. "Yeah, that's it exactly. How did you know?"

"This may shock you," he said dryly, "but that's not exactly an uncommon reaction. Not exclusive to your kind of people, either." Which, I had to admit, was true enough.

Neither of us said anything for a while, which I was fully in favor of. I disapprove of serious conversation when there's food to be eaten. Product of a werewolf upbringing, I suppose.

Once we'd finished eating, and I'd cleared the dishes away, I sat back down across from Enrico on the couch. Snowflake promptly sprawled out across my lap—and I do mean across my lap, with extremities sticking out on every side—and started dozing. I ruffled her ears affectionately, enjoying the simple and pleasant feelings I was picking up from her. I had enough control over my magic these days that I could have blocked them out if I wanted, but I didn't bother. I mean, let's be honest here, most of us can only wish we were that happy.

"Okay," I said. "I know you probably have a bunch of questions, but there's way more to this stuff than we can cover in one night. So for now, how about we focus on what you need to know for tomorrow?"

"Sounds good," Enrico said, his voice having gained an edge again. "Maybe starting with what Christopher said about werewolves coming out of the closet."

"Um. The way I heard it is that they're getting concerned that somebody will actually start paying attention and realize that they've been here all this time. If that were to happen things would get really ugly—think the KKK, except that werewolves really aren't human."

"If they're that scared, why wouldn't they be working harder than ever to stay hidden?" Enrico asked.

I shrugged. "They think it's inevitable that they won't be able to hide forever. If people have to believe in them, they want to make sure it's the right version. Sort of like the difference between believing in Disney and believing in Grimm's."

"So which one's real?"

I shrugged again. "Little of both. They aren't movie monsters, but they aren't cute and cuddly either." I hesitated. "Well, unless they like you. Then they tend to be okay with cuddly, although—"

"Stop," he said, shuddering. "I do not want to know how you were going to finish that sentence. Ever."

I grinned wider. "Oh, that's nothing. You want to know where it gets really disturbing, remind me to tell you some stories about my mother sometime."

"I'll keep that in mind if I ever want to lose my lunch," he said dryly. "So what version do they want people to believe in?"

I frowned. "Actually, I'm not entirely sure. Christopher said something about wanting to seem like respectable citizens. That's the center of it. You'd probably have to ask him for the details." I stood up to get a piece of paper, ignoring Snowflake's sleepy mental protest at being displaced. "In fact, here's his phone number. If you have any questions about werewolves, he's probably a much better source than I am."

"Thanks," he said, also standing. "Get some sleep, Winter. I'll see you tomorrow." He paused. "Actually, what time tomorrow am I supposed to be seeing you?"

I smiled. "See? That's a great example of the sort of question you could ask Christopher instead of me." He laughed. "Good night, Enrico."

I went to bed almost immediately after he left. Snowflake, of course, promptly jumped up next to me and went to sleep. I let *me* fade into *us*, which as a rule I don't do very often, and slipped from that into darkness myself.

Chapter Five

Val didn't come to work the next day either.

I started working on Kyra's order when I got there. She wasn't exactly looking for excellent work or artistic merit, though, so it didn't take my full attention. There was plenty left over to think about how weird this was all starting to look.

Val doesn't miss work often. He's a dedicated workaholic—you have to be, to get to be that skilled—and, as one of the fae, he doesn't have to worry about little things like sickness or hangovers. Granted he wasn't exactly punctual, but generally I can count on him being there for at least a few hours every weekday.

And, while he might not be the easiest boss in the world to work for, one thing he's very good about is letting me know when he won't be there. I'd been working for him almost six years now, and in that time the number of times he'd ditched work without telling me in advance doesn't break double digits. For him to miss two days in a row like that was unprecedented.

Of course, my phone battery had been dead the previous day. And, when I'd turned it on that morning, it had told me I missed a call from him as a result, along with one from Enrico. But normally, I would have expected him to call more than once, or at least leave a message or something.

I tried to call him back once it became clear that he wasn't going to show up. The phone rang nine times, then went to his answering machine. Predictably, the message prompt was just, "Dvalin Kovac. Leave a message."

I didn't leave a message. There was too much I didn't know, and too little I understood about what was happening.

Now, I'm not a normal person. Not in any sense of the word. So I can't really speak for what a normal person does in a circumstance like this. But when I encounter that much weird and inexplicable shit at the same time, I tend to suspect it's related unless and until I learn otherwise. You'd be amazed what an awareness of the real-life boogymen out there can do to your belief in coincidence.

And I am a bit paranoid. Never denied that.

In this case, though, I thought it might be justified. The stuff that had happened yesterday—and which had, in a subtler sense, been happening for months now—just didn't make sense to me. Christopher's reaction, for example. He'd been...calm. Casual.

Too calm? It seemed possible.

See, here's the thing. Werewolves have a tendency toward strong emotional reactions. My semi-foster-father (sort of—it's a complicated relationship) is a great example. Edward has a tendency to

go from roaring with laughter to roaring in anger with little to no transition zone. If you ever hear him calm, you should worry, because he's almost certainly still feeling something and he's hiding it from you.

The other thing to remember about werewolves is that they are, psychologically, different from humans in a few very important ways. They often tend to react in rather...extreme ways to challenges. They get extremely territorial. And the dominant wolves, in particular, react badly to being threatened. The message I'd passed on should have hit all of those levels, with the added unpleasantness of being a total surprise.

So why hadn't he shown it at all? Was it just his ingrained response from spending years living under an insane Alpha? Or something more?

I knew very little about Christopher. I knew he was a decent man, one of the few werewolves Kyra has a pleasant thing to say about. When he was still just a high-ranking wolf in Roland's pack rather than the Alpha, he had often intervened to help shield the more vulnerable wolves from the insanity of Roland and his cronies. And, as I had noted before, he must have had an unbelievable poker face to survive that pack without either provoking Roland to kill him or going batty himself.

As I worked, I found myself going over what he'd said in my mind. He'd come up with a theory about what had happened almost instantly, I remembered that much. It sounded obvious after he'd said it—of course a fae mercenary suggested a fae employer, of course a fae imitating a werewolf in a way that would generate lethally bad publicity was a threat—but then, so did plenty of other explanations. It could have been a werewolf that hired the fae—I knew there had to be wolves opposed to going public. There were humans who already knew about the supernatural, too, who had reasons to want it to stay firmly in the closet.

So why had Christopher jumped to the conclusion that it was a fae? Was it really that obvious, and it was only my own idiocy (coupled with a knock to the head, don't forget that) that kept me from seeing it before I spoke to him? Or was it that he already knew something I didn't?

And was it suspicious that he'd changed the subject immediately afterward? Logically, that made sense if he were lying to me; tell the mark a believable fiction, then move on as quickly as you can without seeming suspicious, so that they don't have time to think about it and see the holes in your logic. It didn't help that then he'd dropped an emotional bombshell on me in the form of being invited to the pack, one that—with my history—might well have been tailor-made to keep me off balance.

Well. Shit. I couldn't even begin to guess how much of that was real and how much was just my own paranoid tendencies. I mean, I know as well as anyone how little it really takes to make a conspiracy theory.

I hate feeling like that. I mean, seriously. Never mind joining the pack; now I was starting to remember why I left the Khan's pack in the first place.

I don't know if there are any great minds on record as saying "werewolves are trouble," but if there are, they were a genius. Really.



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When I finished roughing out a table leg, I sat down and checked my phone again. Kyra had texted to say that our meeting with the chief of police was at one-thirty which—I had to check—was in a little under two hours. Other than that, nothing had changed.

I frowned. Thinking of Conn had reminded me of something. Given that he was the one actually managing the joint motion between the werewolves and the fae to go public, he definitely needed to know if there was a rogue faerie out killing people and making it look like a werewolf.

Besides which, if Christopher were serious about that, he should have already called Conn to tell him about it.

The phone rang a half-dozen times before being answered by Erin, Conn's youngest child and only daughter. "Hallo," she said brightly, the tone not quite covering an underlying coldness. Erin and I were sort of similar, except that she takes all my paranoia and dislike of strangers and multiplies them by a thousand or so.

Probably because her function is to be the Khan's assassin. When somebody causes trouble—a werewolf breaking the rules, a reporter following crazy stories a bit too closely, even just some poor fool who gets too close to the truth and reacts badly—somebody needs to fix things. Most of the time in North America (and Iceland, and Japan, whose wolves also answer to the Khan) she was that person.

"Hey, Erin," I said.

"Winter!" she said, the cold undertone vanishing. "How you doing? You never call."

"I know," I sighed, "I know. I'm a terrible person. Is your father there by any chance?"

She sighed theatrically. "I knew you wouldn't have called just to talk to me. He's not around, sorry."

I frowned. "All right. What about Dolph?" If Erin was an assassin, her brother Dolph was more like a diplomat. More or less the same function, except that one solved problems with fangs and bullets while the other prefers the infinitely more treacherous weapons of contracts and backroom deals.

"Fraid not. He's with Conn in Reykjavik."

"Iceland? What the hell are they doing there?"

"Summit meeting about the big reveal coming up." Erin's tone suggested that she didn't fully approve of said reveal—or maybe just said meeting; it was hard to tell.

"Wait a second, I thought the fae had already agreed to the deal."

"Sure," she said wryly. "But now that my father's got them to agree some of the European wolves want in on the action."

I sighed. "I hate politics."

"Seconded, motion passed," she agreed. "You want me to take a message for one of them? The summit's only supposed to last 'til Friday."

"No thanks. I have Dolph's cell number; I'll just try that." I paused as a thought occurred to me. "Actually, Erin, maybe you could help with something. If a fae wanted to hire somebody for a hit, somebody who maybe wouldn't ask very many questions, who would they ask?"

"Depends on the fae, I'd guess."

"Well, sure. But who are some popular choices?"

"No idea. Sorry. The fae aren't really my area of expertise. I could talk to a few people in the trade I'm acquainted with. Samuel Black, maybe, or Blind Keith might know..."

I sighed. "No thanks. I'll figure it out."

"Have fun. Sounds like it might be getting exciting out there. Call if you need anything, you hear?"

"Of course. Thanks, Erin."

Conn was the one who answered Dolph's cell phone when I called. It's the sort of thing that happens around him so often you just sort of get used to it. And no, I don't know how he does it. I'm not sure if Conn really does know everything, or if he's just unnaturally lucky and good at faking it. Whatever it is, it happens way more than coincidence accounts for.

"Hello, Winter," he said without preamble. And without my having to tell him who I was, although that might have been caller ID for all I know. "What do you need?"

"Conn," I said. "There's a fae mercenary in town who killed somebody and made it look like a werewolf. When I followed up on it, he said that it was supposed to send a message to Christopher."

"So why are you calling me?"

I shrugged—Conn couldn't see it, but that never seems to stop people on the phone. And besides, with Conn there was no guarantee that he *couldn't* see it. "He seemed to think that the message was that if the werewolves go public, they'll keep killing people to start a witch-hunt. I figure that makes it something you need to know about."

He laughed. "That's putting it lightly." There was a brief pause, during which you could practically hear him frowning. "Christopher called me last night. His story was the same as yours except that he left out that it was you that found the mercenary."

Well. If Christopher were bringing the Khan into things, that suggested that he was telling the truth. Either that or he was willing to take a much larger risk than I would have guessed. Lying to me was

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one thing, but lying to the Khan...well, suffice to say that if he found out, Christopher would regret it. Intensely, but very briefly.

From the other side of the phone, I could hear someone start screaming in the background. They were speaking what I presumed was Icelandic, and I couldn't understand a word, but it wasn't hard to figure out what was going on when somebody screamed back in Spanish. Get more than one Alpha in the same room and a certain number of screaming arguments is inevitable.

Conn sighed. "I have to go deal with this. I'll be in touch." He hung up without saying anything more.

Surprisingly enough, I was the first one to arrive for the meeting. Granted I'd left pretty much right after I finished talking with Conn, but still. Considering that I was the only guy without transportation, you'd think I'd be the last one there.

I wasn't entirely sure how formal this meeting was supposed to be, so I'd even taken the time to make myself appear marginally presentable before I left. I say marginally because golden eyes and charcoal-gray hair, both of which I'd inherited from my father, tend to make anything beyond that rather difficult to attain.

Kyra was the next to arrive, parking her battered vehicle down the street and walking over to join me. There was plenty of space in front of the police headquarters, but I guess she didn't want to be too obvious. I could understand that.

"Hey," she said in the too-casual voice that tells everyone who knows her that she's feeling nervous. "You been here long?"

I shrugged. "Five minutes or so." We were still fifteen minutes early.

"So what's the plan?" she asked.

"Um. I thought you were the one with the plan."

"Hey, you're in charge here, remember? You're supposed to be the brains of the outfit."

"Great. I guess we play it by ear, then."

"Wait a second. What's with this we stuff? I'm just here to give the demonstration. You're the one doing the talking."

"Right. Why am I doing this again?"

"You agreed," she said pitilessly. "Deal with it."

"You're a great friend. Speaking of which," I checked the time and saw that it was only twenty after one. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you." I proceeded to lay out the basics of what Christopher had said to me, focusing on the part where he invited me into the pack.

"That's great news!" Kyra exclaimed once I finished. Then she paused. "It is great news, right?"

"Maybe," I answered. "But there're a few things bothering me. Do you remember how exactly he phrased it at that pack meeting?"

She hesitated. "Well," she said slowly. "No. Because that meeting never happened."

I froze. "Are you sure?"

"Winter. I haven't missed a meeting in over a year. He declared your status as a friend of the pack not long after Roland was killed, and reaffirmed it a month or two ago. That's it." She shook her head. "Besides, it doesn't make any sense to do something like that now. The pack's still pretty unstable without bringing you into things. He's right about how they feel about you, but you'd think he'd wait a while to do anything about it."

"Why?" I asked, curious. I'd heard a few things from Conn that suggested that Christopher wasn't able to hold his pack together as tightly as they should be. If that had progressed to the point that the pack was actually beginning to fall apart, things might get very bad.

She shrugged. "The new structure's still settling into place after Garrett killed a few of our wolves." She grimaced in distaste. "Like me being second, for example. I wish I knew whose brilliant idea that was so I could strangle him." I managed to keep from whistling innocuously or anything else that would give away the fact that it had been my idea, but only with difficulty. "Then," she continued, "there's all the new wolves in town."

My ears perked up at that, metaphorically speaking. I wasn't quite far enough removed from humanity in a physical sense for them to perk up actually. "What new wolves in town?"

"We were under strength even before Garrett. After, well, we needed a few more wolves. So Christopher arranged for a few immigrations." She shrugged again. "People are still getting used to them. Figuring out how they fit in to things."

Well. Stranger and stranger. I trusted Kyra, to an extent possibly unmatched in the world. And she was telling me that at least one thing Christopher had said was a blatant lie.

It was entirely possible that he'd made it up just to soothe my concerns about the pack's opinion. Presenting a prospective werewolf formally to the pack was, as he'd said, entirely optional. Especially if he really had known that the pack would accept me, which seemed at this point fairly likely.

Of course, it was also possible that it had been part of a carefully calculated deception. I'd already been considering the possibility that he had been duping me, and the fact that he'd lied to me at

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least once made it seem just that much more likely. I'm no psychologist, but in my experience people who lie about small things will also lie about big things, given a good enough reason.

My unpleasant thoughts were, thankfully, interrupted by Enrico's arrival. He'd apparently parked out of sight, because he walked around the corner without my ever seeing his car.

"Hey," I said to him. "You ready?" It was barely five minutes till our meeting.

"As I'm likely to be." Enrico glanced in our direction for the first time as he approached, and sighed despairingly. "Don't you ever dress up for something, Winter?" he asked rhetorically.

I looked briefly at my Hawaiian shirt, decorated with a lovely orchid print, and cargo pants. "This is dressed up," I informed him honestly. I don't bother with nice clothes for the most part. They're expensive, uncomfortable, and difficult to move in. More importantly, they have almost no pockets, which I find to be a lethal flaw in clothing. Next to his understated suit, though, I had to admit I looked a little bit tasteless. I mean, even Kyra had found a decent pair of slacks and a buttoned shirt for the occasion.

Enrico, on his home ground, was the one to take the lead through the building. The people at the front desk let us by without question. Luckily, they were willing to take his word that we were safe people, and didn't insist that we walk through the metal detector or anything. It hadn't even occurred to me until that moment that loading my pockets with concealed weapons, some of which even a normal person off the street would recognize as such, might be a bad idea before this meeting. I mean, come on. If anybody should understand paranoia, it's the police, right?

Enrico led us unerringly through a maze of brightly lit, windowless corridors to a simple wooden door that bore the name Albert JACKSON, CHIEF OF POLICE. The door was firmly closed when we got there, and when Enrico tried the handle it was locked. I could hear voices from inside, but I couldn't make out anything of what was being said.

It probably shouldn't have surprised me that our meeting didn't start on time. After all, it seems like no appointment actually happens on schedule. The three of us sat in surprisingly comfortable chairs across the hallway from the office, and waited. And waited. All told, it was probably fifteen or twenty minutes before the door opened and a short man in an expensive suit walked out. If his posture was anything to go by, the conversation had ended rather badly for him.

Enrico waited a moment to make sure it was really over, then walked up and knocked on the doorframe. Kyra and I took a deep breath (metaphorically—we weren't like breathing in tandem or anything) before we followed him over. I was feeling a lot more uncertain that this was a good idea now that it was actually happening, and I could tell that Kyra was feeling the same way. What had seemed entirely reasonable when Christopher described it was now striking me as a fairly stupid way to go about things.

This was a bad time to change my mind, though. So I squared my shoulders, pretended to know what I was doing, and followed the other two in.

The Chief of Police had a surprisingly small office, all things considered. Not tiny or anything like that. But given that he was, to the best of my knowledge, a sort of important person locally, it was a lot smaller than I had expected.

There were a couple of big windows to the left of the door. A few potted plants, which looked like they were doing pretty well. The desk, which took up a fair amount of the room, was liberally coated with papers, file folders, and notebooks. There weren't any family photos or keepsakes that I could see, giving the office a sort of grim, institutional feel.

I had plenty of time to take all of this in while the Chief was on the phone. I could hear both parts pretty well, but the conversation wasn't the eavesdropping treasure trove you might imagine. From what I could tell, it sounded like he was attempting to explain to an exceedingly dull woman that he wasn't actually the right person to call for information on tax breaks. It took him a few tries to get the point across. And yes, I had to work to keep from laughing.

"Sorry about that," he said when he eventually managed to hang up.

"Not a problem," I assured him, stepping forward very slightly to establish myself as the leader. Humans don't generally think about things like that, but that doesn't mean that you don't notice them.

Chief Jackson studied me for a moment. His gaze was...uncomfortable. Nothing like some of the people I've had stare at me in my life, but I still got the distinct impression that he saw more of me than I saw of him. "You must be Mr. Wolf, then." He wasn't asking.

I gave him my best winning smile, which admittedly will never win an award. "Please. Call me Winter." I wasn't speaking rhetorically. I despise my last name. I mean, I understand where my mother was coming from and all, but come on. Winter Wolf? That sounds more appropriate to a comic book than anything.

He nodded slowly. It was interesting; watching him, you could practically see him slot the information into place. "Right. So what did you want to talk about?" The question was clearly directed at me. He hadn't missed the subtle deference Kyra and Enrico were paying me.

Clearly, the Chief of Police was accustomed to paying attention to the little things. That's dangerous in a person.

It's easy to see too much.

I didn't answer him right away. Instead, I pushed the door closed, and then locked it firmly. I could feel his attention on me as I closed the blinds, casting the room into an odd half-light. I wasn't entirely sure how this conversation would go, but I was certain I didn't want anyone else to know about it. In fact, ideally no one would ever know it happened at all.

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That accomplished I sat down across the desk from the Chief and thought about how to approach the subject. Enrico sat beside me, while Kyra hung back in the corner. She resembled an exceptionally pleasant-looking thug, even with her nice clothes on.

I am not good at complicated word games and subtleties. Oh, sure, I can do them if I have to, but as a rule? Not my first choice. So, as I usually did when I had any option at all, I settled on the direct approach.

"Is this room bugged?"

I felt Enrico tense beside me, and even Kyra was a little startled by my bluntness. Not that you'd know it to look at her; the only reason I could tell was because I had years of experience with her personally, and a lifetime's worth when it comes to werewolves in general. Having magic helps too, at least when one of the main things it lets you do is form connections with predators. I was familiar enough with Kyra that when she was nearby, I had to work not to pick up surface thoughts and feelings from her on a subconscious level.

Chief Jackson, though, seemed to see nothing odd about my question. He leaned back a little in his expensive-looking office chair and considered me for a moment before answering. "Not that I know of. And if someone did bug it, there'll be hell to pay when I find out."

Good enough for me. "Officer Jackson," I began. Paused. "Is it supposed to be Chief Jackson?" Wow, did I feel like an idiot then. I mean, seriously. When you have to ask a question like that, you know that you've made a mistake.

He waved one hand as though it couldn't have mattered less. "Not important. Call me Albert."

I wondered idly whether everyone got the informal approach, or it was because Christopher had been smoothing the way for us. "All right then, Albert." I leaned forward slightly, placing my elbows on the desk. "What I'm about to tell you is secret. Unless you hear otherwise from me or one of my associates," I gestured vaguely at Kyra, "it doesn't go beyond this room. Is that acceptable to you?" Too late I realized he would probably think I was including Enrico in that comment.

"I'm willing to treat it as confidential information," he said slowly. "But you realize that if it comes up in court or anything like that, I'm obligated to disclose it."

I smiled reassuringly. "That won't be a problem. If things get that bad, I doubt it'll matter anymore anyway." I paused. "I have your word on that?"

"How quaint," he said, with the first trace of humor I'd heard from him. "Yes. You have my word."

And he had no idea what that meant. See, the supernatural world has a totally different set of priorities than the normal one. A lot of things just don't have any meaning. The law, for instance. Most people in the community couldn't care less about mortal law, literally. It's not even an annoyance. There

are lots of things like that. Money. Fame, outside of supernatural circles. To a lot of them morality as I understood it was literally a meaningless concept.

On the other hand, there are things that carry more weight. Obligations, for example. As I'd explained to Enrico, even a minor obligation is literally a matter of life and death on a regular basis. Likewise, favors are a currency infinitely more highly valued than wealth. Related to that, a promise can be extremely important.

The consequences of breaking your word vary a lot. With the werewolves, for example, you probably don't have to worry about anything except...call it excommunication, for lack of a better word. No werewolves, and nobody on good terms with werewolves, will so much as give you the time of day if a prominent Alpha accuses you of breaking a promise. Not pleasant, but not unbearable either.

Other groups are scarier. Break contract with a powerful mage or, God help you, a mage clan, and you're a dead man. If you really made them angry you will probably quite literally beg to die before the end. They take insults like that very seriously. Other beings, most prominently the fae, are bound by certain rules. Not telling a lie, for example; I don't know why, but the fae literally cannot speak a word that isn't true. I don't understand a fraction of those rules, but apparently a big part of it has to do with balance and debts. Break a promise to one of them, and you're solidly on the wrong side of a major debt.

And, because you didn't outline how it would be paid beforehand, they can collect in whatever way they like. By making you an indentured servant for the rest of your (probably very long) life, for example. Or by selling you to one of the nastier beings to be served as a main course.

Suffice to say that if you ever give your word, even on a tiny thing, you would be very wise to keep it. Which, really, applies whether it's a supernatural being or not. All else aside, after all, breaking promises is rude.

"Well," I said cheerfully. "That's good. So what would you say if I told you werewolves are real?" In my peripheral vision I could just see Enrico's expression turn from moderately hopeful to somewhere between horrified and disgusted.

"Well," the Chief said in that slow considering voice that is somehow more insulting than outright laughter, "I don't know that I'd say much of anything. On account of I'd be too busy laughing at you and calling security." His eyes hardened. "Now, if you don't have anything else to discuss, kindly stop wasting my time and see yourself out." He plucked a folder seemingly at random from the mess on his desk and started leafing through it.

I sighed. This was so not going how I would have liked. I gestured vaguely at Kyra, who cleared her throat and walked forward out of the corner she'd been standing in.

"What?" Chief Jackson said irritably, looking up just in time to see Kyra drop her shirt on the floor. He blinked, then flushed with anger and opened his mouth, presumably to berate her for



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impropriety or something like that. I never found out what he meant to say, because right about then Kyra finished undressing and started to change.

Theoretically she could have skipped right to the turning-into-a-wolf part. I say theoretically because, in practical terms, things tend to rip when you make a serious anatomical change without getting out of your clothing first. The Hulk had it easy in that regard, believe me.

Watching the were turn into wolf is a bit of an incredible experience. Especially the first time. I was seven the first time I saw it, and the memory is still as fresh and sharp as ever. Since then I've probably seen werewolves change at least a thousand times, but some part of the fascination still refuses to fade.

It's hard for me to look away from a changing wolf. For all sorts of reasons.

At first the Chief probably thought Kyra was having a seizure or something. She dropped to her knees, her eyes half-closed but still showing way more white than eyes really ought to. Her whole body shook once, and then started to shift slowly around. Kyra's magic seemed to fill the room with the aroma of wolf and lavender, like a perfume for me alone. That was the surface, anyway, the part that was common to all werewolves; I couldn't get any of the subtler stuff without concentrating, but I knew from experience that her power smelled of shadows and secrets and freshly spilled blood. And yes, that's just as ominous as it sounds.

The change is not especially quick. This might surprise you if you've taken the time to actually read the older legends, in which the process is usually quick and simple as breathing. There are shapeshifting magics that can do that, but a werewolf's isn't one of them.

So we sat—or, in my case, stood—and watched for about a total of fifteen minutes while Kyra did her thing. The room was dead quiet, which meant that we could hear the noises she was making with perfect clarity. They were...discomfiting even for a veteran like me. The near-silent whimpers were the least of it. The sounds of bones breaking, shifting around beneath her skin, and rearticulating were infinitely worse. Don't even get me started about the cartilage.

I knew from experience that it wasn't exactly a treat visually either, although I was watching the Chief rather than Kyra. It wasn't like I really needed to see it to know what was going on. Every change is different, but there are only so many ways that bones and muscles sliding around under somebody's skin can move.

For his part, Chief Jackson looked to be taking it pretty well, which was a relief. That was why I was watching him, and also why I had stood up as soon as Kyra made her move. If he decided to do something stupid, I would really prefer to be ready to do something about it.

Here's the thing about people. Most of the time, they're pretty predictable. I mean, that's what society's for, right? We have these complicated, senseless patterns and rituals for how we communicate precisely to ensure that we can guess how a person will react to what we do. You don't have to think too hard, for example, to know what to say when you check out at the grocery store.

When those rules break down, though? Then people are hard to predict. What he was seeing was a threat to his world. I don't mean that in a literal sense—the werewolves were hardly going to rampaging in the streets or anything like that. They have too much invested in this world to want to harm it. But in terms of how he saw the world, what he understood existence to be, people like Kyra—or me—represented a very fundamental threat.

Unless you know somebody very well, you can't predict how they will react to that. Even if you do, it's chancy. One of the few people I'd actually seen react, who I would have said I knew extremely well, pepper sprayed me in the face and ran away, possibly screaming. I wasn't exactly paying attention to that detail at the moment, so I'm not sure.

On the other end of the spectrum, Erin had once told me a story about a rather inebriated man who, for reasons I've never completely understood, had just seen her transform right in front of him. Rather than fear, he reacted by immediately trying to hit on her.

The best part? She wasn't turning into a human. Not that there's anything intrinsically wrong with flirting with a werewolf in fur, but it always strikes me as a bit icky. Especially if you're a human yourself, because there is no way I can imagine that encounter ending that isn't disturbing to contemplate.

The Chief of Police was somewhere in the middle. He wasn't calm, cool, and collected, but he didn't go for a gun. Or the phone, which I was frankly more concerned about. I could handle guns a lot more easily than the whole city finding out about werewolves before Conn's organized reveal.

Eventually, after what felt like a short eternity, Kyra was finished. Where she had been kneeling—or, later, laying—was a medium-sized wolf. Well, medium for werewolves. That translates to about two hundred pounds or so, which (for those not conversant with canines) is bigger than pretty much any actual wolf.

You may notice that that's also bigger than most humans. Including Kyra, who only weighed about one-thirty as a human. Where does the extra mass come from? Beats me. I heard an explanation, but it involved way too much math for the likes of me. I am not, generally, fond of numbers. The short answer is that it involves other dimensions which may or may not exist as we use the term, and that unless you're a freaking quantum physicist or something it's better to just not worry about it.

"Well," Jackson said, staring down at the brown-furred, green-eyed wolf sitting in the middle of his office floor. "I suppose I owe you an apology."

"No need," I said easily, sitting down now that the danger was passed. "It comes as a bit of a shock to most people."

He gave me a sharp glance. "Not to you?" he asked.

Damn. He might not look like much, but the man didn't miss much. "Not especially. You could say I was raised with it, and that makes a big difference."

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He raised one eyebrow, and a surge of jealousy went through me. I've always wanted to be able to do that, but whenever I try my face contorts to such an extent that I look like I'm wearing a Halloween mask or something. "I'm sure. So why did you just show me that? Assuming I haven't started hallucinating, that is."

"Maybe we were just sharing information with the police out of the kindness of our hearts," I said innocently.

He snorted. "Yeah, and I'm sure you have a bridge you'd like to sell me too. Now can you cut to the chase? I have another appointment in fifteen minutes."

Wow. That was...an impressively cool reaction.

"At some point in the near future," I said, picking my words more carefully now. "Werewolves will no longer be as...secretive as they currently are. As I'm sure you can imagine, this is a matter of some concern to a great many people."

"Great. And I get to be one of these people why?"

"It has occurred to certain individuals that the transition would be a great deal smoother if there were people on hand ready to assist in it." I sighed. "I'll be frank with you, Albert. Humanity—and America in particular—doesn't have a shining history when it comes to bigotry. It would be helpful if people such as yourself were to talk about how useful, law-abiding, and all around awesome werewolves are when this happens."

"Makes sense," he said slowly. "So I guess that makes you the talker, her the bruiser, and Rossi the inside man, right?"

I blinked. "What?" I said stupidly.

He snorted again, but without any significant humor this time. His eyes had gone granite-hard. "I'm not an idiot. You're talking around it, but I know what's going on. So what happens if I don't? Blackmail? Or do I just meet with an unfortunate accident and someone more amenable takes over?"

I suddenly realized what he was talking about. "You think we're threatening you?" I asked incredulously.

He eyed me. "Well, it does seem that way, now doesn't it? What with the Mafioso approach and everything. So which is it?"

I probably shouldn't have laughed then, but I did. Long and hard, while everybody else in the room stared at me. "Oh," I said eventually. "Sorry. That's just..." I shook my head and started over. "There's nothing like that going on here, Chief. If you don't want to do it, that's fine. I'd appreciate it if you would hear me out first, but you can always say no." I paused. "Although I was serious about that secrecy bit. If people find out about this too soon, it might get ugly."

A faint flush of embarrassment crossed the Chief's features. "Oh. Sorry. What exactly were you trying to say, then?"

I shrugged. "Basically just that. We'd appreciate it if, when the time comes, you'd speak publicly on the werewolves' behalf."

He frowned. "But if you're not threatening me, why would I lie on your behalf?" He eyed me again. "I hope you're not trying to bribe me."

I smiled. "Sort of, but not in the sense you're thinking. Our idea was that by the time we'd be asking anything of you, it wouldn't be lying." I leaned forward again, and met the Chief's eye steadily for the first time. "Think of this as a bargain between two groups. You represent the police. I represent the local werewolf pack. We're willing to prove to you that werewolves are decent citizens. We're willing to help you out. In return, we'd want your support."

He considered that for a long moment. "What kind of help are you offering?"

I shrugged again. "Depends what you're willing to take. Not all of the stories you hear about werewolves are true, but some of them are." I gestured vaguely at Kyra. "My friend here is at least as good as any police dog you have. She's smarter, stronger, and I guarantee you that with a little practice she can do anything they can." Kyra gave me a withering look, which made me smile again.

"So if you want, I can arrange for a half-dozen or so wolves to help you out in that regard." I paused. "They might want compensation for their time, the same as anyone else. That's between you and them."

He nodded slowly. "Reasonable enough. So I have two questions. One, what exactly do you want from us in trade? And two, what's his role in all this?" He gestured at Enrico, in case it wasn't perfectly clear who he meant. "I get it that the girl's here to provide a demonstration, and you're obviously the negotiator. So why'd you bring him?"

Enrico broke in for the first time. "They thought I might smooth things over. Not that that worked or anything," he said dryly.

"And also, I'm not actually a negotiator," I told him. "I'm just here to present you with this offer. If you're thinking about accepting, there's somebody else you can talk to. You'd probably do better to ask him your first question, too." I nudged Kyra with my foot.

She looked up at me, then stood and turned to face the door expectantly.

"Come on," I said. "You're smarter than that. If we leave with you looking like that, somebody's bound to notice."

She sighed—and it's amazing how well werewolves can sigh, considering—before walking back into the middle of the room and starting the change back. It took about another fifteen minutes, during which time nobody said anything. Enrico and Chief Jackson were both staring at Kyra, because watching

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the change once or twice doesn't make it familiar enough to no longer be fascinating. I wasn't quite as enthralled, but I figured that at this point I'd either sold the deal or not. More talking wouldn't make a difference.

Eventually, Kyra was fully human in shape again. She dressed efficiently and without any sign of modesty or self-consciousness, which was entirely in character for a werewolf. She went right back to lurking in the corner, without having said so much as a single word since we'd walked in the door.

I met the Chief's eye again. "So. What'll it be?"

There was a long pause. "Who do I call?" he said finally. He sounded reluctant.

I smiled at him, showing plenty of teeth. "I was hoping you'd ask," I said, reaching over to set a business card in front of him, on one of the few clean spots of the desk. It was plain white with a phone number printed on it in jet black. No ornamentation. No name.

And yes, Christopher does enough dealings of this sort to make up a business card specifically for the occasion.

Chapter Six

"You think he'll do it?" Kyra asked once we were outside again.

I didn't know the man well enough to tell, so I looked at Enrico. He shrugged. "Beats me."

"Not our problem anyway," I said firmly. "Right now it's between him and Christopher."

Kyra nodded. "You want to go give him the report, then?" she asked me.

"Probably better." I glanced at Enrico. "I'd appreciate it if you'd come with us. There's something I've been meaning to show you."

He looked at me curiously, then shrugged. "Why not."

I rode with Kyra. We didn't talk much; neither of us is especially chatty by nature. That's probably a big part of why we get along. Most of the people I've known are always talking whether they have something to say or not, and at some point that starts to irritate me.

Besides which, while Kyra's car is a battered piece of junk and it's frankly amazing that it still runs, she had an excellent stereo in it. On the way to Christopher's house we listened to several songs which I was pretty sure she'd gotten from Aiko. They were odd, to say the least, but not actually bad. My favorite was the one that sounded like a cross between ragtime and speed metal.

There was no one else at the house this time. I was, to a certain extent, glad for this. What Christopher said about my feelings towards the pack as a whole might well be true—I hadn't thought about it enough to be sure yet. Regardless, though, most of them were near-total strangers to me, individually. And, however this ended up going, I value my privacy quite highly.

Enrico waited downstairs while Kyra and I went upstairs. I wasn't entirely sure why; he might have been sending a subtle message to me or the Alpha, or just trying to stay out of business that wasn't his.

There's not a lot to say about our actual meeting with Christopher. Basically, we told him our various impressions of the Chief, along with what he'd said, and that was it. Whatever he'd said, the Alpha almost always does any real negotiations. We'd just been sent to sort of feel out the territory.

I was betting Christopher would be getting a phone call pretty soon.

I didn't mention my growing suspicion to him. After all, so far I had very little to base it on, aside from a gut feeling and what Kyra had told me. I didn't want to confront him unless and until I had proof positive. Even then I would probably not act directly. It isn't really my style unless I have no other choice.

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So, long story short, it took about ten interminable minutes from start to finish. Christopher spent most of it doing paperwork, which tells you something about how little was actually being said. Once that was finished, we went back down for a conversation which was—at least to me—enormously more important.

Enrico was standing at one of the tall paned windows in the main room downstairs. We were close enough to the edge of the city that it looked out onto largely undisturbed forest. It looked remarkably primeval, considering that I knew for a fact there was a house not a hundred and fifty yards away in that direction.

"Hey," he greeted us without turning around. "How'd it go?"

I shrugged. "It went. Now come on, there's something you need to see here."

He smiled thinly. "Great. What is it?"

Rather than answer his question directly, I asked Kyra, "Is the safe room attached to the building?"

She gave me a look that suggested she knew what I was doing, and she did not approve. All she said, though, was, "Yeah. Back this way."

She led the way out of the room and down a short hallway I didn't think I'd ever seen before, stopping at a simple wooden door. You didn't need magic or semi-werewolf supersenses to feel either her displeasure or Enrico's curiosity.

I stood facing the door for a long moment, working up my nerve. As far as appearances go, you would think this was ridiculous. It was a cheap door set in an out-of-the-way part of the house. It was on the ground floor, for obvious reasons. If you didn't know better, you would think that it probably led to a closet or something.

I knew better. I knew, at least in the general sense, what was on the other side. And I did not have pleasant memories associated with werewolf safe rooms.

Eventually, I opened it and flicked on the light switch on the other side. It was like opening a door into another world.

I should make something clear here, just so you understand what the contrast was like. Christopher isn't ostentatious or self-important, and he values the pack more than himself. That said, his house is *nice*. Comfy couches. A stone fireplace that probably cost more than most cars. Nice furniture, for the most part, most of it handmade. His desk is an antique, handcrafted from fine mahogany, which is literally worth more than every piece of furniture in my house combined. The overall impression is one of understated wealth.

On the other side of this door, though, was something completely different. It was a descending staircase, narrow enough to feel claustrophobic in the extreme. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all bare concrete, lit by a handful of naked light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. There was no banister.

I led the way down. Enrico followed me after a moment's hesitation, and Kyra was close behind him. When she shut the door, it echoed with a sort of quiet finality more intimidating than a loud boom could ever be.

At the bottom of fifteen steps was another door. This one was more than impressive enough to make up for the first one's simplicity. The door and jamb alike were solid steel, sunk into the concrete of the wall. It looked like it would take a battering ram to bring it down, and I knew from experience that this wasn't entirely inaccurate.

There are bank vaults with less impressive protection than a pack's safe room.

Enrico spoke for the first time as I opened the latches. "What is this place?" he asked. His voice had a hushed quality to it that you more commonly find in churches and sacred groves.

I grunted and swung the door open. It opened inward, and needless to say there wasn't even a handle on the inside surface. The door wasn't locked, of course. That door never locks.

Not from the outside, at least.

Kyra was the one who actually answered him, her voice equally hushed. "It's the safe room. Kind of a prison, holding area, and bomb shelter all at once."

I checked that the door was solidly propped open—we could probably get out without too much difficulty if it swung closed, but still. I guarantee that after you've spent any length of time in a safe room, the idea of being locked in for even a short time is enough to raise your hackles. Then I stepped inside and flicked the lights on.

I'd never been inside this particular safe room. They're all modeled on more or less the same design, though, and about as simple as a room can be. Just a concrete box, which in this case was about ten feet square. A little smaller than some, but not a lot.

There were no decorations. There were no windows, unlike the last one I'd been in, which had barred clerestory windows near the ceiling. Light was provided by a couple of unadorned fluorescent fixtures on the ceiling.

It's a bit of a challenge to make a prison to hold a determined werewolf. They have supernatural strength, supernatural healing powers, intelligence at least on a par with humans, and often centuries of experience. That's a pretty tall order in a cell.

Safe rooms meet it. All of the walls—and floor, and ceiling—are reinforced concrete with a web of magically supercharged silver woven throughout. With the exception of the ceiling, they're backed by at least twenty feet of packed dirt, just in case the inmate manages to get through the concrete. The



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door, in addition to weighing about two hundred pounds, is only steel on the outside. The inside is stainless steel with another layer of silver over top, and it has a silver core, too. The locks are equivalent to those on a vault door, and that's on top of the total absence of a handle on the inside. What's more, the way it's designed is such that you can't just force the locks from the inside by main force. You would have to rip the entire door, including frame, out of the concrete it's set into. Even when they have windows, they're six inches wide, a foot deep, and have more steel-and-silver bars across them.

There are not many ways to escape a safe room once the door locks. They were designed to hold even the most desperate wolves captive indefinitely, and they're very good at it.

As soon as I walked in, the presence of so much silver started to irritate me. It wasn't physically painful, between the fact that I wasn't touching it and that most of it was insulated by metal or concrete. But still. It started to get to you after a while.

Even more than that, there was a sort of...atmosphere in the room. One of the basic rules of magic is that energies leave a residue of sorts. If you've ever read about, or experienced, a haunted location that inexplicably disturbs and frightens everyone who goes there, that's probably what's up. Humans, whether mages or not, all have a certain amount of magic, and a certain sensitivity to magical energy as well. Once the metaphysical atmosphere gets bad enough, it starts to mess with anybody.

This was a bad place, where bad things happened on a regular basis.

When I spoke, I was every bit as quiet and reverent as the others had been. It seemed to demand it, somehow. "This is the pack safe room," I told Enrico. "Every pack has something pretty much like it. They're designed, first and foremost, to be a cell for werewolves."

He looked around briefly, and I could practically see the gears turning in his head. "Doesn't look like there's much capacity," he commented.

I chuckled grimly. "No. It's not meant for long-term solutions. Sometimes a werewolf loses control temporarily, though, and the pack needs somewhere to put them for a while. Usually it's due to injury or serious stress, although some newer wolves need it during the full moon."

"So it's not for punishment?" Enrico sounded relieved, somehow.

I shook my head. "Not really. Most of the time, if a werewolf commits an infraction that doesn't merit death, they just get a stern lecture and maybe some added duties or something. Occasionally corporal punishment comes into play, but that's about it."

He thought about that for a moment. "So why did you want me to see this?"

"Because this is your last chance," I said easily.

He froze. "Last chance for what?" he asked cautiously, as though hoping I might be joking.

I wasn't. "Last chance to get out," I told him. "So far you haven't gone too deep. You can back out of all of this and go back to your life without any serious consequences. But from here on out, that isn't an option anymore."

He opened his mouth to respond, but I didn't give him a chance to. "I don't want your answer yet. There's something I want to tell you first." I looked past him to where Kyra was waiting outside. I could understand that. I have no doubt that she has a significant number of unpleasant memories associated with that room. "You might as well come in," I called. "I know you've been wanting to hear this story too."

She frowned at me, and I could tell that at this point I was departing from the script she had worked out of what was going on here. She did come in, though, after first checking again that the door wouldn't close on us. Even so she kept glancing back to it every second or two, just to make sure.

I looked at the two of them soberly. "What I am about to tell you," I said quietly, "is not a story I tell often. With that in mind, I would appreciate it if you don't interrupt. I'm trying to tell you something, here, not looking for pity."

The two of them looked at me expectantly. Neither of them said anything.

I was for a moment forcibly reminded of the stories I'd heard growing up, first from Edward and later from Dolph or Erin. All of them were big on storytelling, and I heard a lot of them when I was young.

In spite of everything, the comparison made me smile a little. Then, still smiling, I began.

"When I was a kid," I said, "I was around werewolves a lot. When I was twelve I moved away from home to live with a pack in Wyoming. Most of my friends were werewolves at that time.

"So, as you can probably imagine, I was pretty eager to make the change myself. When I was around sixteen years old I did." Kyra looked a little surprised at that. She knew that I was no werewolf, and also that there are only have two options when you get changed. One of them is to come out a werewolf, and the other is to come out in a box.

"Now," I continued, "for various reasons that aren't important right now, I was considered a high-risk candidate. I was aware of that, although not all the reasons why, and I knew that I probably shouldn't be trying it." I paused, and smiled ruefully. "Unfortunately, sixteen-year-olds aren't known for good decision making." Enrico chuckled at my joke, at least.

"Like most people that age, I thought I was special and the rules didn't apply to me. Also like most people, I turned out to be wrong." I hesitated, trying to decide how much technical information Enrico needed to understand what I was saying. "You remember what I said about how werewolves, and especially young werewolves, have a bunch of urges and instincts that can be pretty hard to control?" He nodded.

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"Well, at least at first, how strong those instincts are is determined largely by how strong the werewolf magic is in you. If there's a little bit of magic in you, you change a little bit. If there's a lot, you change a whole bunch." There were complicating factors, and it was almost never that straightforward, but that was good enough for now. "With me so far?"

Both of them nodded. Kyra, at least, looked like she was starting to understand where I was going with this.

"Well, due to a peculiarity of my heritage, I got an exceptionally strong dose of magic. There wasn't any real question of my controlling it, at first. It just wasn't going to happen."

I paused and focused my attention on Enrico. "The first time you change, it's a serious physical drain that your body isn't accustomed to. On top of that, there was enough magic in me that my body was already trying to heal at an accelerated rate, which drains more resources."

"The predictable result of this was that I was hungry, to an extent which I doubt you can fathom. That, coupled with the instinctive drive to hunt, was enough to force me to find food." I hesitated, unsure how to phrase the next part with any tact at all. "Unfortunately," I said eventually, "there was not a great deal of food to be had nearby."

Enrico looked confused. Kyra did not. Her face went pale, and she winced a little. "Oh God," she said, her voice sounding drawn. "How many?" Enrico, who still hadn't realized what we were talking about, looked at her with confusion.

I didn't pretend not to understand her. "Four. Fortunately that part of Wyoming is sparsely populated. I expect it would have been much worse if I were in a city at the time."

Enrico's expression changed from confusion to dawning realization, then horror. He opened his mouth to say something.

I cut him off with a sharp gesture. "Like I said, I'm not looking for pity. This was a long time ago." I took a deep breath; long time ago or not, these were not pleasant memories. Not at all. "That night," I said in a measured tone, "I assaulted, killed, and partially ate four people. A family, living in an isolated home. A man, his wife, and their two children. One of them was a nine year old girl."

Kyra looked like she was about to be sick. Enrico's expression of horror hadn't changed. "Is that normal?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. Most werewolves are unconscious for at least a day or two after the first change while their body adjusts. Even if they aren't the pack can force control on them to make sure things like that don't happen.

"So I mentioned that some werewolves get put in the safe room while they struggle for control? Well, situations like that are what I'm talking about. I wound up being put in the safe room until I got

myself under control. It was pretty much like this one. Now, can you guess how long I spent in there?" I asked.

Enrico shrugged helplessly. Kyra, who was more experienced, frowned and hazarded, "A week?"

It wasn't a bad guess—or rather, it wasn't a bad guess when you were dealing with a normal werewolf. For me, it was less than accurate. "Three months," I corrected. "During that time I had essentially no contact with another living being." I paused. "Unless you count the occasional live meal. Rabbits, for the most part. They thought it might help calm the wolf." They hadn't been entirely wrong about that, either—although the guilt I'd felt about it probably hadn't done much for me, overall.

"During that time I went pretty much insane. Now, I don't mean that the way I normally do when I say that I'm insane. Most of the time I'm just a bit odd. At that time, though, I was...I was pretty far gone."

I paused meditatively for a moment. "Actually, the first month wasn't so bad. I mean, even without the wolf I'm not suited for captivity, but I was doing all right. It wasn't until I'd been in there two full months that I was really in bad shape."

Enrico frowned. "How bad are we talking? I mean, two months in solitary isn't fun, but there are people who've made it through worse."

I looked at him levelly. Then, very quietly, I said, "I started hallucinating at around six weeks. I lost track of time so completely that the only way I could tell one day from another was by the size of the moon. They say I talked to myself almost constantly. Not screaming or anything, just a constant monotone mumble."

"I wanted out," I continued quietly, "more badly than you can imagine. I tried to dig my way out through solid concrete. I clawed at the walls until my claws were broken and my paws were bleeding. As a human I wore the last digit of my fingers literally to the bone. I broke most of the bones in my hands trying to batter the door down. They had to rescue me once when I hanged myself trying to fit my head out the window." Most of my clear memories of that time are actually of me lying in the middle of the floor, twisting in agony from the things I'd done to myself. A werewolf's healing is extremely efficient—and, thanks to my extra-high dose of magic, I was healing even faster than almost any werewolf. But that doesn't do anything for the pain.

I paused to let that sink in a moment. "You can maybe understand," I said, "how terrifying that was. To be incapable of controlling myself. I knew that these were stupid things to do. I knew that, at that point in time, I didn't even want to be free. I would have been a danger to myself and others. And, despite all that, I was literally and physically unable to stop myself from doing them."

Enrico looked at me with a sort of horrified fascination. "What happened?" he asked me.

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I shrugged. "After about three months of that, I processed the magic. The experience left me with a few souvenirs, but that's about it. I'm not a werewolf anymore, if that's what you're wondering." Which was only half-true, but I didn't intend to tell either of them the rest of the story.

Kyra frowned at me. "Winter. That doesn't happen. Once you're a werewolf, you don't go back. It's impossible."

I grinned at her. "It's mostly impossible," I corrected her. "There's always an exception. In this case the exception was me." I looked at Enrico again. "In any case, I'm telling you this for a reason. See, what happened to me? It was bad."

I shrugged. "But realistically speaking, I was lucky. I survived. I'm still me. That's more than a lot of people can say. The point is that almost every single person you encounter in the supernatural world has had something bad happen to them. Mine have been worse than some. But there's also a lot of people who were a lot less lucky than me."

"If you insist on getting involved," I told him quietly, "there is an excellent chance that something equally bad will happen to you. You think that I can protect you from the bad things out there. I can't." I shook my head and laughed a little. "I can't even protect myself. Every single person I have ever introduced to this stuff has ended up worse off for it."

He thought that over for a bit while we left the safe room. I think by that point none of us wanted to stay there any longer than we absolutely had to. Once we were back in the main part of the house, he finally spoke up.

"If you had the chance to choose over, would you have gotten involved?"

I smiled a little at that, because he was making a terribly inaccurate assumption. I never chose to get involved in the first place. I was born with magic in my blood, and it had done almost as good a job at driving me nuts as lycanthropy ever did.

That said, it wasn't a question I'd ever really asked myself before. I'm not much given to considering problems I can't solve. Now that I did, I was actually a little surprised at my answer.

"There are terrible things," I said slowly. "Things that I would rather not have experienced. Things that I would rather not know about. But there are good things out there too. Beautiful things." I shrugged. "And this is who I am. What I am. So no. If I had the choice, I wouldn't change that."

None of us said anything until we were outside the house. Then, sounding somewhat nervous but resolute, he said "I'm in, then."

That was good. Smart enough to be afraid, but not letting that stop him. That was the attitude you need to survive in my world.

"Although not right now," he added as an afterthought. "I still have a job."

I laughed. "That's fine. I have other things to do right now, too. How about I call you in the next few days to line things up?"

He agreed, and shortly thereafter it was just Kyra and me standing there. I checked the time, and—somewhat to my surprise—saw that it was already two-thirty. That left me only half an hour before my next meeting.

"Hey," I said to Kyra. "You mind giving me a ride to Alexander's place?"

She shrugged. "Sure." She'd been there once or twice, although she hadn't ever met him. As far as I knew she didn't especially want to, either. Kyra was not at all interested in supernatural politics or concerns beyond the pack. I couldn't really blame her for that. In a lot of ways she had even less choice about becoming a part of it than I did.

The interesting thing is that what Kyra had said was pretty much true. Once you turn into a werewolf, you don't turn back.

You have to have some idea how lycanthropy works for this to make sense. It's not a curse you can break, or anything like that. It isn't something that happens to you at all. It's more like something you become. So going from a werewolf back to a human isn't really possible. It wouldn't be enough to undo the magic that changed you; you'd have to reverse the process and convert all of your magic from werewolf back to human. It makes certain changes to your body, too, which would need to be undone.

In other words, it's not possible. There are ways to stop a person from becoming a werewolf, but once it's already happened it's pretty much set in stone.

That's the case for me, at any rate. The thing is that not all of the players in the supernatural world play by the same rules as me, or the werewolves for that matter. Some of them operate on an entirely different level.

There are entities out there that are so far beyond me that there is literally no comparison. Beings whose power is such that what is impossible to me is light work for them. We're talking about the kinds of things that were worshipped as gods, back in the day, and had the power to back it up.

This is what really happened. One night, in the midst of my interminable imprisonment, a man entered the safe room. Except that the door never opened, and in fact he didn't come in by any means that I could understand. He was just there.

At first I thought it was another fever dream. I had a certain amount of reason for this, admittedly. He looked a bit like a warped reflection of myself. He was tall, better than six foot, whereas I'm barely average for an adult male human. Other than that, though, he looked like someone had taken all my distinctive features and ramped them up to eleven.

Where I'm lean, he was gaunt to an extent that even the fae mercenary's disguise hadn't approached. You could reasonably say that he looked like skin and bones without exaggerating. Where

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my hair is a dull, even shade of charcoal grey, his was mottled grey and silver and looked like a pelt. Where my eyes are a shade of amber barely within human possibility, his were literally golden and reflected the light of the half-full moon like a cat's.

The funny thing is that I remember all that, with a perfect and unnatural clarity, but other things are strangely fuzzy. I don't know what he was wearing, where he was within the safe room, nothing like that. I don't even remember what I thought of his appearance, or whether I reacted when I realized that he was there.

What I do remember is his voice. He sounded wrong, absolutely inhuman in a way that words cannot express. His voice sounded like it was made up of thousands of other sounds assembled into a semblance of human speech. The growls and snarls of wolves, the wind howling through leafless trees, the brittle sound of breaking ice, all pulled together into a rough imitation of words.

For all of that, what he said was perfectly clear. He said, "Do you want to be free?"

I was partially insane. I was sure that I was hallucinating. I was still relatively uneducated about the supernatural. All of that can perhaps explain how I responded, but most certainly does not justify it.

I said, "More than anything."

That's the last thing I remember before I woke up the next morning. If that had been the end of it I would have dismissed it as the hallucination it initially seemed to be, but there was one very important difference.

When I woke up, the parts of myself that I thought of as coming most directly from the influence of the werewolf in me—the need to hunt, for example, or the driving urge to escape my cell—were gone. No slow waning, no nothing. Just gone. I tried to change almost immediately, and for the first time in months I couldn't. I was, for better or worse, stuck as a human.

All of this might strike you as a good thing. The only problem is that the basic law of the universe is that you can't get something for nothing. It doesn't matter how much magic you have, you can't change the essential nature of the world. For every action there will be an equal and opposite reaction.

Or, to phrase it more simply: ain't no such thing as a free lunch.

What the entity had said hadn't been a simple inquiry; it was also an offer. One which I, in my ignorance, had accepted thoughtlessly. And, from any reasonable perspective, he had followed through on his end. He had not only arranged for me to escape the confines of my cell, he had provided me with freedom from the influences and powers which had landed me there in the first place. He had fulfilled his part of the deal.

Except that deal hadn't covered what I would do to repay him. Not even a little.

The supernatural world runs on concepts of debt and obligation. After what he'd done, I was heavily indebted to him—and I'd never had a chance to repay that debt.

Which meant that, any time he cared to collect, he owned me. Pretty much literally. Every law and treaty governing my portion of the world would be solidly on his side. And, for an entity with enough power to do what he did to me, collecting that debt would be a simple prospect. Even if I fought, I didn't have enough power to threaten the likes of him even under ideal circumstances.

Needless to say I had no intention of explaining this to Enrico or Kyra, ever. That isn't the sort of thing you tell *anybody*. I mean, it's one thing to sell your soul. But I didn't even know who the buyer was, and that's a dangerous position to be in.



Chapter Seven

Alexander Hoffman was a wizard. Not a fake or a pretender, which most of the people who claim that title are. He was the real deal. Wielder of power beyond mortal ken, subtle and quick to anger, the whole thing.

Quite simply, he was the single most powerful and skilled mage I had ever met. Since I first met him a couple months ago I'd been taking lessons from him on a semi-regular basis, and I've only become more impressed over time.

I should make something clear here. I have magic. More of it than most of the independent operators in the supernatural world. Within a certain few, specific domains I even have skill. I'm pretty good.

That said, I don't hold a candle to Alexander. He has an order of magnitude more power than I do, combined with skill and experience gained over God alone knows how long. Mages, unlike werewolves, are not immune to time—but if you know how, there are plenty of ways to change that. Most of them aren't very nice, but then most of magic isn't.

Long story short, if Alexander ever really got mad at me, he could crush me like a bug. Odds are good I wouldn't even know about it. I'd just be walking along some day when my head exploded or he lit me on fire from the inside out from a mile away. I haven't exactly seen a lot of high-level practitioners at work, but I have a suspicion that Alexander is one of the best there is.

Like, anywhere.

And yet he lives in a small two-story house painted lilac and trimmed in maroon. I hadn't seen much of the interior, but what I have more or less matches the outside. Lots of bizarre and tacky trinkets, for the most part.

I pounded on the door with the antique brass knocker he used instead of a doorbell. No matter how many times I saw it, I could never quite decide what it was supposed to be. Sometimes I thought it was a particularly hideous Victorian-style cherub. Other times, like today, it looked more like a constipated garden gnome.

About fifteen seconds later, he opened the door. As always it was seriously locked, and even when he opened it, it only moved about two inches before being caught by the chain. Said chain was clearly a custom model, with quarter-inch-thick links made from solid steel. The surface of the metal was covered in a tracery of other metals, silver prominent among them, forming a complicated runic pattern across the surface. I could smell the magic of Alexander's warding spells like the tang of heated metal, particularly strong around the chain itself.

Alexander himself was glowering at me from the other side of the door. Every time I'd seen him he'd been wearing some form of pajamas, and today was no exception.

When he saw me standing on the other side, his expression warmed—but only slightly. Alexander doesn't, as far as I know, really do friendly. He nodded to me marginally, made a grunting sound that might have been "Winter" if he'd put more effort into it, and unlatched the chain to let me in.

I'm bad at small talk. Like, really bad. So is he, and as a result nothing was said until we were down in the laboratory. It's accessed via a trapdoor in one corner of the front room, which he keeps covered with a Godzilla rug when not in use.

Alexander's lab is an amazing place. You could literally spend days on end down there trying to catalogue things and still have only a small idea of what all he had. It doesn't help that things are constantly changing. He makes most of his money selling the things he can make with magic, so things vanish from the lab as he finds buyers. He also adds things all the time, that he either makes or trades for. This time he'd ditched the glass globe in the corner, which had been about three feet in diameter and filled with a thick, billowing black mist. In its place was something that looked a bit like those skeleton models they use in anatomy classes, except that the bones looked like they'd been selected from at least a dozen animals and wired into the rough shape of a human. It was disturbing, and yet also strangely difficult to look away from.

"So," Alexander said as we made our way to the main workbench, in the center of the big room. It was the only part of the lab that was clean; there were a ton of other countertops and such, but most of them were covered in half-finished projects. "What do you want to work on today?" He asks every time; oddly enough, though, whatever I say we end up doing what he thinks I need to work on.

"Actually, there was something I've been hoping to ask you."

"Really? What is it?" Alexander said, sounding interested.

"How much do you know about the fae?"

He gave me an irritated look. "You should know better than that. I know enough. Now what's your actual question?" He sat on one of the tall, battered stools around the table.

I briefly explained what had happened with the fae mercenary. Then I outlined what Christopher had said about it.

"Interesting," he said. "So did you always get into this much trouble, or is that only since I met you?"

I ignored him, instead phrasing my question. "So was what Christopher was saying accurate, do you think? Is this some sort of fae political game?"

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He shrugged. "Maybe. I honestly don't know about the mercenary. I've never had much need for that sort of thing, so I don't know much about how they operate."

"That's not actually what I was talking about. I'm a lot more concerned with the motive."

He smiled thinly. "Finally you show some intelligence. I don't know about that one either. It sounds reasonable enough."

I nodded. "So do you know which of the fae are the most likely to arrange something like this?"

He looked at me like an exceptionally dim pupil. "Winter. Do you know why I live like this?"

"Frankly? No."

"Because I hate politics. I refuse to play political games. I work on a strictly personal basis, one thing traded for another. I have no political agenda to advance. So why would you think I'm a good person to ask that question?"

I flushed a little. "Right. So who would be a good person to ask?"

"I take it talking to your contacts among the wolves is out of the question?"

"Absolutely. I'd rather deal with an independent operator." Until I had more information, I didn't want word of this to get to the Khan, which it inevitably would if I told any of the werewolves. And I sure as hell wasn't asking Christopher.

He shrugged. "You're more or less out of luck, then. The fae are big on secrets. You'd pretty much have to ask one of them to learn anything useful about their politics."

I nodded glumly. I'd been afraid of that; I mean, they *do* have a reputation as maybe the most secretive groups in a secretive world. "How much is that kind of information likely to cost me?"

"Depends on a couple of things." He counted them off on his fingers. "One, what information do you really need? Two, which of the fae do you ask? Three, what kind of relationship do you have with them?"

Made sense. "So I should consider asking that Twilight Prince that owes me a favor?" I wasn't entirely sure who she (Twilight Princes are all Princes, gender notwithstanding) was, but I was sure I could figure it out if I wanted to badly enough.

He shuddered. "Not unless you're truly desperate. Making deals with the Twilight is a bad idea. You're better off with the lesser fae. They might cost a lot, but at least you know what they'll cost you before you're paying."

Wow. I hadn't ever heard that much emotion out of the old wizard in that few words. Which, in turn, made me wonder what bargain he'd once struck with one of the Twilight.

And what currency he'd paid in.

"Actually," he continued thoughtfully, "you might want to consider a familiar. If you had that sort of relationship you'd have someone you could ask your questions without incurring debt."

"I thought familiar spirits were more of a shaman thing," I said hesitantly.

He gave me a look of deep disgust. "That brings us to something I've been meaning to talk to you about, actually. If you don't mind changing the subject."

I assented. "When you were starting out," he said, standing and taking on the attitude of a lecturing professor, "did you learn about different kinds of mages?"

I nodded. "I was taught that there are five basic kinds of mage."

"Really?" he said. "What are they?"

"Wizards and sorcerers," I recited dutifully. "Druids and shamans. Witches." Or, to use another way of phrasing I'd learned, external energies and internal, the physical world and the spiritual, and the beings that move through them.

He nodded. "Not a bad system. When I was growing up they still used a nine-part system."

I frowned. "What were the other four?"

He shrugged. "They divided witches into physical and mental. Other than that there were alchemists, conjurers, and enchanter. It doesn't really matter. The important part is that most of what you know about mages is wrong."

I blinked. "I don't understand. Why would I have learned it if it was wrong?" Admittedly I'd learned most of what I knew about magic from assorted old werewolves, but they generally knew what they were talking about.

"Because it's a necessary teaching aid," he said. "But it's time for you to be moving past that." He saw that I didn't understand and sighed. "Look. What's the difference between, say, a witch and a wizard?"

"Wizards manipulate external forces, while witches make connections with other—"

He cut me off. "Not that. That's a difference in what they do. I want to know what the difference is in what they *are*."

I thought about it a minute. "I don't know," I admitted eventually.

He nodded. "You're smart enough to realize it, at least. The difference is perspective."

"What?"

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"Perspective. That's the secret. There is no difference in what they are. The only difference is in how they perceive what they are."

"I don't understand," I said, puzzled. "Witches and wizards do completely different things. How can there not be a difference between them?"

He sighed and seemed to try a different tack. "Magic is basically the manipulation of forces, correct? You can add in all the philosophy and such that you like, but that's the essence. You're manipulating forces and energies."

"Right," I said, nodding. That much agreed with what I knew.

"So how do you do it?" Alexander asked. He didn't give me a chance to answer, continuing without a pause. "With your mind. Some people have a natural ability to detect magic. Having detected it, you can learn to affect it. For reasons largely unknown to us—and totally unimportant to you, at this point—magical energies are sensitive to will. To our thoughts and desires, appropriately expressed. With me so far?"

I nodded silently.

"So," he asked conversationally. "Are all mages alike? Or are we all different? All unique?"

I opened my mouth to say that of course we were all the same, that was what he'd just said. Then, suddenly, I understood what he was getting at and grinned. "We're people, right? And no two people are alike."

He nodded. "Exactly. Your mind is influenced by a great many factors. Those influences are numerous and complex enough that you are, for all practical purposes, unique. There is no other person alive who is exactly the same as you are. And, naturally, your mind influences your magic. It can't be otherwise, because that's simply how magic works."

"People can be grouped in some ways, though," he continued. "And those are the groupings you learned. One wizard perceives and interprets the world in much the same way as another, because that is what it means to be a wizard."

"How is that?" I asked curiously.

"Essentially, we see the world as being composed of energies. Forces. Everything is under the influence of forces. Understand the forces and you understand the world. What you understand, you can control. I won't pretend to understand what all of these forces are. But I understand some of them. The simpler ones. Things like heat. Light. Movement. Those are forces any physicist knows."

His face had taken on a dreamy look. "But there are other forces. Time is a force. So is love. Even magic, when you get right down to it, is just another collection of forces."

I had to fight to repress a shiver. What he was saying made sense, in some ways, but...it crept me out. That world seemed like a barren, desolate place to me, with little room in it for the things that mattered more to me. Things like friendship, or morality, or even life itself.

Alexander noticed my expression and nodded knowingly. "I'm guessing that's not how you look at things, though. Right?" I opened my mouth to make some sort of explanation, but he just laughed. "Don't worry about it, Winter. There isn't a right or wrong answer to questions like this. It's more like right or left. What do I care if you take a different path? They're all going to the same place."

Huh. That sounded almost philosophical, which was odd for Alexander. It made sense, too, which was even stranger.

"What you believe is your own business," he told me. "The important thing to recognize is that at this point, it doesn't matter. Magic is magic, regardless of what you believe it to be or how you think of it."

"But wizards and witches do different things," I pointed out. "Isn't that difference important?"

"Maybe," he allowed. "But let me ask you something." He pointed toward a thick, ugly beeswax candle on an adjacent table. "If I told you to light that with magic, could you do it?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

He nodded. "So could any mage. Why?"

"Because it's a simple use of magic?" I guessed.

"And more precisely?" he pressed.

I shrugged helplessly.

"Because they all have an idea of what magic is. And they all have an idea of what fire is. All you have to do is line those ideas up." He held up one finger. "But wizards have an advantage. Why?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Because wizards think of things in terms of energy," I said eventually. "And because heat is basically an energy, that's a good way to think of it."

He nodded approvingly. "Exactly. Fire is, at heart, a concept we use to refer to an exothermic chemical reaction. I naturally think of the forces involved which can produce such a reaction. Heat, most simply, light or friction if I have to. That lets me approach the problem directly." He paused. "What does that approach not work as well for?"

I didn't even have to think about it. "People," I said confidently.

He nodded. "Exactly. People are difficult to break down into basic forces. A witch's approach, or a druid's, works better for that. But the point is that any approach can, theoretically, work. A witch, who thinks of the world primarily in terms of the beings in it, might conceive of the idea of flame rather than

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the real thing, and use that to light the candle. A druid convinces the world that the candle belongs on fire, or finds the potential for flame already in the candle and makes it a reality. Totally different approaches from mine." He shrugged. "The candle gets lit no matter what."

I considered that. "That makes sense. Are there any things that *only* a wizard could do?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Because they involve more complicated forces?" I hazarded.

He shook his head. "Not more complicated. More pure. Fire isn't simply a force, you see. It has ideas associated with it. Energies. It's an exothermic reaction, but it also has an existence beyond that fact. That's why there are so many avenues that can reach it more or less equally well. There are other things—pure heat, for example, or gravity—which are almost pure forces. They're harder to understand in other ways."

"Huh. So all the categorization basically just says what kinds of magic you work with more easily?"

He shrugged. "Ignoring what it says about you on a deeper level? Pretty much." He brushed his hands together as though dusting something unpleasant off of them. "So now that we've got that out of the way, can we get back to your actual lesson? Lovely," he said, not waiting to hear my answer. "To continue our earlier theme, I'd like to spend some time talking about the Otherside and spiritual entities. There are a number of ways you can access the Otherside, most of which require a significant investiture of energy to accomplish..."

Alexander produced a piece of slate from one of the many drawers of his worktable and began writing formulae across it. Wizard or not, a lot of the more advanced magic I'd been learning involved math (unfortunately), and I leaned forward to watch.

I arrived home about three hours later, tired but satisfied. After he finished lecturing I'd spent some time working on my current project under his watchful eye. It was in line with my talents, but nothing like I'd ever done before, and the amount of magic required was significant.

What Alexander had said about magic being an external energy was true. I am not personally capable of powering my own magic for any significant length of time; the energy requirements are simply too high, and you pretty much have to draw on environmental sources to get anything done. But controlling the magic takes its own toll on you, mentally and physically. It's draining, and although I'd been getting much more practice in recent months than ever before, I was still pretty tired from the evening's work.

So, when I got home, I was looking forward to a long shower, dinner, and maybe a few minutes spent reading before bed. I did not anticipate finding anyone else there, and in fact I wasn't aware of them until I walked into my pseudo-living room and found them on the couch.

I should perhaps say something about how remarkable this was. They hadn't left any physical scent around the trailer, not even at the front door. There was no magical aura, even within the room, which is unusual to say the least around supernatural beings. There were no tracks, and no means of transportation nearby to show how they got there. Even the delicate web of energy which, at Alexander's suggestion, I had begun leaving around all the doors hadn't been interrupted, which it should have been if anyone other than me had entered or left.

My first indication that something was wrong was when I saw Snowflake asleep next to the woodstove. There was a merry fire going, even though I hadn't lit one this morning. She didn't react at all to my presence, not even to twitch her ears. Normally she would wake out of a sound sleep when I came home, and still move fast enough to meet me at the door.

When I walked in I was sure that they were there to kill me. That is, generally speaking, an appropriate reaction to finding two men sitting on your couch when you've already been involved in one serious violent encounter that week. When one of them is holding a huge freaking rifle, it's just that much easier.

It took me only half a second, though, to notice something else. The man with the gun had a strangely vacant expression on his face. I don't mean that he looked like his attention had wandered off for a moment. Nothing like that. It was more like there *was* no him left. He didn't react at all to my coming in, not even a reflexive twitch to look at the door. He kept staring straight forward at the wall, not blinking at all.

The same could not be said of the other man. He leapt to his feet and, grinning from ear to ear, bowed to me. The expression, twisted as it was by the numerous scars around his mouth, was in no way comforting.

"Winter," he said, his voice perfectly suited to his appearance—which is to say it was enthused, pleased, and a bit unnerving for no reason I could tell. "How are you doing?"

I stared at him. Then, making no effort to sound friendly, I said, "Who are you and what the hell are you doing in my house?"

I don't like strangers. I especially don't like strangers in my home. I have territoriality issues, and while I don't claim much territory, what I do claim is *mine*.

He seemed to muse on the question for a moment. "Well," he said slowly, "I've come a long way to get here, so why don't you call me Traveler?" He seemed terribly amused by that, laughing so hard he doubled over and then had to sit down again, wiping his eyes. They were intensely blue, the deep blue of the sky at midnight on a moonless night.



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I wasn't laughing. "And why are you here?"

He grinned at me again, and I had to work to keep from shivering. There was something intrinsically, inexplicably *wrong* with that smile. "I," he said slowly, "am here for a pleasant chat. But this fellow," he gestured vaguely at his companion, "came here intending to kill you if I'm not mistaken." He paused. "Unless you know why else someone would be waiting with a fifty-caliber rifle pointed at your front door. If he's a friend of yours, well, I'm terribly sorry, of course." His voice was mocking now.

I frowned and walked closer. The other man didn't react at all. He still wasn't blinking, was barely even breathing. I grabbed the gun and found that it was, indeed, a high-caliber sniper rifle, although there were no marks to say where it had come from or who the maker was. It was loaded with silver, too, which was overkill on a grand scale. Werewolves have incredible healing abilities, sure, and I could go even further than the average werewolf if I really had to—but there are limits. A fifty-caliber round to the head is pretty much beyond them.

I mean, shit. You don't even *have* a head after that. Pretty hard to fix something like that.

I gave Traveler a hard look. "So why didn't he?" I demanded.

He shrugged and snapped his fingers next to the man's ear. There was no reaction, and Traveler sighed. "Humans are such fragile things, don't you know? You can hardly even start to play with them before they break. Not like werewolves, are they?"

I stared for a moment. "Are you saying you did this to him?" I whispered, horrified.

He shrugged again. "With him, to him, doesn't make much difference in the end, does it?" He grinned at me.

I looked at the man, and realized that my first impression had been right. That wasn't a man anymore. There wasn't a person on the other end of those dry, unblinking eyes. Just a pile of meat only barely holding to life. And I saw, deep in those eyes, that there was just enough left of what he had once been to realize what had happened, and to suffer because of it.

Death would be kinder.

I shuddered and looked away. Traveler leaned over and patted me comfortingly on the back. "You are new to this, aren't you?" he said gently. "It's okay. You weren't exactly the first bad thing he was going to do. I didn't see much, but I saw that."

I pushed his hand away roughly. Then I closed my eyes, took a couple deep breaths through my nose, and opened them again. When I spoke again, my voice sounded more or less normal again.

I'm always all right. More or less.

I desperately wanted to ask if he'd done something to Snowflake as well—she was still sleeping by the fire, still hadn't shown any sign of knowing that any of us was there. On the off chance that he hadn't, though, I didn't want to draw his attention to her. So, instead, I asked, "Why?"

He shrugged. "Seemed like the least I could do. Common courtesy and all that." He grinned again, twisted and mocking. "Besides. Hard to have a chat with someone after they're dead." Which was reasonable enough, assuming that was indeed why he was here—which I didn't.

I sat on the chair. It wasn't pretty, having been pieced together from the assorted scraps of a dozen larger projects in Val's shop, but it was surprisingly comfortable.

I would be more vulnerable sitting down, but that quite simply didn't matter. Whatever Traveler had said, destroying someone's mind like that isn't easy. Not at all. People are fairly resilient, and if you attack them they get home-field advantage.

Someone who could do that just to have a chat with a stranger, who spoke of crushing a person's mind as casually as a sports game, was utterly beyond me.

"So what do you want to talk about?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "You, more or less. You've been attracting attention lately, you know." He smiled at me, a thin shark-like smile that showed a lot of teeth and very little mirth. It bore no resemblance to his previous grins whatsoever. They had been mocking, laughing grins, but at the same time they'd felt hollow. This one, though cold and dangerous, was more honest. It seemed more suited to his face, somehow.

"How so?" I asked. "I haven't done anything that remarkable."

"Really? I heard that not half a year ago you countered a ploy by quite an intelligent adversary. One with far more experience than you have." He looked at me seriously and finished in a near whisper. "Few can say they have done something more remarkable, Winter."

I frowned. "I don't get it. Garrett was bad news, but he wasn't that tough."

He raised an eyebrow incredulously. "You think that was your enemy?" He snorted. "That pathetic wreck was a tool. Nothing more. Nothing less." He leaned forward and focused on me intently. "The hand holding the tool was your true foe."

I thought that through. Even at the time, I'd speculated that Garrett might not really be the mastermind behind the attacks that fall. The plan had been intricate, cunning, and grandiose beyond anything I'd ever seen. For a newbie like him to have come up with it would be incredible.

Besides which, someone had to have taught him a certain amount of magic. How to summon and bind a demon. How to use the power it granted to do unnatural things to yourself and the world around you. It was not at all unreasonable to say that the person who taught him had been the one actually in control the whole time.

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But that changed things, too. Garrett I could believe had been trying to spark a war between the fae and the werewolves out of hatred—not to mention killing a number of members of the local supernatural community along the way. But serious players don't generally act from motivations that simplistic. If they did, they wouldn't have gotten to be serious players in the first place. Which left only political ambition as a reasonable motivation.

Traveler smiled. "Exactly," he said. "Politics are worse than any monster, aren't they?"

Holy crap. He'd heard me thinking. There hadn't been any intrusion into my mind—I would have felt something like that. The fact remained that he had known what was going through my head, further supporting my guess that he was seriously powerful.

It didn't seem like it would make a difference, so I thought out loud for the rest of it. "If someone that heavy was behind it," I said slowly, "then what I was seeing wasn't a fraction of what was really going on. People like that don't mess around with small stuff." I paused as something I'd been trying not to think about occurred to me again. "There was a Twilight Prince at that fight out in the forest, too. So at least two heavies involved."

Traveler smiled at me and said nothing. He said it very loudly, too.

"So. For one Twilight Prince to act directly against the minion of another suggests that they're enemies." I frowned. "Opponents, at least. On opposite sides in the argument over the treaty with the werewolves, probably."

"Actually," he interjected, "that's pretty small business to them too. One point of contest among many."

That was when it really sunk in what I had involved myself in. A political struggle that spanned centuries, if not freaking millennia. Beings so powerful they could treat the relations between two of the stronger political entities in the modern supernatural world like small change.

Then another, even worse thought occurred to me. "And I helped one of them," I said, "and killed the other one's toy." I shook my head grimly. "People like that hold a grudge. Shit."

He nodded, smiling cheerfully. "Yep. You've made yourself into another piece in the games they play. One of them tries to get revenge on you. The other blocks, to keep the opponent from having the satisfaction." He shrugged. "They're fairly well matched on the whole. The vast majority of their efforts balance out."

His words sent a chill down my spine. If you've ever played chess, even very casually, you can perhaps understand why. A skilled player will naturally try to prevent the opponent from taking even a pawn, because it's never good to let your enemy get what they want and because sometimes even a pawn can be important.

But if you have a chance to exchange that pawn for something you value more? You take it, no questions asked. And sure, sometimes that sacrifice is vitally important in bringing about your eventual victory—but that doesn't help the pawn.

It doesn't matter who wins. Most of the pieces usually get taken on both sides. I'd never played the real-world equivalent, but I was willing to bet it wasn't much kinder to the pawns.

"I have two questions left," I said eventually. "One, who the hell are these people?"

He looked at me soberly. "I can't tell you that. I know a handful of the players in the game, but not which sides they've taken on this particular issue. I certainly don't know which of them are fighting over you."

Lovely. Now I only wished it was chess they were playing. At least a two-player game I can keep track of.

"Two," I said, "whose side are you on?"

He smiled, and even though the expression was a little sad it seemed to me that it held something of the manic laughter from earlier. "Mine, of course."

I rolled my eyes. "Aren't you a wiseguy. Why are you telling me this?"

He shrugged. "You amuse me. You threw a wrench into the wheels of their precious machine, and damn me if that wasn't a fine jest."

I waited a moment, but that seemed to be all the strange man had to say. "That's it?" I said incredulously. "You came here just because you think I'm funny?" I shook my head. "Damn. You, Traveler, have way too much time on your hands."

He laughed. "See? That's what I'm talking about. You sit there, knowing full well that if I wanted to I could kill you right now and you would be powerless to stop me." His voice wasn't bragging, or anything like that. He stated it with the same calm certainty you would use to explain that the sky is blue, or that two plus two is four. He said it like a fact that wasn't even worth considering, it was so obvious.

Which was fair enough, I supposed. That was pretty much the case.

"And yet," he continued, "you still crack jokes at my expense." He shook his head, grinning. "I admire that kind of attitude. Most people take themselves much too seriously for my taste."

"I still don't get it. Why would you invest this much effort just because I amused you briefly?" I didn't for a second believe that my actions had been important to him, not even enough to laugh at for more than a moment.

He regarded me seriously. "In the extremely unlikely event that you live to be as old as I am," he said soberly, "you will find that there are things that continue to threaten you, regardless of how much

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power you come to hold. Because power is as nothing to them. Boredom is a greater threat to me than all of my enemies combined. For you to lift that threat, even for an instant, is a service I appreciate. For such a deed as that, being told things you already know is surely only a small recompense."

I considered that for a moment. Assuming he was immortal—which seemed entirely likely to me—that was actually fairly reasonable. I mean, after a few thousand years, life probably gets boring, right?

"Maybe," I said quietly, "you'd be willing to make up the rest by telling me things I don't know."

He laughed. "Winter, I could tell you things you don't know for ten years on end, without stopping, and still have things to say. But the things you *need* to know? Those I can't tell you."

I frowned. In my experience, when someone dances around an offer without ever actually refusing, it means that they aren't unwilling to help you. They're just waiting for you to ask for the right thing.

"Can you put me in contact with someone who can?" I asked.

His smile widened. "No. But I can put you in a situation where you can contact them yourself."

"At what price?"

"Fool me twice, eh?" he murmured. "Nothing so bad as that, trust me. You'll owe me one service, of your choosing. If I don't call it in within ten years and a day, or if another comes to own your services, then you're free." He smirked knowingly.

Well, crap. Either he was messing with my head, or he knew about the bargain I'd unwittingly made to get out of lycanthropy. Or, if I had any idea whatsoever about what he was and what motivated him, both.

That said, it was about as sweet a deal as I could hope for. Granted I would still need to bargain for the information itself, but if I could choose the service and any service would do, it couldn't be that onerous to repay. After all, if I really had to, I could always defer for the full ten years (assuming I lived that long) and get out of paying entirely.

"You can do this within a reasonable time frame?" I asked, more to give myself a chance to think than anything.

He gave me a mildly insulted look. "Of course," he said, sounding a bit offended that I would doubt it. "Within three days."

I sighed and put my hand out. "Deal."

He shook it, smiling again. "Bargain struck, Winter Wolf," he whispered. He let go of my hand and took a step back.

And then, without even a whisper of magic that I could detect, Traveler was gone. The man he'd destroyed vanished too—although I noticed that he left the rifle, as a gift perhaps.

I was left alone with a sleeping dog, the start of a headache, and the uncomfortable feeling that I'd just screwed myself. Again.

Chapter Eight

Snowflake woke up about half an hour later. By that time I was sitting on the couch eating leftover spaghetti, so I had an excellent position to watch her from. It was sort of funny, actually; she stood up, stretched luxuriously, and then shook her head energetically, as though shaking off water. The motion must have brought me into her peripheral vision, because she stopped short and turned to stare at me. A moment later she came trotting over and plopped across my feet, blue eyes looking up at me.

*What just happened?* she said, the concepts communicating themselves to me only blearily. She must have still been half-asleep.

"I'm not entirely sure," I said aloud. Snowflake isn't fond of spoken language, but she can understand it just fine. "What did it feel like to you?"

There was a long pause. When she eventually replied, it "sounded" nothing like her usual self.

Snowflake looks like a dog, and in most ways she is one. More specifically she is a juvenile female Siberian husky. There is another entity inside her, however, which bore about as much resemblance to a dog as my newly acquired sniper rifle did to the average BB gun. He'd been a wolf in Yellowstone once, but he'd come a long way since then. These days he exists as, essentially, a purely mental being which shares Snowflake's body. He doesn't come out to play much, preferring to leave the day-to-day business of living mostly up to her.

But now he spoke up.

*It felt like it did when I died*, he whispered. Mental voices carry a lot more information than actual ones about the person speaking. Snowflake, for example, sounded playful, young. Her mind was fresh and light, like a snowfall in May or the sun sparkling on the surface of a mountain lake. The wolf was more what you might get if you dove beneath the surface of the lake into the still, cold depths beneath.

I frowned. *Do you mean pain?* I asked.

*No pain. Invasion. Then, nothing.*

"Huh. Traveler must have put some kind of sleep spell on you. Do you feel any different?"

*No.* They spoke in near-unison, with bedrock certainty. *Nothing else was done*, the wolf finished alone. *Who is this Traveler?*

Huh. That was...emphatic. It was also, for rather obvious reasons, unreliable. After all, when you're messing around with somebody's head, probably the most common thing to do is make sure they're absolutely sure no such thing ever happened. Traveler hadn't seemed malevolent, but that wasn't worth much.

There wasn't really anything I could do about it at the moment, though. So instead of mentioning it, I briefly explained what had happened with Traveler. Snowflake didn't say anything, although she did jump up onto the couch and contort around so that I could scratch her chin.

Neither of them cared especially about it. Snowflake made Kyra look like a political mastermind, she was so disinterested in such things.

People always seem to equate intelligence with humanity, but the truth is that this just isn't the case. Snowflake, thanks to the things that made her different from a normal dog, was easily as intelligent as the average human. She just didn't have the same priorities as a human. Although she was more than capable of conceiving of, for example, past and future events, they didn't matter to her. Or, as she put it, what's the point of worrying?

For her, there was none. There's probably a lesson in there, somewhere.

I got a good night's sleep after that, which was good. I'd have been grumpy the next day otherwise.

I mean, I hate few things more than coping with assassination attempts when I'm already cranky from inadequate rest.

The next day was...interesting. Primarily in the sense of the curse "May your life be exciting," but interesting in other ways too.

It started when I went to get dressed and found a scorpion in my shoe. It was a glossy black thing the size of my hand, which I crushed immediately and then burned in my stove.

There are parts of the world where this is an everyday occurrence, and you'd be a fool to ever put on your shoes without checking them. Colorado, or at least my part of Colorado, is not one of them. I'd never seen a wild scorpion in my life. If Snowflake, whose senses were obviously more acute than mine, hadn't warned me, I would have stuck my foot in and undoubtedly gotten myself stung.

An ordinary scorpion is nothing but a minor inconvenience to someone like me. Werewolf healing applies to drugs and toxins as well as more obvious injury, and it's not like scorpions are made for killing things the size of humans anyway.

Somehow I was willing to bet this hadn't been the ordinary kind of scorpion. If it had stung me, it probably would have killed me, or at least made a solid effort in that direction.

*You should take me with you*, Snowflake murmured as we watched the pseudo-arachnid burn. It gave off an unpleasant stench both physically and magically as it did, confirming my guess that it was no natural thing.



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I glanced down at her. *You sure?* I asked. I'd tried taking Snowflake to work with me a few times, and she'd found it incredibly boring. Since then I mostly left her at home, where she had free run of the cabin and several largely undeveloped acres around it.

*Absolutely. You get hurt less when I'm around.* Which was hard to refute, given that she had just saved my life and it wasn't even seven yet. *Besides, I might get to kill something.*

My lips twitched. "Fine," I said aloud. It might be dangerous, but so what? Life's dangerous, and Snowflake was—whatever she looked like—a person intelligent enough to make her own choices. If she wanted to risk her life trying to help me, that was her business.

It took me a while to realize that.

After that I was extra careful on the way to work. Snowflake, following me on the thin leather leash she hardly ever used, was glancing about hyperalertly.

About halfway to Val's shop it paid off. I caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye and, almost before I'd realized what it was, dove forward to get out of the way. Snowflake followed me unquestioningly, spinning to face it as she did.

The sports car hit the sidewalk almost exactly where I'd been standing, skidded forward a few feet, and then flipped into the ditch on the other side when its nose was less than a foot away from me. Thanks to exceptionally quick reflexes, Snowflake and I were completely unharmed aside from a massive adrenaline rush.

Two other people weren't quite as lucky. One of them had been clipped by the rear end of the car as it came onto the sidewalk, suffering several broken ribs and God only knows what internal damage. The other probably got her leg tangled up when it rolled or something; it was broken in at least three places that I could see, and bent around like a freaking bonsai tree.

In all the chaos I checked, very briefly, on the car. I saw more or less what I'd expected.

The driver—if there had even been a driver—had already vanished.

Things were pretty hectic for a while after that. I provided what medical attention I could for the two injured—I was almost certain the runaway car had been another murder attempt, and I felt responsible for them. Besides, it's the sort of thing anybody should do.

I'd had a bit of medical training, most of which was just enough to teach me that there was very little I could do for them. I stopped what little external bleeding there was, helped them into slightly more comfortable positions, and made sure somebody had called an ambulance. It didn't take long to get there, and I watched with a sinking feeling as they loaded the two people into it on stretchers.

I'd been involved in violent dealings before, on a somewhat regular basis even—but nothing like this. It was terrifyingly random. There was no pattern to the attacks I could see, no order or reason. I couldn't predict them, and it would only take one slip for them to be successful. That's a disturbing thing to realize.

After that I spent a while answering questions for the police. I probably could have avoided that with only a little effort, but I had to admit a certain amount of fellow-feeling for the officers. They were just doing their jobs, after all; I had no desire to make that any harder.

Besides which, it wasn't like I even had to lie. What were you doing? Just taking my dog for a walk, Officer. Did you get a look at the driver? No sir, by the time I realized what was going on the car was already rolling. Have you had medical training? Yes, sir, I did an EMT course a few years ago. Are you licensed? Not in Colorado, but they needed help.

It took a while, though. By the time I made it to work Val was already there.

The door was unlocked when I arrived, and there was a car I didn't recognize in the lot. I walked in and saw Val standing at the counter. He was arguing with a customer and gesturing emphatically at the same damn radio I'd been working on when this whole mess started. I looked at the customer, recognized his sly, satisfied posture, and smiled maliciously.

I'd had a bad few days, and the car wreck had been just enough to really tip me over. Which is to say that I was frustrated, angry, and generally in a mood bad enough that I was glad to see an opportunity to take it out on someone else without feeling guilty.

"Excuse me," I called out from the door. "Is that your radio?"

He spun to glare at me. He was trying to look angry, he really was, but the satisfied smirk gave him away. As I'd suspected, he hadn't ever intended for that radio to be repaired. "Yes," he said, "it is. Are you the incompetent bungler who should have had it finished by now?"

I smiled wider. "That's me," I said, continuing into the room. "And that's my boss you're talking to, and I really need to have a chat with him, so kindly take that piece of shit with you and get out."

He looked shocked. "Who do you—" he began, furious.

I kept moving until I was about six inches from him, interrupting him effortlessly. "Listen, mate, I'm in a bad mood, understand? I have had a worse day than you can imagine and it's not even noon yet. This day is only one in a series of bad days I have had, which in turn has been a part of a truly awful year."

He had a confused look on his face; this was quite obviously not how he had expected this conversation to go. "Now," I continued smoothly, interrupting whatever he was trying to say again, "please understand, I'm not telling you this out of some misguided desire for sympathy. In fact, if you

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were to try and offer it right now, I would most likely laugh in your face. Rather, I say this entirely so that there is some small chance that what I am saying will penetrate your thick skull when I tell you that I am neither joking nor indulging in hyperbole when I say that if you continue to irritate me, I will cut off your nose and feed it to my dog." I smiled at him. It wasn't a friendly sort of smile.

"Now wait a second, Winter," Val said, and for a moment hope appeared in the man's face. "Are you sure that's good for a dog?"

The expression on that punk's face when Val said that was priceless.

I shrugged. "Noses are mostly cartilage, right? And I think cartilage is mostly the same as bone. She likes bones."

He looked at me dubiously. "I'm not entirely sure it works like that."

"Whatever." I looked back to the man I was intimidating. "Get. Out. Now." I almost growled the words at him, backed up by Snowflake's literal growling at him.

He stammered something incoherent, then snatched the radio and stalked out. I sighed with relief and sat down on one of the chairs.

Val sat down next to me and gave me a concerned look. "Not smart," he said. "What if he goes to the police?"

"That's actually why I did it the way I did. If you go to the police and tell them that someone threatened to kill you, they take it seriously. If you go to the same cop and say that an employee wanted to talk to their boss so much that they threatened to cut off your nose and feed it to a dog, they'll laugh in your face." I shrugged. "That's what I'm hoping, anyway. If not I'll deal with it later."

"Why?" Val asked. Val was not inclined to waste words.

"Because I am in entirely the wrong state of mind to deal with assholes like that. Besides, I do need to talk with you."

"About what?"

"Where you've been the past few days."

He sighed. "I did try to call you."

"No problem. I was just wondering where you've been. I mean, you don't miss work often. I'm curious what you were doing."

His face, normally at least as communicative as his voice, froze up. "Not your business."

I nodded easily. "Sure, sure. None of my business."

He grunted an affirmative.

"Say," I said conversationally. "I wonder if it's the pack's business? "

He glared at me. "No."

"Uh-huh. Had absolutely nothing to do with any recent events in town which might potentially affect the Khan's agreement with the Twilight Court, then?"

"I said, it's not your business."

I grinned. The fae are notoriously tricky and fond of deception, but there's one trait they all have in common. They cannot, literally and physically cannot, speak a false word. If you get specific, and you pay as much attention to what they don't say as to what they do, then that can be a serious opening.

"You didn't actually say no, though. So let's say it does have something to do with the agreement." I leaned back in my chair. "Let's see. Does it involve something which could potentially lead to the agreement being invalidated because circumstances make the original terms impractical for one or both parties?" Like I said. You have to get specific.

He glowered at me. He didn't answer. In fact, he stood up and left without another word. I heard his truck, a vehicle at least as old as I am but in excellent condition, start up and drive away.

Well, that was just great. I'd pissed off my boss, maybe seriously—and yet, in spite of that, I was the happiest I'd been all day.

I was right. It was all connected.

I just sat there for a moment, going through what I'd learned and how it fit together with what I already knew.

Val is not a political creature. He does not willingly involve himself in other people's business, certainly not that of strangers. Which, in turn, meant that he was involved, but not by choice.

He was fae, so logically only the fae could have made him involve himself. For them to get involved suggested that it was, in fact, fae business, which would mean that the mercenary had been hired by one of the fae. They wouldn't bother otherwise.

So Christopher had probably been telling me the truth. That was good to know.

After that, I made a few phone calls. The first one was to Erin, to say that as it turned out I would appreciate her help after all. She agreed without even asking what I needed, and said she could be there within a day.

I don't deserve friends that good. Which didn't keep me from being grateful, mind you.

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Then I called Christopher. He didn't answer, but I left a detailed message describing what I'd learned so far. Whether I trusted him or not, this was something he needed to know.

After that was done I went into the shop and spent several hours working on Kyra's order while Snowflake, bored nearly out of her mind, alternately paced and slept. No customers came in, which in my current frame of mind was a good thing. Neither did the police, which was even better.

I didn't leave to get lunch. I was afraid of what might happen if I did.

On the walk home I encountered another trap, a tripwire strung neatly over a little-used section of sidewalk. We stepped over it carefully and continued on our way. I have no idea whether it actually would have triggered a lethal trap. I didn't actually see anything except the wire itself, but when you're dealing with magic (or people powerful enough to arrange three ridiculously complicated assassination attempts in one day), that isn't a guarantee.

Other than that, there was nothing. I made it home and didn't get a .50-caliber round through my skull. The door didn't explode when I opened it. I swept the house as soon as I was back, and there was nobody waiting there. Neither my senses nor Snowflake's detected anything funny.

In other words, everything looked to be okay. I'd just started to take my shoes off when I saw something new. It was sitting on my desk right in front of my computer, where I'd have to be blind to miss it.

It was a card, about as big as a sheet of paper, and it was absolutely beautiful. The paper was significantly nicer than anything I'd ever actually touched before, thick and creamy and expensive-looking. If you can imagine an adornment that might be found on a letter, at any point in time from the Renaissance to today, it was there. The paper was embossed, gilded, and bore several wax seals. There was a full-color watermark of a rampant coiled dragon, incredibly detailed. It was handwritten, but the penmanship was so flawless and even as to be difficult to believe. This is what it said.

*You are invited*

*To a Gathering and*

*Festival of the*

*Seelie and Unseelie Courts*

*of the Sidhe*

*To be held Tomorrow, from*

*Dusk until Midnight,*

*In the Palace of*

Emrys Vaughn

*His Imperial Majesty, Ryujin*

*And to bring with you one Escort*

*of your Choice.*

It wasn't signed or dated, but then it didn't really need to be. Traveler had come through, and more quickly than I had anticipated.

I studied the invitation for a while. Read it enough times that I could practically have recited it from memory. I inspected it thoroughly, and found nothing to suggest that it was less than authentic.

Eventually I reached for my phone and dialed another number.

Chapter Nine

"Nice," Aiko said as she turned the invitation over in her hands. "This is really nice. I mean, you don't see work like this much anymore, you know?"

I nodded, my mouth full of pepperoni and mushroom pizza. Aiko, knowing that my cooking skills can for the most part be charitably described as godawful, had brought food when she came. I swallowed, took a drink of iced tea, and then said, "I've never seen anything like it. I'm out of my depth here."

She looked at me, amused. "You face down a demonically possessed werewolf without flinching. And you're afraid of a party?"

"When said party involves the Sidhe," I said dryly, "it's likely to be significantly more dangerous than a werewolf."

She snorted. "True. So why'd you call me? Wouldn't it make more sense to ask one of them?"

I shrugged. "I'm not on good terms with any of the Sidhe that I know of. Besides, Ryujin is a being out of Japanese myth, right? A sea dragon."

"That's one of his names. It's more like *the* sea dragon, though. The eldest and most powerful."

"Wow. How much power we talking?"

"Enough to curb-stomp most of the Twilight Princes."

I whistled. "Damn. So don't get on his bad side?"

She shrugged. "I'd worry more about his guests if I were you."

I nodded. "True. The fae don't exactly have a reputation for their tolerant and easygoing nature."

Aiko winced. "Don't call them fae to their faces," she warned.

"Why not? Isn't that what they are?"

She sighed. "Winter, what you know about the fae could fit in a thimble. And I guarantee that if you don't shut up and pay attention, and you go to that party, they will be able to bury what's left of you in one."

I thought about protesting that I was relatively well educated, and while I didn't know everything about the fae I wasn't a *total* ignoramus. Then I did the smart thing and shut up.

"Okay," she said. "The first thing to understand is that the fae only exist as a group in this world. Once you make it to the Otherside, there's no such thing."

"I don't understand."

She sighed. "Look, pretend you're one of the fae. Let's say a svartálf. Now, as far as I know, that means that you were born to svartálf parents. You grew up surrounded by svartálfar. You probably live in Svartálfheim. If you're solitary, and powerful, you might have established a domain of your own, but it's still probably nearby. With me so far?"

I nodded, and she grinned. "Good. So the important part is that you've spent most of your life surrounded by others of your own kind. There might be other groups represented nearby—the Unseelie Court has an excellent relationship with the svartálfar, for example. But they're very definitely not the same as you, and they get treated appropriately."

"So if I were lumped in with them," I said slowly, "it would be an insult. A serious one."

She nodded approvingly. "Exactly."

I frowned. "So what's different about the real world?"

"Number one, don't call it the real world around them. The mortal world is much preferred. Two, even a large city isn't likely to have more than a dozen or two svartálfar in it. Of those, you get along with maybe half. That's not enough to make an independent nation." She shrugged. "But once you make it here, your relations to the other groups are different. You have more in common with each other than with humanity, after all. And these days you're all bound by the same treaties in this world. Makes things easier."

Comprehension dawned. "The Twilight Court. That's what they're for, isn't it? Governing how the fae behave in *this* world."

"Yeah. On the Otherside, though, it's all fair game."

I reached out and tapped the invitation. "So this party. It's just the Sidhe, right? None of the other fae."

"Well," she hedged. "Yes and no. There are plenty of things that are part of the Sidhe Courts without actually being Sidhe. Besides which, this is like a mixer, right? It's an event where different groups are *supposed* to mingle."

"How do you know that?"

Grinning, she tapped the invite. "Did you see where it says the Seelie and Unseelie Courts will be there?"

"Yeah. I thought it was a way of referring to all the Sidhe at once."



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"Sometimes it is. In this case, though..." she shook her head. "The Courts hate each other, for the most part, with a passion. Most events would involve one Court, or the other, but not both."

"Whereas this explicitly states that it's a Festival of both Courts." I read it over again. "At a neutral location, too, so that neither side has the advantage."

"Exactly. It's the sort of thing that happens maybe a few times a year. It's kind of a big deal." She looked at me curiously. "How did you get an invite, anyway?"

I shrugged. "I bargained away a favor of my choice."

She winced a little—like most every other supernatural group, kitsune take their bargains seriously—then glanced at the invitation again. "Not a bad bargain, I guess. Who was the buyer?"

I gave her my best mysterious smile. "That would be telling," I said, because it sounded a lot better than admitting that I had no freaking clue.

She snorted. "Yeah, whatever." She looked down at the card again. "I wonder how he got you that thing," she said, sounding more intrigued now. "Invitations to an event like that aren't easy things to get your hands on."

"Speaking of which," I said casually. "What would you say to an opportunity to attend an event like that yourself?"

She looked up at me, her dark eyes glittering. "Depends," she said. "What did you have in mind?"

I shrugged. "Obviously I have no clue what I'm doing," I said easily. "But it says I can bring an escort of my choice. You're the only person I know who I trust and who also knows more than I do about an event like that."

"Interesting," she commented. "How are you getting there?"

I coughed. "I was, ah, sort of hoping you'd have some suggestions on that point. It's at Ryujin's palace, after all, and you're more like Ryujin than I am, so..."

"That you would say that," she muttered darkly, "is all the proof we needed that you have no idea what you're talking about." She pressed one hand flat to the back of the invitation and frowned briefly. When she removed her hand a moment later, the back was covered in lines of writing. It was also handwritten, but unlike the front it was small and tightly cramped together. Aiko picked it up and studied the new writing.

"Wait a second," I said. "What is that?"

"Travel instructions," she said absently, not looking up. "They don't show up unless you request them. That way it doesn't distract or insult those who don't wish to attend, or already know how to get there."

I frowned. "How do you know this?"

She shrugged. "I attended a few Seelie events when I was younger. They haven't changed the protocol." She blinked and lowered the invite. "Wow. They're arranging a direct portal from Colorado Springs." She gave me a hard look. "Did you set this up?" she demanded.

I smiled mysteriously and didn't say anything, but inside I was just as surprised as she was. Creating a portal from Earth to the Otherside is a serious effort. Like, if I were to exert all my magic on that one task I might be able to open one, but the effort would pretty much wipe me out. Holding a portal steady for any length of time is practically impossible. For them to establish one right in my city was either incredibly fortunate coincidence, which seemed unlikely, or...

Or Traveler showing his power again.

How much influence did the man have?

"Okay," Aiko said a moment later. "Sure. I'll pick you up here at around three." Which wasn't as early as it sounds; dusk comes early in winter, and somehow I was pretty sure I didn't want to be late for this one.

"That'd be great," I said, nodding gratefully.

"See you then," she said, standing. She paused with one hand on the door. "Do try to wear something nice, Winter."

Then she was gone.

Erin, who can get things done very quickly when she has a mind to, called me at about seven the next morning to say that her plane had arrived. We agreed to meet at Pryce's in an hour. I didn't have a car to pick her up in, but I was confident that she could arrange her own transportation.

It never even occurred to me that she might not know who Pryce was or where his bar was. I mean, Erin knew everything, right? And everyone knew where Pryce's was. No-brainer.

I brought Snowflake with me again. I'd also slipped the invitation very carefully into one of my many pockets, along with a sheet of notes on what had been going on. I remembered it all, but I was afraid I would forget to mention something to Erin without a reminder.

On my way to the restaurant I got to experience not one, but two bizarre and seemingly random assassination attempts. The first, which involved a crumbling old brick building, I honestly can't say for sure was an attack. I mean, bricks do fall off of old buildings sometimes, and unlucky people are occasionally underneath of them.

The other one was the most intricate yet. Another tripwire, much like the one last night, except that the sidewalk on the other side was rigged. Some kind of pressure plate, I think. When I stepped

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over the wire, I set off the dart trap hidden in a nearby tree. I heard the click when it activated, and just barely managed to not be where the dart hit.

Needless to say, when I recovered it, I found an ugly-looking black substance on the tip. Poison, no doubt.

I considered the dart in my hand for a moment. Then, very carefully, I went back and broke the tripwire.

It set off another dart trap. One which had evidently been set by a truly vicious person, because it was pointed directly at where I had been sitting to break the wire, and even as careful as I'd been it nearly hit me.

The whole thing seemed sort of bizarre. Not so much that it had happened; it wouldn't be hard for someone to find out which way I was coming, and the trap itself had been remarkably cunning. No, the bizarre thing was that it should happen *now*.

See, that setup was different from the others. It was baroque. Elegant. Ingenious, in a way. The first dart directed at the logical place to step if you'd noticed the tripwire and didn't want to set it off. The second, obviously intended to catch me off guard after the pressure plate, designed to take advantage of natural curiosity.

Compared to the things I'd encountered previously, it was ridiculously complex. Cunning. Subtle. I mean, really. There's a world of difference between putting a scorpion in somebody's shoe or arranging for a car to come flying at them, and a personalized trap built explicitly to exploit an individual person's psychology. There are people, after all, who wouldn't have gone back to test the wire, or who wouldn't have seen it in the first place.

In other words, the most recent trap was much more intelligent than the previous ones. It had a much higher chance of success.

So, if they were capable of that kind of work, why hadn't they used it in the first place?

It would be wrong to say that it confused me, because I was already confused when I found it. But it sure as hell didn't make me any less confused.

Erin already had a table by the time I got there. She was sitting with her back to the mostly-empty bar watching the door. She waved lazily at me as I walked in.

Erin, due to one of the odder quirks of lycanthropy, looks significantly older than the rest of her family, even though she's the youngest of them. Her father looks like he's about seventeen, but you might guess at Erin being as old as twenty-five or thirty. Other than that, the resemblance is striking; they both have straight, even dark hair and eyes the green of spring leaves with the sun behind them.

Snowflake, without any prompting from me, curled up near the door to wait. Her icy blue eyes were focused on the door, and I could see that she wasn't nearly as relaxed as she wanted to look. The muscles of her legs were tense, coiled and ready to move in any direction.

"Hey, Winter," Erin said as I sat down across from her. "Been a while."

I shrugged. "Just a few years." Not too long after I came to Colorado I had, reluctantly, been forced to call her for a favor. It hadn't been pleasant, but it had been necessary.

"So what do you need?" she asked me.

"One second," I said, pulling out a piece of paper and pencil from one of my pockets. I wrote a couple things down, then walked over to get a drink. Pryce was open at eight, but he didn't bother having any staff come in until about ten. And, because he doesn't leave his bar, you either go to him or you don't get anything. It was understandable, given that we were the only customers there.

Erin looked up from the paper to me as I sat down. "'Scorpion?'" she said without preamble. "'Falling brick?' What is this?"

I shrugged. "I started keeping track of all the ways somebody's tried to kill me in the past few days. I was afraid I might forget otherwise."

She started to laugh, then realized I wasn't joking and frowned instead. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

I told her about it in fairly precise detail. It was a bit of a struggle for me—I don't normally tell people important things without a judicious amount of editing—but one of the things I'd learned early on is that sometimes you just have to decide to trust a person without reservation, and Erin was as good a choice as any. It might be different if I were a major player, but I simply didn't have enough power to go it alone.

The first thing she did was look back at the list and then say, "You don't have the dude with the rifle on here." Erin doesn't miss much.

I shrugged. "I don't entirely believe Traveler. I mean, the other events all have a few things in common, right? So far we've got scorpions, dart traps, and contrived car wrecks. You know what we don't have?"

"Sanity," she said dryly. She nodded slowly. "I see what you mean, though. A fifty-caliber rifle pointed at your door is an efficient way to kill somebody." She tapped the paper. "These aren't. No sane mercenary would do this."

"Besides," I said. "Traveler talked a good game, but you know what he didn't talk about? Why the guy with the rifle was there. He never, for example, said that he didn't hire the man himself."

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She sighed. "I hate dealing with the fae. Every time you think you have them figured out, they spring something new on you. So are you going to that party?"

I shrugged again. "Don't see that I have much choice. Whether he was telling the truth or not, it sounds like an ideal chance to fish for a little information." I pulled the invitation out and handed it to her. The writing on the back had faded almost immediately after Aiko put it down, but the text of the actual invitation was still there.

She read it quickly, then set it down next to my list. "Damn. Wonder how he got his hands on that?"

"Yeah. Any idea who he was?"

"Sorry. Without more to go on, I can't even guess."

I wasn't surprised. Disappointed, maybe, but not surprised. "Have any advice for the party?" I said without much hope.

She surprised me this time. "Don't make any deals. You'll get screwed, trust me. Don't ask what Court they're from, they hate that. You can't hope to look as good as they do, so don't try. You're better off picking a distinctive look and going with that instead. Make sure you know where the exit is."

I blinked. "How do you know this?" I asked curiously. "I thought you left the political stuff to Dolph and your father."

She shrugged. "The politics, sure, but you have to know a certain amount if you want to stay in business. The Sidhe are always expecting me to go to social events when I'm working for them. Not usually this major, but I'm guessing the rules are pretty much the same." She saw my expression and laughed. "Come on, Winter. You didn't think my father was the only one I did jobs for, did you?"

I hadn't ever thought about it. "You're a freelance assassin?" I asked, incredulous.

"Sometimes," she said. Her voice wasn't especially defensive, the way you would normally expect a person to sound if you asked them something like that. "Mostly I do bodyguard work, though. It pays better. Less work most of the time, too."

I so wasn't going to touch that subject. "Do you have any idea which of the Twilight might be involved?" I asked instead.

She licked her lips nervously. Then, looking over toward the bar, she called out, "Hey, Pryce. You mind if we make a circle? I'll clean the floor after, promise." He grunted an affirmative, and she stood up and grabbed a couple of salt shakers.

"What are you doing?" I asked as she unscrewed the lids of the shakers and began to pour a line of salt maybe an inch across on the floor around us.

"Circle," she said shortly. "You're looking for names. I don't feel like attracting their attention."

I blinked. "I thought the whole True Names shtick was bullshit."

"Yep, that's what I think too." She finished the circle, enclosing the entire table, and set the empty shakers down outside of it. "I'd rather be too paranoid than not enough, though. Mind giving me a hand powering this up?"

"Not at all," I said absently, walking over to touch one finger to the line of salt. Beside me, I could smell Erin calling her power in a rush of musk and lavender, and I directed my own magic at the circle as well.

Here's the thing about werewolves. When you think of them, it's easy to see the "turning-into-a-wolf" bit and think that's all there is to it. Even once you know about the other things they can do— healing, superstrength—it's still very easy to overlook something. See, becoming a werewolf isn't a biological change. It's an energetic one, a magical one. It bestows a measure of power on you, and changes what you already have from a purely human variety to a sort of hybrid. There's still some human left—not for nothing are they called *were*wolves—but there's also the new stuff.

All of their abilities come from directing that power to a certain task. Shifting, healing, strengthening their body, whatever. Mostly, especially at first, it's an instinctive process. Your body notices an injury and realizes that some sort of counteraction is necessary. Your magic reacts to that instinctive, subconscious desire and makes it happen. Higher thinking processes never get involved at all.

With a bit of knowledge—and a lot of practice—it doesn't have to be that way. I, for example, have a certain amount of werewolf residue in my magic from when I was one. I know quite a bit about directing energy, too, as a result of my magical practice. So when I want to badly enough, I can sort of send more power to that part of myself, and make it heal me faster than it otherwise would.

Most young werewolves, if they even realize that, don't have the patience or interest to invest the hundreds of hours it takes to learn how to really use the power they've obtained.

Erin is not a young wolf. She is, in fact, about two hundred years old, give or take. She's picked up a few tricks in that time. It doesn't give her the kind of fine control a skilled mage has—werewolf magic isn't particularly suited to manipulating external things anyway—but she still has some pretty impressive skills.

The circle snapped into place around us with a sudden burst of power. Underneath Erin's magic I could just detect the colder, subtler scents of my own—wolf and blood, grass and snow.

Circles are one of the simplest magical structures there are. At heart they just represent the concept of a fence (and sometimes an actual fence, but that's not important right now). They're a way of telling the world that the inside of the circle is different from the outside, and using your will and power to make the world listen. Complex circles can involve dozens of layers, physical reagents and symbols, and enough power to level a building. Simple circles, though, are about as stripped-down of a spell as you can find. Even a normal person, without any magical talents at all, can create one if they have a

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power source of some kind. It doesn't have to be a literal circle, either; any shape will do. Circles are just convenient and easy to visualize.

You can use them do a lot of different things, and in fact a circle is the starting point for almost all complex spells. At the moment, the feature we were concerned with was that it takes a lot of work to make magic carry over from the outside of a circle to the inside. That includes, for example, magic meant to eavesdrop.

"Okay," I said, sitting back down. "What do you have for me?"

She grimaced. "I don't know who most of the Twilight Princes are, but my father says there's still a lot of division about the agreement. Like, a whole lot."

I frowned. "I thought it passed unanimously."

She shrugged. "That's what they told us, sure. And maybe it did, and maybe it didn't. Hardly matters, though. I mean, didn't take a genius to see which way the wind was blowing, you know?"

"So if they knew the measure would pass, they might have voted in favor even if they were against it?" I nodded slowly. "Makes sense, I guess. Do you know who was the most dead-set against it?"

"The Morrigan," she replied immediately.

"The Morrigan," I repeated blankly. Then I blinked. "Wait. You mean the Morrigan? The deities?"

She frowned, and I got the idea that she was struggling to phrase something that didn't lend itself well to the English language. Or any other, probably. "Yes," she said eventually, "and no. She's been called a lot of names, but that's the one the Twilight used in the dissenting opinion."

"I'm confused. Do you mean she, or they? 'Cause I thought there were three of them."

She shrugged. "It's referred to both ways. Other than that, I know a couple of them. But for the most part they're referred to only by title." She paused. "That is safest, you know. Names can be dangerous things."

I didn't feel like pursuing that line at the moment. "Who are they? And what about the Morrigan?"

"The Morrigan is also a title. The three of them have individual names too, and even inside a circle I'm not going into them. Other than that, I know that the Mermaid, the Banshee, the Gentle Lady, and Boann's Son were all opposed."

I thought about that for a moment. I wasn't sure who any of those people were, but I knew that the Morrigan, at least, was seriously bad news. In the old stories she was a tripartite goddess of war, who delighted in slaughter and chaos. She was also extremely influential. Like, other deities begged favors from her.

"Two questions," I said eventually. "One, if there were that many people opposed, how did the treaty pass in the first place?"

She shrugged. "There were plenty of people for it too. The Shepherd, the Hunter, and the Wolves' Son were the most outspoken, I think."

"Okay. And what's with all this mumbo-jumbo about names, when everything I've learned says that's a waste of time?"

She frowned. "Everything I know," she said slowly, "agrees with you. As far as I'm aware there isn't any special power or magic associated with names." She paused and looked at me, her green eyes disturbingly intense. "But people have been stepping carefully around these beings for thousands of years. I figure they must have known something, and I'd be a fool to ignore that example." She stood up without another word and broke the circle with her foot. The air inside seemed to relax when she did, somehow, although I wouldn't have said it was humming with energy before.

She returned with a dustpan a moment later, and we silently swept up the salt and dumped it in the trash. She paid Pryce a few dollars for the salt we'd used and we left.

I had walked, and Erin took a taxi from the airport, so we didn't have a car between us. That was fine with me, though; the winter morning was clear and brisk, the sort of day I love, and I didn't have anywhere to be until that afternoon.

Someone else might have thought it was cold, especially as I wasn't wearing a coat. Or a sweatshirt, for that matter. Thankfully (sort of), one of the things I had inherited was a remarkable resistance to cold. Oh, I can feel it; it just doesn't bother me unless it's really freaking cold. Like, subzero cold. Up until then I don't get numb, I don't get frostbitten, I don't even really shiver.

Erin did not have a similar nifty ability. She was a werewolf, though, and a strong one; they're hardier beasts than humans.

I tried to point out the tripwire I'd encountered earlier to her, but all sign of it had already vanished by the time we got there. Not just the wire itself, but the traps, the darts, and the pressure plate built into the sidewalk. It was frustrating, to say the least, but nothing I hadn't expected.

Not long after that, Erin idly asked me, "What are you wearing to this party?"

I shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it."

She stopped. I kept walking, and she had to take a couple quick steps to catch up. "You hadn't thought about it," she said with a tone of deep disgust. "And you're supposed to leave at three." She shook her head and sighed. "That is so typical of you. Come on. I know where we can get you some reasonable clothes."

I thought about protesting that I didn't want nice clothes, and they would be a waste of time on me anyway. Then I thought about how serious this party apparently was, and I kept my mouth shut.



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Who says I never learn?

Chapter Ten

As it turned out, buying clothes took a while. Like, hours.

I suspect I'm not alone when I say that I think of clothes as being something you wear. Oh sure, that's obvious, but what I'm saying is that I think of clothes primarily in terms of what they do for me. Are they warm? Do they fit? Will they keep that dude from filling me up with lead? Stuff like that.

Like I said, I think that's not an entirely uncommon attitude. In fact, I would lay money that most guys think like that. In this case, though, I was choosing them for what statement they would make instead. It was a really good thing Erin was there, because I would have been clueless trying to do that kind of thing myself.

She also insisted on buying everything, which was just as well. My bank account wasn't empty, but that was mostly because I'd spent too much time living paycheck to paycheck lately to think about accessing it.

Long story short, by the time it was one o'clock I was sitting back home the proud owner of a loose black shirt that probably wasn't silk but looked like it was, dark grey slacks, and a really nice pair of black leather boots. I'd also showered and shaved, and even gotten a haircut, which was maybe more work than I'd ever done for a social event before.

That left me with nothing much to do before I left, and I spent the time thinking.

I didn't even bother trying to figure out what was going on in the broader sense. I simply didn't have enough information to work with to guess at that. That was the whole point of the evening, after all. Trying to gather facts that I could use.

I was more busy trying to think of how I could obtain that knowledge. The Sidhe are not known for their great generosity and willingness to share information, and my bargain with Traveler had extended only to getting me there. Actually getting something out of them was my problem.

The Sidhe, and really all of the fae, don't give away knowledge, but sometimes they will sell it. The problem was that I had very little to bargain with. Sometimes you can bribe them with simple cash—or, better yet, gold, silver, and gems—but the information I was looking for was likely to cost a lot. If you don't see the problem with that, see above regarding "dirt poor." If I sold everything I owned and went heavily into debt, I most likely still couldn't afford their price.

The three basic commodities of the supernatural world—and, pretty much, the regular one too—are goods, information, and services. Goods were out, but that still left me with two options. Information was problematic as well, simply because I didn't know all that much. Oh, I wasn't an idiot or uneducated, but most of what I knew was essentially common knowledge. That sort of thing wasn't

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totally worthless, but again, what I wanted was top-dollar. The only really high-value information is the secret kind, and I didn't know any secrets worth that much.

That left services, which most commonly took the form of favors owed. And that was...potentially very bad.

See, here's the thing. Knowledge and goods are limited things. You can't sell them if you don't have them, unless you're in the stock market or something, I suppose. Services aren't. The only limiting factor on them, excepting your own capabilities, is what you're willing to do. For a small exchange, you might be stuck with something simple. Providing regular meals for a year, say, or acting as their proxy in a business exchange.

There's a reason that people who know anything about it are always, always warning you about making deals with the fae, though. Because if you want to sell more, they're happy to buy. Theft and murder are common favors to ask. And, if the knowledge you need is even more important, the price is likely to be even higher. Like your soul.

Oh, not literally. As far as I'm aware magic has had no more luck than science when it comes to proving or disproving the existence of an immortal soul. I'm talking about your person. Your free will, really.

Make the wrong kind of deal with the wrong kind of person, and they own you. Absolutely. You'll do whatever they say—clean the bathroom, rat out your friends, jump off a building, whatever. You have about as much choice in the matter as a gun does of who to shoot. Depending on what deal you made, the terms and length vary quite a bit. Sometimes it lasts only for a day. Other times it can be a year, or several.

Or, you know. Forever.

Anyway, the point is that sometimes the prices involved are heavy. For obvious reasons, I didn't want to pay a price like that.

Alexander had outlined three basic factors determining the price you pay for information when you bargain with the fae. I had no way to know which of the Sidhe, or various others, I might have an opportunity to ask tonight, making that factor impossible to guess. That precluded improving my relationship with them, as well.

Which left only what information, exactly, I was asking after within my power. Which, in turn, left me thinking about exactly what I needed to know.

In order to figure that out, I had to look at what I already knew. It was harder than you might think; I'd learned so many things, most of them unpleasant, over the past few days that I was starting to lose track.

What I eventually came up with was this. Someone had hired a mercenary to kill someone in a manner suggestive of werewolf attack. Said someone had wanted a message passed along to Christopher, although I still couldn't say for sure what that message was. I had recently begun attracting the attention of powerful, dangerous beings, one of whom had been trying to kill me in increasingly bizarre ways. Those two someones might or might not be connected, or even the same person. And...that was about it, really. Okay. What could I say from that?

The first conclusion I drew was that the mercenary I'd met hadn't been behind the recent attacks. They just weren't his style. I usually have pretty good instincts about people, and he'd struck me as a logical, brutally practical man. He hadn't toyed around with Kyra and me; he hadn't laid an elaborate trap for us. He'd lured us in and had his men hit us from behind. Simple. Quick. Nothing left to chance. In other words, the exact opposite of a tripwire rigged to a dart trap. If he were after me, I was pretty sure I wouldn't even know it until my house blew up or somebody shot me in the head.

Besides which, I still remembered his parting comment to me. He'd warned me not to be stupid, then said that the only reason I was alive was because he hadn't been hired to kill me.

Now, that might seem like a small thing. But he was fae, I was entirely certain of that, and the fae don't lie. They *can't* lie. If he said he hadn't been hired to kill me, then he hadn't been. Granted, the terms of his contract could have changed since then, or he could have decided to kill me without being hired—but that seemed unlikely.

Actually, now that I thought about it, that whole encounter seemed really fishy to me. It took me a moment to realize what was bothering me, but when I did it seemed so glaringly obvious that I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it sooner.

When I'd asked what the message was, he hadn't told me. Now, there are plenty of ways he could have done that. For example, "I don't intend to tell you," "That's my employer's business," or "Shut up and do what you're told, dumbass." Not to mention a whole bunch of others.

He hadn't said any of those things. He'd said, "I have no idea."

He hadn't just said that his employer hadn't told him, or that he didn't know. He *had no idea*.

The problem was that it seemed really freaking obvious. A person with any intelligence would have to guess that killing somebody, making it look like a werewolf, and using that as a message to the local werewolf Alpha was a threat. The mercenary had seemed like he had plenty of intelligence to me. How could he not have *some* idea what was happening?

Take out the bit with the corpse looking like it was mauled by a werewolf, though, and things started to make sense. A stranger to town, and a faerie at that, could be easily forgiven not knowing that the pack's corporation had its main office only a couple of streets away. Without that detail, and if the death had originally looked about like any other, the mercenary might reasonably have been baffled.

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From his perspective, after all, the job seemed nonsensical. Kill a random person. Attract the attention of the pack—actually, scratch that. Attract *my* attention, specifically—that was what the scent-blocker had been about. Given that I wasn't even a werewolf, it would make even less sense to him. What kind of message would a plain, simple corpse carry for an Alpha? Why choose me to carry the message?

I started to get a different picture of what had happened. The mercenary, as efficient as ever, had killed the bakery employee quickly and simply. He'd covered his tracks and left, weaving his illusion spell behind him so that I would have something to track. He was meticulous. He took a ridiculous, weaving track and went to a house designed to be nigh-invisible, purely so that I wouldn't be suspicious. He arrived. He waited for me to follow, playing solitaire to pass the time.

Somebody else had been watching the whole time. They waited for him to leave the bakery and get far enough away that he wouldn't notice anything. They made sure nobody found the corpse until then—no, wait. The mercenary had probably arranged that himself. He wouldn't want somebody to catch him in the act, after all.

After he left, the interloper went in and mangled the body. They were careful to ensure that the wounds matched a werewolf attack. In fact, that was probably why the body had been so thoroughly ravaged; no one would notice a bullet or knife wound in that mess. They'd even forged a print, the only truly damning piece of evidence there.

Once that was done, they went and called the police. I wasn't sure about this part, but they must have done something to make sure that the cops found it before the pack. As far as sending a message goes it wouldn't matter, but threatening to expose the wolves wouldn't work unless the police found the body. That was why I had arrived earlier than the mercenary had anticipated; he hadn't expected anyone to know about the death so soon.

I couldn't be sure, but I thought that was a much likelier explanation. In which case...

In which case, his employer hadn't been targeting the pack at all. Or at least not for what we had thought. Which meant...

I grinned suddenly. I knew exactly what information I needed, and it had nothing to do with Twilight Princes. Which was just as well, really; I probably couldn't have found someone who knew about that stuff even if I could afford it.

Aiko was five minutes early. By the time she got there I was already decked out and waiting outside. I had, reluctantly, left most of my weapons behind. It made me feel intensely vulnerable, but you'd have to be an idiot to carry iron into a party of high-ranking Sidhe, and that disqualified most of my kit. All I had left was a bronze ring set with chips of obsidian, a leather bracelet I'd made about a month ago, and a few silver needles. Not much, especially by my standards, but it was what I had.

Besides. If this went south, I'd need a tank, a squadron of mages, and a full pack of werewolves to make it out. And even then it would probably require direct divine intervention.

I got into the car next to Aiko and glared at her. "What happened to dressing nice?" I asked.

She looked at me and sniffed. "*You* have to dress nice. *I* am a kitsune and therefore not expected to fit in with polite society. I'm allowed to look absurd."

Absurd probably wasn't the word I would have chosen. She'd apparently gone to just as much work as I had on her appearance for the evening, but in sort of the opposite direction. She was wearing a black leather jacket, an orange T-shirt, black jeans that had been patched with at least half a dozen brightly colored materials, and sneakers with even more holes in them than the shoes I normally wear. Her black hair, which had been about shoulder-length, was raggedly cut off at about half that.

Oh yeah, and it was dyed a shade of green between "pine tree" and "beetle."

The best part? Her T-shirt bore the caption "Meddle Not in the Affairs of Dragons, for You are Crunchy and Taste Good with Ketchup." I was guessing it would either make the Dragon King laugh fit to bring the roof down, or cause him to set us on fire and smile as we burned.

Except he was a sea dragon, so maybe he would drown us instead. Or boil us, if he was in the mood for a cooked meal.

Not for the first time I wondered why I liked Aiko. Not for the first time, I decided it was because I seldom find someone crazier than me who is still amusing instead of terrifying.

The portal site wasn't actually in Colorado Springs proper. It was set up in a disused building about fifteen or twenty miles away, not far off the highway. By the time we got there the shadows were lengthening, and the trees seemed eerie and a little menacing in the twilight.

Perfect.

Aiko led the way to a door, which was securely padlocked shut. She didn't bother trying to open it; she just rested one hand on the surface of the door for a moment. There was a gentle surge of magic, scented like fox and spice, and the portal opened.

I hadn't ever seen a portal open to the Otherside, and I had to admit it wasn't what I had imagined. There wasn't any flash or dazzle to it; it just appeared. Where there had previously been an old, weather-beaten door, I could now see just a glimpse of a small, boxy room. All of the colors and shapes were ever so slightly indistinct, as though seen through the heat haze over a parking lot at noon on a hot day.

I took a deep breath and stepped through.

Chapter Eleven

Everything changed once we were on the other side—ah ha, ha, ha. What? Believe me, you would crack jokes too. I mean, what else can you do to cope with this shit? If the choice is between bad puns and a padded room, I will always choose the jokes.

The room we were in was about ten feet square, and appeared to be made of coral. Like, gem-quality coral. Except I was pretty sure it was still alive. There were no windows, and only one door, on the opposite wall from us. I didn't look back after we stepped through, partially because I was sure the portal would have already closed and mostly because I didn't want to show anything that could be interpreted as weakness. I was betting everything that happened in this palace was under close observation.

I hadn't ever been to the Otherside before, and I found it a strange experience. Everything felt just a little bit too *intense*. The colors—not just of the room, but even of the clothing I had worn in—were a little bit stronger than I would have expected, vibrant and intense. The air had a sort of charged quality to it that I'd never encountered before. It was a little bit like the atmosphere inside a ritual circle, but without the sense of power I associated with that feeling.

There was one other person in the room, standing near the door. He seemed both deferential and confident, and I immediately placed him as a high-ranking servant of some sort. Almost before we were across he was moving forward to greet us, a coolly professional smile on his face.

"Good evening, sir and madam," he said, bowing. "Might I see your invitation?"

"Certainly," I said, carefully extracting it from one of the few pockets in my new clothes.

He took it and glanced at it. It took him only a moment, but somehow I was willing to bet that he had given it a much more thorough examination than was apparent. Fortunately for me, it apparently passed, because he handed it back to me with another bow. "Very good. If you would be so kind as to follow me, I will show you to your room. The festival should begin shortly."

I exchanged glances with Aiko as we followed him out of the room and down a narrow hallway. *My room?* A personal servant? Did everybody get this kind of treatment here, or had Traveler somehow hooked me up with a VIP pass on top of getting an invitation to the event?

My room turned out to be only a short distance from the room we'd arrived in. It was bigger, maybe twenty feet square instead of ten. There was a king-size bed with posts, a few chairs, and a table with a few bowls of snacks sitting on it. Aiko went right to the food, sniffed at it a couple of times, and pronounced it safe to eat. I was glad, because I had more than half expected to go hungry throughout the party. I wasn't sure what the rules were about eating on the Otherside, but I knew they existed and breaking them was an extremely bad idea. You could, for example, wind up like Persephone, bound to spend three months of every year in Hades for eternity.

That's one of the terrifying things about the Otherside. It's not just big, or huge, it's freaking enormous. Like, it's usually referred to as theoretically finite because, although it must have some sort of limit, nobody has ever found it. They say that, if you know how to look, you can find anything and everything on the Otherside.

The scary part is that any given part of it can have totally different rules than any other part. And none of them are the same as those of the mortal world. I don't just mean the social norms, either. The laws of reality are more like suggestions on the Otherside. Take Faerie, for example. If what I'd learned about it was accurate at all, both gunpowder and gasoline were noncombustible there.

I was too nervous to eat, so I mostly just sat there and waited. Aiko made up for it, sampling every one of the bowls and pronouncing most of them far too mild for her. She likes her food the same way she likes everything else—bizarre and unpredictable.

It was about twenty or thirty minutes before party time. I wasn't sure, because—like all my other gadgets—my phone and watch were back at my house. I wasn't entirely sure how they would react to being on the Otherside, or whether they would function at all over here, so I'd left them behind.

In any case, after a suitably interminable wait, there was a polite knock on the door. I opened it to find the same servant as before, wearing the same inscrutable smile. He bowed politely and then led us through more corridors, all built of the same jewel-bright coral. They started to grow dimmer as we proceeded, until eventually they were pitch black and I was able to follow him only because his white uniform gave off light, so faintly that I hadn't noticed until everything else was dark.

Eventually, after what felt like quite a bit of walking, we emerged into an enormous chamber. I wasn't entirely sure how I knew it was huge, because everything was still absolutely dark. I don't mean dark like a city night; it was dark like the inside of caves, where you're surrounded by so much darkness that you start seeing things at the edge of your vision.

Our servant positioned us very carefully, then seemed to vanish. Not that it would take much; take away the light and he would be as perfectly invisible as if he were gone.

We stood like that for what felt like a small eternity. First five minutes passed, and I felt all right. By the time ten or fifteen had gone by, though, I could tell that even Aiko was nervous and a little bit twitchy.

And then the lights came on.

There was no gradual lightening. It just went from absolute darkness to lighting which, although not really all that intense, was absolutely brilliant by comparison. I spent several seconds blinking before I could see against the glare, and another several seconds after that blinking in shock trying to process what I was seeing.

We were in a ballroom. A ballroom built to incredible specifications. The vaulted ceiling had to be close to a hundred feet above our heads, and was hung with dozens of crystal chandeliers. They



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shouldn't have thrown enough light to illuminate more than a fraction of the room, but somehow everything was equally bright.

Aiko and I were standing near one wall, giving me an excellent opportunity to look over the room. The first thing I noticed was that it was huge and grand beyond the dreams of human architects. Probably about two hundred yards square, I'd guess. The walls and floor and ceiling were made of the same coral as before, but here it was polished to a high shine, and incorporated black coral as well as red. I couldn't see any seams anywhere, as though the whole palace had been grown in place as a single piece—and maybe it was.

Our host was seated at the far end of the room. At this distance I couldn't make out details, but it wasn't hard to guess that the enormous man seated in the throne was the Dragon King. And the space between us—the *entire* space between us—was filled with Sidhe.

I cannot find the words for what that looked like. Legend tells us that this isn't an entirely uncommon reaction to the Sidhe, especially gathered in a large group. They are quite simply more than the human brain is meant to handle—and apparently I was not significantly different from human in that regard.

Imagine the most beautiful person, of either gender, you have ever seen. Now imagine that that person was also an incredibly graceful, highly trained athlete, and it might give you some small idea of what the least of the Sidhe looked like as they danced.

Oh, did I not mention the dancing? The dance floor was suitably enormous, easily a hundred or a hundred and fifty feet to a side, and sunk into the floor in the center of the room between me and Ryujin's throne. The bands were over to my right, seated on beautiful wooden bleachers. And yes, I said bands, plural. I could make out at least a full orchestra, a jazz big-band, and a carillon. At the moment the orchestra was playing some fast-paced piece of classical music I recognized but couldn't place.

And the Sidhe were dancing. Not all of them, of course, but those that were drew the eye almost irresistibly.

By that point in my life I had seen a lot of things. Some of them were beautiful. Some of them were terrible. And none of them had been as beautiful or terrible as that.

They all looked like humans, from here. Except that every one of them was graceful and skilled beyond the wildest dreams of mortals. They spun and whirled to the music, every step perfect, every motion in perfect time. They were packed together, but somehow they never struck each other, never got in each other's way. A skilled dance company that had practiced that exact dance for weeks couldn't have done it a quarter as well.

They didn't look beautiful, because beautiful is a concept that applies to the mortal world, and they were more lovely than any mortal as they danced. I don't think that there are any models that look as good as the least of the Sidhe.

Tearing my gaze away from that was quite possibly the most demanding thing I'd ever done, in terms of sheer willpower. It took me several seconds to manage it. But I did, and quickly looked somewhere else so that I wouldn't be tempted to glance at them again.

Aiko was looking at me with a concerned expression that faded almost instantly when I looked away. "It's hard the first time," she murmured, so low that surely only I could hear it over the music. "I was afraid I'd have to slap you."

"Why didn't you?" I murmured back.

She smiled, a more polite and restrained smile than I was used to seeing on her. "It would have looked bad."

I, too, was aware that I was in dangerous company and anything less than courteousness would draw a bad reaction. So rather than snort, I chuckled softly at her comment and then nodded at the left half of the room, where banquet tables had been set up. "You want to grab some food?" I asked.

She nodded, the elegant movement at odds with her bedraggled appearance. She took my arm and we began to make our way over toward the tables. Fortunately, most of the space was less crowded than the dance floor. It took us only a few minutes to cross the gargantuan room.

On the other side of the dance floor we found huge tables, supporting hundreds of dishes. Apparently, and somewhat to my surprise, it was being served buffet style, so we both grabbed a plate and started loading up on food once Aiko had determined that this, too, was safe to eat.

The spread was incredible. There was almost literally any kind of food imaginable, ranging from burgers, pizza, and French fries to sashimi, candied jellyfish, and roasted grasshoppers. I couldn't possibly have tried everything. Even a single bite of each dish would have been impossible.

Contrary to what you might expect, though, I didn't stick to the more mundane stuff. I've never been timid when it comes to food.

So I tried the grasshoppers, and the jellyfish, and a dozen exotic fruits. I sampled steaks that claimed to be made from elephant, tiger, and crocodile. I felt a little bit guilty about that, but I was confident that the animals they were made from would never have to worry about being endangered—if they had come from animals at all, which on the Otherside was probably optional.

We sat at a smaller table, again near the walls, to eat. Needless to say everything was absolutely perfect; the fruits were ripe, without any concern for season, and tasted like they'd just come off the tree minutes before. The meat was all top-quality cuts, tender and juicy. I had never in my life tasted anything even close to as good.

While we ate I watched the crowd. I didn't make the mistake of looking at the dancers again, but there was still plenty to see.

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To my surprise, Aiko's garb wasn't the most bizarre. Not by a long shot. I saw a number of the Sidhe wearing T-shirts and jeans, although on them they somehow looked like a fashion statement. Others, more fanciful or more flamboyant, were dressed in some of the most ridiculous and incredible things I'd ever seen. One woman wore a dress seemingly made out of mist, while a male Sidhe wore what looked like a suit woven of pure flame. One of the incredibly beautiful women was clothed only in patches of magically produced shadow, which did little except make her nudity suggestive rather than matter-of-fact.

I didn't see anyone I knew, thankfully. That would have been awkward, especially because just about anybody who knew me would know that I shouldn't have been able to get in the door to a party like this. I did see a few things I recognized, though. One of the partygoers was a slender, androgynous form with huge dragonfly wings. It could almost have been the Twilight Prince I had—sort of—assisted during the fight with Garrett, except that its skin was dusky gold rather than silver, and its enormous, luminous eyes were crimson instead of green. It was naked except for what looked like dozens of ribbons in every color of the rainbow hung on its body and draped on its wings. Fortunately it wasn't human enough in appearance to make me feel awkward looking at it.

Aiko nudged me, and I turned to see that her plate—coral, like the silverware—was empty. She nodded toward the throne on its massive dais. "Before we do anything else," she murmured, "I should go introduce myself to our host."

I frowned slightly. "I was under the impression that you didn't much care for him," I said in a bare whisper. Insulting the host, even as obliquely as that, is extremely bad form in supernatural circles.

She smiled. "I don't, particularly," she said, equally softly. "But he's a distant uncle. There'd be hell to pay if he found out I was at one of his parties and didn't say hello." She shuddered slightly. "To say nothing of my mother."

"Okay, then," I said. "I'll be near the food when you're done." She walked away, somehow slipping effortlessly through the crowd without ever seeming to actually displace anyone. I realized that, somehow, she was moving almost as gracefully as one of the Sidhe. I hadn't ever noticed that before, probably because she couldn't have moved like that in my world without attracting attention.

I finished eating slowly, then pushed my chair back and went back to studying the crowd. This time, surprisingly, I did recognize someone. Traveler stood on the opposite side of the dance floor from me. I shouldn't have known him at such a distance, but he was staring directly at me and waved slightly when I looked. I doubt anybody but me saw it. He, too, had dressed up, wearing a cloak made out of what looked like nothing but feathers, in more hues than they would ever come naturally.

Something about that tickled at my memory. The cloak of feathers...I remembered that from somewhere. I felt like I ought to be at least a little worried, and maybe a whole lot, but I couldn't think of why.

Before I could tease it out of my memory, a female voice asked, "May I sit here?"

I stood and turned to face her. It was one of the Sidhe, of course. She was as beautiful as the rest, with long dark hair and emerald eyes with slit pupils. There was something about her appearance, though, or possibly her attitude, that I didn't much care for. I didn't let that show, bowing and murmuring a polite, "Of course."

She ignored me completely, instead staring at me with those uncannily green eyes. "Both of the Courts opposed you, you know," she said abruptly. "You will find cold welcome here."

"Excuse me?"

"You're either stupid, ignorant, or arrogant to come here looking like that. I forgive none of those things." Her voice, although still soft and lovely, was also bitterly cold. She smiled, the expression showing a great many teeth, very white and very even and very sharp. "But then, it is said that the stupidity of humans is infinite. Perhaps I should be more forgiving." Her voice practically dripped scorn now.

"With all due respect, madam," I said stiffly, "I am hardly human."

She tapped one long, elegant fingernail against her chin as though contemplating my words. "Very true," she said. "And you remind me of an important truth. For, infinite though the stupidity of mortals may be, nevertheless the arrogance of your kind exceeds it at every turn." She turned and left without another word, vanishing into the crowd.

Once I was sure she was out of earshot, I shook my head. "What was that about?" I muttered to myself, baffled.

I was entirely surprised when another voice answered me. "She saw a part of what you are," it said in a strangely resonant baritone. "And thought that it was the whole."

I turned to face the speaker. I hadn't noticed him until then, but he was standing right next to Aiko's vacated chair—in perfect position to have witnessed the whole thing.

Several of the other Sidhe had seemed strange, or bizarre, or even somewhat disturbing. This, though, was the first to look actually *frightening*. He was taller than me by a wide margin, and although I am barely average in height that still made him at least six foot seven. He was the first of the Sidhe I had seen who wasn't entirely lovely. His features were rough, his dark hair cropped short and unevenly. If it weren't for the tapered ears and slit pupils I wouldn't have thought he was Sidhe at all.

He was wearing what looked like a fresh wolf pelt as a cloak. Its fangs dimpled the skin above his eyes, which were a shade of green a good bit darker than the woman's had been, and its tail hung down between his legs. I noticed that the whole thing, but especially the paws, moved subtly but constantly in a way that had nothing to do with either the wind or the motion of the man wearing it. I had to fight back a shiver when I saw that.

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Underneath that he had on a plain leather vest and a pair of leather breeches, held up with a simple length of rope. Nothing else, including footwear. I saw smears on his skin and at first thought they were some kind of paint, as several other Sidhe were wearing. Then I realized that the wolf pelt was leaving trails of blood on him as it brushed against his skin. That was creepy as hell. Although I was also observant enough to note that the trails lasted only a few moments, and disappeared entirely rather than drying up and rubbing off. A fashion statement, then, like the cloak itself.

He seemed content to wait while I examined all of this, so I went ahead and replied to him. "What about you?" I asked.

He smiled, and though his teeth were even more obviously those of a predator I was happier to see it than I had been that of the woman. His at least seemed genuine. "I see the whole, and think it only a part. May I sit?"

I had barely begun to nod when he sprawled in the other chair. The cloak's front paws rested on the table in front of him, and had stopped moving.

I wasn't exactly looking forward to fishing for information here, but I had to do it. Might as well start here. The sooner I started the sooner I'd be finished, after all, and he at least seemed friendly.

"Are your answers to questions always so cryptic?" I asked casually. That was as directly as I could approach my real reason for coming to this without possibly giving offense.

He leaned back and stretched. "That depends," he said. "On who's asking, and why. Should I take it you have a question that you would like a less cryptic answer to?"

I frowned slightly. "Is it customary to conduct business in such a straightforward manner at events like this?" I made sure my tone was honestly curious rather than accusatory; I certainly didn't want to offend him.

He shrugged, the pelt moving strangely with the motion. "A great many of these people," he gestured expansively at the room, "won't see each other again for quite some time. Such events are an excellent place to make alliances and bargains."

I nodded. I hadn't thought about it quite like that, but now that I did it was obvious. If the Seelie and Unseelie Courts really didn't have much contact with each other, it made sense that it would be a big deal. And if I knew anything about the Sidhe, then regardless of how opposed the Courts officially were there would be plenty of people on both sides with connections in the other camp.

"In that case," I said slowly, "there may indeed be a question I would like answered. If the price were right."

He smiled. "But wouldn't I have to know the question first?"

"A fae mercenary was recently hired for a task in the mortal world," I said. "This task involved sending a messenger to a certain person. He used me as a tool for this end. Are you familiar with what I'm speaking of?"

He nodded. "Indeed, I am."

I leaned forward slightly. "I would greatly like a meeting with this mercenary," I said quietly. "To express my feelings regarding how he treated me. To that end I wish to know where I might find him within the next few days. Preferably in the mortal world."

He nodded again, as though unsurprised. "Revenge," he said inaccurately. "I suspect that I can find the information for you, and tell you a good bit about the mercenary in question as well."

Wow. Got lucky first try. "And in return?" I asked.

He smiled. "You will answer three questions for me," he said. "Your answers must be honest, but need not be complete. Although naturally I will feel no obligation to be any more complete in answering your question than you are with mine."

I didn't want to actually tell him that his price was low—that's generally a really bad idea when bargaining. He must have seen it in my face, though, because he laughed. "You've started to interest a lot of people," he said, amused. "Including myself." He shrugged. "Besides, I'm fond of werewolves, and I think your actions will be of help to them. So," he said. "Have we a bargain, Winter?"

I gave him a hard look. He knew who I was—no surprise after his comment about my being of interest. That, in turn, meant that this was no chance meeting. He'd sought me out specifically, probably intending to make just this bargain.

It probably says something about my psychology that I was relieved to learn that. I mean, I'd be worried if I got that lucky.

"We do," I said. "And how should I refer to you?"

"Call me Blaze," he said casually. "First question. Why are you at this party?"

I considered my words very carefully. "It seemed like a good place to acquire information. Information that I need to protect the lives of myself and my friends. I didn't know where else to find it, so I thought that I should try here."

Blaze nodded as though he had expected as much. "Second question. Are you happy?"

"Not especially. I'm not comfortable surrounded by so many of your people."

"Clarification," he interrupted. "Are you happy with life?"

"Oh." I thought about it for a minute. It...wasn't a question I'd ever really asked myself before. Oh, I asked myself whether I was happy at any given moment, sure, but happy with my life? Never even

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occurred to me. I suppose that it's the werewolf in me, that isn't inclined to consider much beyond the present.

"I don't know," I said eventually. "People have a lot of ideas about what makes a person happy. Things like money, or love, or morality." I shrugged. "I don't have any of those things. But I like my life. I'm doing better than I probably ever have before. And most of the things that I don't like aren't within my power to change. Nothing good will come of thinking about things like that. So essentially? I'm not as happy as I could be, but I'm probably happier than I deserve to be."

"Hm," he said thoughtfully. "Last question. Do you desire power?"

"No," I said firmly. "The power I already have is more responsibility than I would prefer. I don't need any more."

He looked at me for a moment, as though he thought I might be lying but didn't want to say so to my face. Then he nodded slowly. "Interesting. I look forward to seeing how your opinions change in the future."

"You've answered my questions," he said in a brisk tone completely different from a moment before. "I will have the information you requested to you within twenty-four hours. If I am unable to obtain said information you may ask me any question, and I will answer to the best of my knowledge."

Well, he was confident. An open ended offer like that wasn't something you make lightly.

"Excuse me," said another voice, a familiar one. "Mind if I borrow your dining companion for a moment?"

Blaze stood immediately. "Of course not. Our business was just concluded." He looked at me and somehow I sensed that there was a warning of some kind in his forest-green eyes. "Twenty-four hours, remember."

And then he was gone, and Traveler was in the chair opposite me instead. If I hadn't heard him speak, though, I might not have recognized him. His reddish blond hair was the same, but his eyes were no longer blue. They weren't mortal eyes at all. Instead, the pupil and white and iris were replaced with a whirl of strange colors, orange and emerald predominating. They were in constant motion, the colors swirling madly. It was incredibly distracting.

And then, very suddenly, I realized what it was that my subconscious had been trying to warn me about. I realized who—and what—I was looking at.

I'm not sure what tipped me off. The eyes, maybe, or that magnificent cloak of feathers, or maybe the scars. God, how had I missed the scars? They seemed even more pronounced tonight, a score of thin white lines all around his mouth. When he grinned, as he was now, they pulled at his mouth and made the expression seem almost deformed, so wide that it seemed unnatural.

"Traveler," I said quietly. "It's short for Sky-Traveler. Isn't it."

He grinned at me. The mad dance of his eyes accelerated. "I wondered how long it would take," he said cheerily.

I bowed my head. "Longer than it should have," I said, sudden terror making my voice sound weak and thin. "Loki."



Chapter Twelve

I don't know if I can adequately express how absolutely, utterly screwed I was. I mean, it's hard to really grasp the furthest extent of it unless you have a really solid idea of who and what Loki was. I didn't, but I knew enough to be freaking terrified.

Granted, Loki isn't quite the demonic figure that most of the modern interpretations seem to see him as. In the source material, he was a great friend of the gods. He went on adventures with both Odin and Thor, and if it weren't for him both of them might have been in a very bad way.

But the fact remains that he's Loki. The Trickster. The Sky-Traveler. The Lord of Lies. He was the God of Fire, and if you made the mistake of standing too close he *would* burn you.

They say that when monsters and giants come to overrun the gods and burn the world, Loki will be at the helm of their ship, and laughing all the way. That is, really, all that needs to be said.

And I owed him a favor. I mean, seriously.

He looked at me, and I know he saw the fear in my eyes.

It made him grin even wider.

"Come on, Winter," he said easily. "There's no need to look at me like that. Didn't I get you the opportunity you wanted? I just saw you conversing with a most excellent source of information. Why, I'd be surprised if you don't already have the answers you were looking for. Now you're free to enjoy the party for the rest of the evening. And there is quite a lot to enjoy, isn't there." He smirked and ate a roasted grasshopper. I had no idea where he had obtained the thing.

"Yes," I said slowly. "But you are the god of liars. I think I have a certain right to be concerned." I gave him a hard look. "Aren't you supposed to be bound?" Imprisoned far beneath the earth and slowly tortured until the end of days was more like it, but I wasn't going to say so.

Who says I have no concept of diplomacy?

He grinned, seeming to take no offense at the question. "That was wishful thinking at best," he said. He nodded in the direction of the departed Blaze. "You should be careful around that one, you know," he said conversationally. "He really is what most of the people here only pretend to be. So what do you think of the party?"

"The food's not bad," I said. "But the company could be better." I gestured vaguely at the Sidhe in the rest of the room. Now that I knew what to look for, I could see that most of those not dancing were slowly milling about the room, conversing for a few minutes at a time and then moving on. Making deals and alliances as they went, no doubt. That was what the Sidhe did.

Loki grinned at me. "They can be a little overwhelming, it's true. Especially the first time. But I shouldn't monopolize your time when there are so many interesting people around to talk with." He started to stand, then said as an afterthought, "One more piece of advice. Don't talk to our host."

I frowned. "Why not?" I asked, although I had a feeling I wasn't going to like the answer.

Still grinning, he leaned closer, until his lips were only inches from my ear. Even so, when he spoke it was a whisper almost too soft to be heard. "Because I forged that invitation."

I didn't actually say anything, but I know my mouth shaped the words "oh shit." Unsurprisingly, by the time I recovered enough to look around, Loki was gone without a trace.

It wasn't until then that I thought about Aiko, who had left to introduce herself. I looked over at the throne, desperately hoping I wasn't too late to stop her. Anything that might happen to her if she didn't talk to Ryujin would be small change compared to getting caught with a forged invite.

It was a long ways off, but her vivid green hair was easy to follow. My heart sank when I saw that she was already talking to Ryujin. Of course. Loki had timed it perfectly.

As I watched, she waved one hand in my direction. I couldn't possibly hear what they were saying, but you didn't have to be a genius to imagine the conversation. "I'm pleased to see you, niece, but I didn't realize you got invites to Sidhe parties." "Oh, I don't. I'm here with my friend Winter." "Really? I must not know him. Where is he?" "Over there by the food. Would you like me to introduce you?"

I sighed. Damn it. I knew making deals with Loki would get me screwed.

Aiko slapped me. Not a gentle ladylike slap, either; she really put her back into it. It stung. A lot. Then she stalked over to the other side of our cage, glaring out through the bars.

I don't mean that metaphorically, like if we were in a cell. No, it was a literal cage, about ten feet square. The bars, made of iron with a tracery of silver on them, were spaced about eight inches apart. The room we were in was dark except for the interior of the cage, but I got the impression that Ryujin's dungeons were almost as big as his ballroom. Not surprising, considering that we were on the Otherside; space, like other physical properties, was a much more fluid concept there than in the real world.

"You are such an asshole, Winter," Aiko snarled, turning back towards me. "You might have told me that we weren't actually allowed to be here. It might have changed how I reacted just a little bit, you stupid raisin-crapper."

I chuckled. "Raisin-crapper? That's a new one."

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"I like it too," she agreed. "Picked it up from a German friend of mine. Now don't try and change the subject." She pointed one finger at me accusingly. "I admire the kind of balls it takes to crash a party like this. But don't you think you should just *maybe* have told your escort the plan?"

I sighed. "I would have," I said wearily. "Except I didn't find out my invitation was a counterfeit until about twenty seconds before you did. The person I got it from didn't exactly explain things ahead of time." Although I probably should have known. I mean, even before I'd realized it was Loki I was dealing with, I'd known he was motivated largely by his own amusement. Why would a person like that give me an actual invite, when it was so much funnier to fake it?

She stopped pacing and frowned at me. We'd been in there for several minutes already, but this was the first time she'd calmed down enough for me to explain. "Wasn't that against your deal?" she asked.

"It should have been," I muttered. "But technically the bargain was that he would get me into a position where I could obtain certain information. He never said that I would actually be allowed to be there."

Aiko stared at me for a moment. Then she sighed gustily and collapsed onto the coral floor, leaning against the bars. "Damn," she said. "You must be the unluckiest bastard I know." She shook her head slowly. "What did you need to know that badly?"

"Um. I would be delighted to explain it to you, but this might not be the best place."

She nodded. "True. So who was it? You think you could explain that you weren't at fault?"

"Doubt it," I said glumly. "I don't even have proof that he was the one who got it for me. It'd be my word against his, and I doubt the judge would rule in my favor against Loki."

She stared at me, her expression gone to one of horror. "Loki?" she said. "*Loki?* You made a deal with freaking *Loki?*"

"I didn't know who it was at the time," I said defensively.

She looked at me like I was a total idiot. Which, I admit, totally justified at the moment. "You made a deal with Loki," she repeated. "Without knowing who he was." She shook her head slowly. "I stand corrected. If this is the worst that happens to you, you're the *luckiest* bastard I know."

"How bad is it likely to be?" I asked with a sort of morbid curiosity.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "Probably not too bad for me. I can always just say you didn't tell me, and he likes me anyway. I'll probably get off with a lecture about being more careful in the future." She grinned briefly. "Which no one expects me to pay attention to, anyway. I am a kitsune, after all."

I grunted. "It'll be worse for me, though. Right?"

"Yeah. Ryujin's sort of a traditionalist. Probably why he gets along so well with my mother. He won't like it that you insulted his hospitality."

"What am I looking at?"

"My guess is he'll go with the traditional answer. A hundred years of service, probably."

My guts twisted at that. It's a pretty common thing to do, legendarily speaking. The way the Otherside works, even a normal human can live for centuries over there without aging.

Time still passes, of course. It just doesn't pass in quite the same way as it does in my world. There are tons of stories about people who, intentionally or otherwise, go to the Otherside and stay for a few days, only to find that years or centuries have passed in the world they left. Others stay on the Otherside for years, but return in practically the same moment they left.

After the insult I'd paid him, I didn't think the Dragon King would let me off that easy. I would return from my hundred years of unpaid menial labor to find that at least that much time had passed in my world—if I returned at all. All of my friends, with the possible exception of the immortal ones, would be dead. I probably wouldn't even recognize the world I had left.

That wasn't a very good option for me.

"What would happen if I escaped?" I asked idly after a moment.

She frowned. "I'm not sure. He might be so impressed that you got away that he lets you go. Or he might decide it's an even worse insult and kill you for it." She shrugged. "No way to know for sure."

I nodded slowly. "Honestly, I think I'd rather die than serve for a hundred years anyway. Guess that's what I'll do."

She stared at me for a moment, then laughed. "Ambitious. But you might find breaking out of the Dragon King's dungeons isn't that easy."

I frowned. "Yeah, I'm still working on that one." A moment later I said, "The way I see it, you have two options here."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "You can stay here and take your chances with his mercy. You can always explain that I escaped against your advice—I could maybe knock you out or something, if you want help selling it. You'll probably get off scot free."

"Or?" she said. She tried to sound bored, but couldn't quite contain her grin.

"Or you come with me. We make our dashing escape from right under the Dragon King's nose and laugh at him once we're back in the mortal world. He's so amazed that he applauds us for our courage and ingenuity. And we still get off scot free."

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

She snorted. "Sounds like I might as well stay then. It'd be risky trying to leave, and riskier counting on him to be impressed instead of pissed."

"Maybe, but come on," I wheedled. "Everyone would know you'd escaped from the Dragon King. How many people can say that?" I paused, then added, "Besides. You know as well as I do that it would be *way* more fun than waiting."

She laughed. "You...." She shook her head, still laughing. "Winter, I think you might be crazier than me. Fine. I'm in." She paused for a moment. "I'm sorry I slapped you," she said apologetically. "I shouldn't have reacted like that."

I shrugged. "It'll heal." Actually, it just about had healed; I was recovering even faster on the Otherside than normal. I could hardly even feel the bruises from when Ryujin's guards had thrown me in here. "Besides. You had reason."

"Doesn't make it the right thing to do," she said firmly. "And the food was worth getting thrown in here, anyway."

I chuckled. "True." I paused meditatively. "It tastes better, knowing that we weren't actually allowed to eat it."

"Yeah. Stolen food always tastes sweeter," she told me. "So have you come up with an idea for getting out of here?"

I examined the bars again. "Maybe." I pointed at the gap. "You could fit through this, right?"

She looked at it. "I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I'm thin, but I'm not that thin."

"You the fox," I clarified. Then paused. "You can turn into a fox, right? I mean, I thought that's what a kitsune was...."

"Yeah," she said, "but it won't do much good. The whole cage is surrounded by a barrier." She reached out and knocked on the seemingly empty air between bars. Her knuckles rebounded with a sound similar to that you might get rapping on hardwood. "Maybe if I were a four-tail or so I could get around it, but as it is...."

"Huh," I said, reaching out to feel it myself. The air became solid at about the same point as the outer surface of the bars. It felt like stone, cold and incontrovertibly solid. "How many tails do you have, anyway?" I asked absently. It was incredibly rude to ask how much power a person had, which among kitsune was measured by how many tails one had. On the other hand, Aiko had never seemed to care too much about politeness anyway.

"Just the one," she said. "I'm only forty-three."

Middle aged to a human, but barely more than an infant by the standards of kitsune. According to the stories I'd heard, they only grew one tail a century, and the most powerful of them have nine. You can do the math.

I closed my eyes and focused on the spell I was feeling. The first thing I got was aromatic in nature, as usual. The magic smelled somehow dry and leathery, the way I imagined a snake would smell. Under that was the tang of salt, which fit with a sea dragon's palace.

As I kept concentrating, I picked out more details. It's hard for a mind designed for normal sensory input to really grasp magical data, but I'd been doing it for most of my life, and practicing intensely the last few months. I got a pretty good idea of how the magic was constructed. The air was locked into stasis, held in place by geometrically ordered magic.

A stable spell like that was all about order, you see. In some ways magic itself is. You have to bind the naturally chaotic energy that makes up magic into a shape that will actually do what you want it to. That's why a strong will is important; the magic wants to go back to its original disordered condition.

Anyway, the important thing is that the spell was an extremely orderly structure. Interestingly, though, the power bound into that form was itself not stable. It flowed through the shape of the spell from one structure to the next like a slow-motion waterfall.

That was a clever trick. It meant that you couldn't just batter the barrier down with main force, the way a more rigid shield could be broken. By the time you'd done enough damage to deplete the magic, it would have been completely refreshed with new. The structures of the spell itself slowly shifted and moved around, too, so that you couldn't even hope to damage them enough that they no longer supported a distinct spell.

It was ingenious, a working quite a bit beyond anything I was capable of. However, if you were clever and you knew what was going on, it was also uniquely vulnerable.

I knew what was going on. I was only hoping I was clever enough to get it done.

I lowered my hand and opened my eyes. Aiko had sat back down and was watching me curiously. "Would our host be working to imprison us personally?" I asked her, sitting down as well and leaning back against the walls of our cage. If he was, we were done before we started.

She thought for a moment, chewing on her bottom lip. "Not during the party," she said eventually. "He'll want all of his attention for his guests."

I nodded. I'd expected as much.

"Okay," I said after a moment. "I think I can bring down a section of the barrier long enough for you to get out. It's tied to the door, so if you can get it open from the other side I can get out that way."

She nodded slowly. "Right. How do we get out of the palace?"

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

I didn't have an answer for her. We sat there for a few moments, staring at each other with dismay. Then she suddenly brightened. "The portal we came in through," she said excitedly. "It'll still be open until the party's over. That way the guests can use it to get home."

I grinned. "That's great news. Do you think you can get us there?"

She frowned doubtfully. "Maybe. I've been to the palace a few times, but I haven't seen this part of it before. Do you know how to get back to the room we came in at?"

"Not really," I admitted. "I lost my way in the dark."

"Okay," I said after a second. "You're sneakier than me. How about you scout out a way to somewhere you recognize and then come back for me? From there, hopefully we can make our way back to the exit."

"Might work. How long should I take?"

"Um. We need to get out before the party ends. Otherwise the portal will be gone. And if the Dragon King gets involved personally, we're done. You have any idea how long that gives us?"

"Three to six hours?" she guessed.

I grimaced. "We go with three then. If you haven't found something in about forty minutes, come back and we'll try to figure something else out."

She nodded. "Right. Guess that's about it, then."

"Yep," I agreed. "Go ahead and get changed. I won't be able to keep that gap open long. Maybe a few seconds at most, so be ready to move at my signal. I don't know what'll happen if you get caught in the barrier when it comes back up, but I suspect it would be bad."

She nodded again. "Understood." Then, without saying anything more, she did her thing.

It was sort of interesting to watch. I'd never seen Aiko change before, and I had to admit a certain amount of fascination at how the process might work.

At first it wasn't much different from watching one of the werewolves. She stripped out of her clothing, as casually as anything, then tore off one of the patches of her jeans. That revealed a small hidden pocket, from which she took a small leather case. She set it next to one of the gaps between the bars. I saw glinting metal, and realized that it held a small but perfectly serviceable set of lockpicks.

She'd come prepared. And that trick with the patches was clever too; I wondered idly how many other tools she'd brought like that. Clearly I had underestimated the kitsune. That was good. It meant we might have a chance of pulling this trick off.

At that point, any resemblance to a werewolf ended. She didn't have to spend long minutes in agony as her body twisted from one form into another. She just took a deep breath and, faster than

blinking, she was gone in a subtle rush of magic, more fox now and less spice. In her place was a fox, watching me with intelligent eyes. Unlike the werewolves, she was absolutely indistinguishable from a normal animal. Her smooth fur was a bright orange-red, touched with black at her nose, tail, and paws.

Most of the time I would have said that was crap as far as camouflage goes. Against the coral walls and floor of the palace, it was perfect.

I realized I was staring and turned to face the barrier instead. "I'm only bringing one section down," I said. "And it'll come back up very quickly. Don't stop until you're well past the outer edge of the barrier. You ready?"

The fox twitched one ear in what I took to be assent.

I took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. I hadn't ever attempted something like this. Even a handful of months ago I would have said with perfect confidence that I couldn't do it.

But it was my turn. And I'd be damned if I was going to let Aiko down. Or myself, for that matter. I really wasn't looking forward to a hundred years of slavery.

I closed my eyes and focused on the world around me. Alexander thought of magic as the manipulation of basic forces, and I could understand that. But it wasn't how I saw things. To me, magic is just a part of how things are. It's a part of the world.

I've always been amused at how arrogant people are, as a rule. I mean, most people somehow think that they're special. That they're separate from the world. Superior to it.

How the hell could you think that? I mean, come on. You're a part of things. A part of the world, of the things around you. What you do affects it. What it does affects you.

I don't understand people very well, I guess. I don't get how they can think that way. In any case, the important thing here is that I *don't* think that way, and that's reflected in how I approach magic. I think of magic as being a part of the world and a part of everything in the world, inseparable.

So now, while I was preparing to do some big-time magic, the first thing I did was let go of myself. That's the best I can describe it. I sort of detached my awareness, my sense of self, from my actual body. I spread my consciousness out, through my surroundings. I anchored myself like that, making sure that I wouldn't lose track of where or who I was.

Aiko's mind pressed against me, all vibrant energy and curiosity and impatience, more vivid to my senses now that the fox was dominant in her. It was a distraction. I blocked it out.

I brought forth power, my power, my magic, filling me in a sudden rush of energy. The magic inherent in the stone—er, coral—and air around me stirred as well, called by my power and my presence. Then, bringing with me as much of that as I could, I twisted my awareness into a more ordinary alignment with my body.



## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

I can drift like that, but it's really hard to actually do anything while I do. Think of it as being like swimming. If you're a decent swimmer you can move around in water way deeper than you are tall. It lets you go places and encounter things you otherwise never could. And that's awesome. But I defy you to, say, bench press while you do. You have to have a firm foundation for that. You need leverage, something to push against.

It's sort of the same with magic. If, for lack of a better word, you diffuse yourself, you don't have the leverage or concentrated strength to lift the metaphorical barbell. When you're concentrated in one place—like, for example, a body—you can exert the same amount of force, but in a concerted, unified way. Plus that body anchors you so that you have something to push against.

So why bother with the first step? Simple. There was a lot of magic moving around in the barrier spell. Like, a lot of magic. More than I could muster, guaranteed. I was targeting a weak point, and I wasn't even trying to actually counter their spell, but it would still take a lot of power to do.

When I returned to my body, I brought a certain amount of power back with me. Not a lot; the process I had used to gather it was ridiculously inefficient. But some, and I wanted everything I could get.

Holding the power I had summoned like an indrawn breath, I found the spell and the power running through it like water. And then I expelled the magic, forcefully, against it.

I wasn't trying to make a spell. I take way too long about a complicated spell for that to work. I wasn't even trying to damage their spell, either. Even if I could, it would be very noticeable. I was simply trying to stop the magic energizing it from moving. Think of the barrier as a waterwheel. I didn't need to destroy the wheel. I just had to stop it turning. To do that, I essentially built a dam upstream from it so that the water—or magic—couldn't get there.

At first it wasn't enough. The power slowed, but didn't stop its motion. I pushed against it harder, expending magic recklessly. The borrowed power was gone within a few seconds—but the flow stopped.

I held it, straining. I was using my own magic now. Every person has a sort of well of power, power which is uniquely flavored with their own personality. Some people naturally have a lot; mostly those people are the ones that become mages.

I forced my eyes open, watching the section of barrier I was depriving of power. Now that I knew what to look for I could see it as a slight haze in the air. I had removed its energy source, but it still had enough lingering power to continue operating for a little while. To continue the analogy, the wheel's inertia was enough to keep it spinning, and the barrier wouldn't fall until it had well and truly stopped.

I held back the flow of magic for one second. Two. I started seeing little, dancing black spots at the edge of my vision. I narrowed my focus until nothing existed but my will, forcing out more and more power. I reached deeper, maybe deeper than I ever had before, and pulled out all the magic I could find.

At five seconds the barrier wavered. At seven it collapsed.

"Go!" I grunted at Aiko. I kept up the pressure; I had no way to know whether the spell would take as long to start up again as it had to stop.

The fox fairly flew out of the cage. I saw her sweep the lockpicks out of the cage with her tail as she passed. She touched the ground about three feet outside the walls of the cage, at about the same time as I finally let go of my dam. Power surged down the newly opened path with the force of any dammed river, and the barrier slammed back into existence.

I sagged against the bars. Like a lot of things, you don't feel the effects of serious magic use until after you finish. It took me a couple seconds to work up the energy to stand up and open my eyes.

Aiko was safely on the other side, watching me with an expression of concern. That last bit might have been my imagination, but I didn't think so; I'm better at reading animals than people, partially because of so much time around werewolves and partially because my magic meant that I had spent a significant amount of time inside of their heads.

"Good luck," I said quietly. Aiko continued to stare, and I realized that she couldn't hear me.

Duh. The barrier. It wouldn't allow anything out of the cage—including sound waves. I smiled and gave her a thumbs-up instead. She twitched her head in a tiny nod and then turned and vanished into the darkness.

It wasn't until then that I realized she had a certain amount of reason to look concerned. The floor around me was covered in a thin layer of frost for six inches in every direction, cut off where it intersected the barrier.

Wow. That hadn't ever happened before. I wasn't sure why it should have happened now, either. I glanced at myself and realized that my fingertips were coated in frost, too, and I hadn't even felt it. I'm not sensitive to cold, but normally I would have noticed that.

This wasn't the time to do anything about it, either. I sat down to wait for Aiko instead. On the other side of the cage from the circle of frost.

Chapter Thirteen

It felt like a very long time I spent waiting for Aiko to come back.

Some of that was because I was alone in a cage in a darkened prison. I mean, that's enough to creep anybody out. It didn't help that I knew that if I didn't get out, the results were likely to be very bad. Even the sentence Aiko had predicted was relatively lenient. If Ryujin decided to be really angry at me, I was looking at worse than that.

More was because, after I finished recovering from my magicking, I had nothing to do. There was nothing I could think of that I could do to affect things from inside the barrier. Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't get out; trying to hold open a gap took too much concentration to walk, let alone dart out through a tiny gap in the bars.

Without something to distract me, my imagination kept presenting me with images of all the things that could go wrong. Aiko might get caught, in which case she would likely get far worse than a lecture. Whoever was powering this barrier might have detected what I'd done—unlikely, but possible—in which case they were alert to our escape attempt. They might decide to close the portal we'd used earlier. There was nothing I could do about any of these things—but that didn't keep me from worrying about them.

And, of course, there was always the possibility that Aiko had just left me here to rot. She'd always seemed friendly, but she also seemed completely cuckoo. It wasn't impossible that she'd just decided I was more trouble than I was worth.

Suffice to say that, although it was only about twenty-five minutes, it seemed like it took her a lot longer.

When Aiko finally returned, she didn't waste any time padding over to where the lockpicks were lying on the floor. There was another rush of magic, which apparently the barrier didn't stop me from sensing, and then she was back to her human form. She must have figured out that it would prevent me from hearing her, because she didn't try to say anything, instead going straight to work on the door. I smelled more magic, subtler and drawn out this time, and realized she was doing something to the lock with magic at the same time as she worked to pick it. That was an impressive piece of multitasking.

Oh, and if you've forgotten, she'd had to leave her clothes in the cage. Which meant that she was standing there picking the lock in the nude, taking exactly no notice of me.

What? I'm used to these things, sure, and they don't distract me, but I still notice them. I'm male, I'm relatively human, and I hadn't gotten laid in years. Of course I noticed. I mean, I didn't stare or anything, that would be just rude, but I was aware of it.

I was betting that the locks in Ryujin's palace were top-notch. Aiko took almost a minute to open this one. Once she did I was outside the cage almost before she had the door open. I had really, really gotten sick of that space.

"I found something I recognize," she said briskly as she got dressed behind me. "But we're several levels down and on the opposite side of the palace from where we came in. We'll have to detour around the ballroom, too. Comes to about a mile of walking, total."

A mile? How huge was this palace, anyway?

Aiko set a brisk pace, which I judged to be a very good thing. We might have as little as two and a half hours until the party ended at midnight, which gave us only two hours to get to our escape route and get away from here with a safe margin. A mile might not sound like much ground to cover in two hours, but believe me, when you're creeping along desperately trying to avoid notice, it's more than enough.

Aiko produced a weak, reddish gold light of some sort to guide us through the darkened dungeon, although it didn't illuminate anything outside of our immediate area. I had the feeling that I was very grateful for that. The kitsune clearly had an almost uncanny sense of direction; she picked her way across the dark, cavernous room to a staircase without any hesitation, and didn't make a single misstep. The staircase, too, was dark for the first five levels. We went up a total of seven, and I got the impression that there might be a whole bunch more in both directions.

The rest of our escape was boring. Absolutely nerve-wracking and terrifying, of course, but basically boring. Aiko's knowledge of the palace, which was much more extensive than I had realized, was our salvation. She led us unerringly through back hallways and service corridors, all of which were narrow and dimly lit, although still made of the same marvelous red coral. I followed along behind her and tried not to feel too clumsy compared to her inhuman grace.

As it turned out there was no need for stealth. We didn't encounter so much as a single servant. Probably they were all busy with the Sidhe festival. We did encounter windows, the first I had seen here, and the view from them was almost as incredible as my first sight of the Sidhe dancers.

It was more or less what you'd expect from an immense, vaguely Oriental palace, except that the whole thing appeared to be built at the bottom of the ocean. There were lots of enclosed courtyards, and gardens filled with kelp, coral, and anemones, with tiny, brightly colored fish flitting around in them. I got the impression that, if I could breathe water, it was the kind of place I would like to hang out in. As it is it was like visiting an aquarium, except the other way around.

I had guessed that aquatic beings would probably like easy access to the water, and I was right. Not far past the windows we encountered a doorway. Or archway, rather; there was no door involved. The water just stopped at the edge of the arch, which was maybe the coolest thing I'd seen all night. At the sight Aiko, who hadn't slowed or spoken since we started moving, stopped to look out. Then she looked at me appraisingly. Somehow, I was sure that look didn't bode well.

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

"How good of a swimmer are you?"

See? I was right.

"Um," I said, walking over to the door. It was incredible; you could stick your hand straight out into the ocean, but no water came in, and when I pulled my hand back in it was perfectly dry. "Not that good, I think. I mean, I can swim, but...."

"Do you remember taking any stairs between the entry room and the ballroom?" I shook my head. "Me neither. That means they're on the same floor, quite a ways above us. The lower levels, where the dungeons are, are separated from the upper, and there's only one staircase between them."

I got a sinking feeling. "Let me guess. Taking the stairs would mean a lot of backtracking."

"An entire wing's worth. Plus the possibility of detection; those stairs see a lot of traffic."

I sighed. "All right. What's your idea?"

She gestured grandiosely at the door. "We go out, swim up about nine levels, and go back in, having cut off all that travel."

"What if there isn't a way back in?"

She shrugged. "We drown. But I think there will be."

I thought about it for a minute. The ceilings seemed, for the most part, to be about twenty feet high. If there were nine levels that made a hundred and eighty feet. Assuming I could hold my breath for about two minutes, I would have to swim at a foot and a half per second to make it that far before I drowned. I wasn't great, but I'd practiced a bit when I was younger, and I thought that was within my range. Of course, if anything went wrong, I didn't have much margin for error.

Then I laughed. Who was I kidding? This whole endeavor was so insane that drowning was the least of my worries. "Fine," I said. "After you."

As it turned out those courtyards I had seen earlier were more like enclosed shafts. The walls towered around us on all sides, higher than I could accurately estimate, and were lined with windows the whole way up. Aiko was a stronger swimmer than me, and I lagged behind a bit. Ultimately, though, we both made it to the next archway, although I won't pretend that our entry was dignified. We swam out of the arch at about head height and tumbled awkwardly to the floor. On the bright side, thanks to whatever magic Ryujin had going on the arches, we weren't dripping wet. Even our clothes hadn't brought any water across the threshold.

"Was that really nine levels?" I asked. It hadn't been nearly as hard as I'd expected.

"Seven," she said. "Close enough, and why take chances?" A sentiment with which I could agree; after all, we hadn't seen any other arches.

After that brief but exciting interlude, it was back to the same old. More narrow corridors, more flights of stairs. We still didn't see anyone, and I was beginning to wonder how long our luck could hold. And also how Aiko could navigate this place; one narrow, coral hallway looks a lot like another to me.

Eventually, after a long enough time that my nerves had moved past twitchy into a salsa dance with castanets, she pronounced that we had arrived. She opened the door, revealing a small cubical room of coral, and—

And nothing. In spite of what all my instincts said should happen, nothing happened. The door didn't explode when we opened it. There wasn't a mocking sign on the opposite wall. There wasn't even a sinister laugh, which I was pretty sure even the weakest Bond villain could have provided.

We proceeded inside, amidst bunches of more nothing, and shut the door behind us. It didn't lock itself. Aiko promptly walked over to the opposite wall and rested her hands against it for a long moment. "Still active," she pronounced eventually.

"We outta here?" I asked rhetorically.

She started to answer, then paused and grinned maliciously. "One thing first," she said, walking to one of the side walls and tearing another patch off her jeans.

In any decent story that would have been when alarm bells started to ring and the exits all sealed themselves to punish us for our arrogance. I mean, seriously. *Any* decent story could take advantage of an opportunity like that. I was almost offended when nothing continued to happen. Didn't we at least merit an ominous send-off from our enemies?

Aiko dropped whatever she'd grabbed to the floor and went back to the portal. It took only seconds for her to get it up and running again, but I had time to see what had been so urgent before we left.

On the wall behind us she had used a piece of black chalk to write, in jaunty, mocking script, KITSUNE WAS HERE.

It was half past midnight when we got out of the portal. I'm not sure why; maybe our estimation of the time was seriously wrong, or there was some sort of time-dilation effect while we were on the Otherside. Or, hell, maybe the portal was just designed to make sure that everyone left after midnight, because that was when the party was supposed to end.

"So what was so important about making fun of them on our way out?" I asked as we made our way back to her car.

She shrugged. "This way it looks like I set the whole thing up as a prank. Might keep some of the backlash off of you." She paused. "Although actually, that was a freakin' awesome prank. Maybe we should do it again sometime."

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

I thought about asking whether she was insane, but really, why bother?

"I'm sorry if I offended you back there," she said about ten minutes later while we were on the road, waking me from a light doze.

"You saved my ass back there," I said, confused. "Why would I be offended?"

She glanced at me obliquely. "Winter. If a man doesn't want to look at a naked woman, it's usually for one of three reasons. She's ugly. He's gay. Or she did something to turn him off." She shrugged. "I know I'm not ugly, and I'd hope you would have mentioned it by now if you were gay."

I blinked. "What? It would have been rude to stare. That's all."

Aiko flushed slightly. "Oh. Ah. Um...sorry."

"Seriously, though. Why should I be offended? I'd probably be dead if it weren't for you."

She shrugged. "You've never seen my other form before."

"Oh. I take it that's caused problems before?"

"A few times. A Sidhe I dated when I was younger, in particular. They tend to look on the animalistic entities with a certain amount of disdain." She shrugged again. "He was all right with knowing what I was, but when he actually *saw* it he bolted."

"That shows only that he has extremely poor taste," I said firmly. I saw that she didn't quite believe me, and sighed. "Look, my magic is good with animals, okay? I've spent probably around five hundred hours psychically connected to various predators. A significant portion of that time has involved foxes. So believe me when I say that you are not unattractive in either form." I paused. "Okay, that came out wrong."

"Extremely," she agreed, although she didn't sound entirely displeased. "We are changing the subject now. Why were you at that party in the first place?"

I explained, in general terms, what had happened in the past few days, focusing particularly on the attention I had apparently begun to attract from people in high places, and the assassination attempts it had garnered me.

That took until we were back in the city. Aiko dropped me back at my house and left, promising to contact me tomorrow. Erin had apparently found somewhere else to stay, because my place was empty and dark, and the fire had long since died. That bothered me not at all, since I went straight to my bed, which Snowflake had been keeping comfortably warm, and went to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

I woke up at seven the next morning feeling, if not as entirely rested as I might like, still pretty good. The way I saw it I was finally starting to make real progress. The Sidhe I had bargained with would be getting me information soon, and I didn't even owe on it. Furthermore, I was starting to get an idea of what was going on. Which worried me.

Here's the thing about the fae, and the Sidhe in particular. Every person I'd ever talked to about them—every single one—had the same piece of advice. If you think you got the better side of a deal with one of them, it's because you got played and you haven't even realized it yet.

I was in too deep to back out now, though. I'd already run over the edge of the metaphorical cliff, and like Wile E. Coyote, I was moving too fast to turn around. So I'd probably better just keep moving and hope I found solid ground on the other side before I realized I was falling.

There was a message on my phone from Val which had been left about two hours before. He asked me to meet him ASAP at an address that was unknown to me, and come alone. That, obviously, was suspicious as hell.

If I hadn't trusted Val as much as I did, I probably wouldn't have gone, or would at least have brought a metric ton of backup. As it was, I armed myself to the teeth and started walking.

On the way I added one bear trap and a set of stairs covered in ice to my tally. I left off the open manhole cover, though, because it might have been coincidence and I couldn't bring myself to believe that anyone would seriously use that as an assassination weapon.

I found myself, after quite a pleasant walk, at a garage not entirely unlike the one Val and I worked out of. It was a great deal more dilapidated, though, and seemed to have been abandoned for years.

An abandoned garage in a quiet part of town. If I were a suspicious sort of person I might think that being asked to meet somebody there alone was a setup of some kind. Good thing I'm not one of those or anything.

The door was unlocked, which it probably shouldn't have been. I pushed it open, but the interior of the place was totally dark. I couldn't see, here, or smell anyone inside.

"Hello?" I called, not going in and keeping all my senses focused on detecting anyone sneaking up behind me to do something nefarious.

There was a brief pause, then a light flicked on inside. "Winter," Val said, relief unmistakable in his voice. "Come inside."



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I stepped inside, closing the door carefully behind myself, and keeping one hand on the knife in my pocket. If this was an ambush, now would be the ideal time for them to spring it. Nothing happened, though—darn it, how many opportunities were the bad guys going to waste like this?—and I relaxed somewhat, proceeding farther into the empty garage.

The light wasn't especially bright, just a simple work lamp. It illuminated a small, worn table and two wooden chairs. Val was sitting in one of them, and looked nothing like I was used to seeing him.

Most of the time Val wore work clothes—he was a repairman of sorts, after all. They were usually simple—jeans, a sweatshirt, that sort of thing. Clean, always, and nothing like as battered as my clothes, but still just work clothes.

At the moment he was in grey silk and black leather. It looked more expensive than anything I'd ever owned in my life, and I was willing to bet that it was hand-tailored.

I stared at him for a moment. Then I sat down in the other chair.

"Nasty business," he said without preamble. "Glad you made it out."

That's when I finally caught on. Val had been at the party that night, and he was still wearing his party clothes. "You know how much I pissed off the Dragon King?" I asked. I still didn't really believe that Erin's caution about names was entirely justified, but I also wasn't planning on using his any time soon.

He ignored my question completely. "You were seen talking to the Sky-Traveler," he said grimly. "And the Son of Wolves."

Son of Wolves, eh? Interesting. That explained the cloak, then. And I suddenly had a much better idea of what had really been going on with that deal. Erin had referred to a Wolves' Son as one of the Twilight most responsible for the treaty with Conn. If it was the same person, and I was willing to bet it was, he probably had a lot invested in its success. Which made that bargain much more understandable as well. From his perspective, he'd made me that much more likely to do what he wanted and preserve the treaty, and gotten a little bit of information into the deal.

I didn't say any of that. I just looked at Val. He had a point he was getting at, or he wouldn't have said anything.

He grunted and looked away. "You're in over your head."

"Yep," I agreed. "I am so deep in hot water I fully expect to pass a kitchen thermometer anytime now. Unfortunately, nobody's been lining up to offer me the easy way out."

"Take the hard one."

I grimaced. "Can't. At this point the only reason I'm still breathing is that some of the people watching me have kept the rest from killing me. Backing out now would piss them off."

He was silent for a long moment. "Damn." He sighed and shook his head. "I cannot interfere directly in this matter, Winter. It is against the rules. But I might be able to help you in another way, if you so desire."

Wow. I wasn't sure I'd ever heard that many words out of Val all at once before. I'd certainly never heard him take that formal of a tone.

"Depends," I said cautiously. "What is it?"

Rather than answer, he stood up and walked away. I'd been in the light long enough that my night vision, normally much better than human, was essentially worthless, and as a result I couldn't tell what he was doing, but I could hear it. He rummaged around a bit, muttered a handful of curse words, and then he was back.

With him he brought a sword. It was ornate, with a golden handle and a fine leather sheath, but also simple. Just an ordinary broadsword, about three feet long. It wasn't an elegant weapon, like a rapier or saber; it was the sort of sword that was meant for killing, and made no pretense otherwise.

There was one other immediately notable feature about the sword. It was held in its scabbard with a leather strap not unlike the restraining strap on a gun, fastened with a very modern-looking snap. It was bound tightly enough that you couldn't have drawn the blade even half an inch without undoing the strap first.

"What is that?" I said softly, staring at the sword. There was something fascinating about it, something I couldn't put my finger on but which was definitely there. I couldn't look away, and I didn't know why, and that scared me.

"A sword," Val said, stroking the hilt gently with one finger. "My sword, long ago." He looked at me. "You are involving yourself in the affairs of Twilight Princes," he said quietly. "Dangerous people. Nothing you have could hope to protect you against the likes of them." He nodded at the sword lying on the table. "This might."

"Are you saying...that thing could kill a Twilight Prince?" I asked.

He stared pensively at the sword. "I cannot say," he said eventually. "Very little can kill beings such as that. But this sword has killed a great many things in its day, some of them quite powerful." He looked back at me. "I do not know whether it is enough to destroy them. But it is more likely to do so than anything else I possess."

I gulped. That was...really scary. I was pretty sure that at least a few of the Twilight were beings like Loki—old gods, powerful beyond mortal ken. Killing an entity like that is...a challenging proposition, at the least. "How long would I be holding this sword?" I asked him.

"Until death do you part." His voice was quiet and absolutely dead serious.

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"At what price?" That was the dicey part. To hold a weapon that powerful for the rest of my life...it was the kind of thing that could cost your soul.

"From me? None. As to what the sword itself might cost you, well," he shrugged. "That I cannot say."

I took my time thinking it over. I was scared of what this deal might mean, and I thought my fear was entirely reasonable. I also thought that, given I was already in over my head, having a way to protect myself might not be a bad idea.

"Deal," I said. "And thank you." I felt a strange frisson of power as I spoke the words, magic unlike anything I had ever felt crawling over my skin like ten thousand tiny spiders for an instant before vanishing.

Val bowed his head briefly. His expression held some emotion I couldn't name. Perhaps it was one that humans didn't share. "So be it, then," he whispered, the same emotion making his voice sound almost choked. "Do not thank me yet, Winter. But take the sword with my blessing, and may the hand of Týr watch over you as I cannot." He stood and left without another word, steady and resolute.

I sat and watched him go with a feeling of deep unease. After he was gone I continued to sit and wondered, for the too-manyth time in the past few days, just what I had gotten myself into.

After Val left I spent a little while examining my new sword.

The hilt was made of two ropes of gold twisted around each other. The pommel was more gold, sculpted into the shape of a snarling wolf's head with black stones for eyes. I sighed when I saw that. I mean, come on. Did I really need *another* thing to link me to wolves? You'd think I had enough already. It was getting ridiculous.

The scabbard was black leather, with fittings of some metal that looked like silver but didn't burn me the way silver should have. Now that the light was better I saw that the leather wasn't actually perfectly smooth; there was a very subtle ripple pattern to it. I could barely see images of snowflakes, more wolves, and ravens, all of the pictures partially obscured.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what that meant. They were all symbols of death.

I took a deep breath. Then, slowly and very carefully, I undid the strap and slid the blade free. As I did the scent of its magic, previously contained by the sheath, filled the room like stone and freshly spilled blood. In case it wasn't ominous enough already, you know. The weight of the sword was odd; I couldn't have said whether it felt heavier than it should or lighter, but it didn't feel quite right.

The blade was mirrorlike. I don't mean that it was shiny; it was literally reflective, a perfect and unmarred polish that I could see my reflection in. The only discrepancy was a series of runes in jet black along the entire length of both sides of the blade. I wasn't sure how they had been made; the edges

were perfectly smooth, and I couldn't tell the difference by feel between them and the rest of the blade. I recognized most of them as Norse, but there were several that were unknown to me, and I couldn't find any meaning in them at all.

I stared at it for a moment. Then, very carefully, I tested the sharpness of the blade with my other hand. When I pulled my thumb away, it was bleeding; the sword was not only so sharp it had cut me just touching it, it was sharp enough I never felt it.

As I watched, the blood seemed to fade into the silvery surface. I felt a strange, satisfied pulse of magic as it did, as though the sword were literally drinking my blood—and it liked the taste.

I frowned. After a moment's search I found a block of wood maybe a foot thick lying around. I set it up on the table and tested the blade against a corner of it. It lopped the corner off, perfectly smooth as though it had been cut with a high-performance saw. I thought a moment, and then swung the blade at the center of the block.

I swung it one handed, and not all that hard. It still went through the entire piece of wood, and the table under it. I barely felt any resistance at all, as though I had been cutting butter instead of hardwood.

Clearly, this sword was more than it looked like. Clearly, I needed advice. I sheathed the sword, being very careful not to touch the actual blade with my hands. The scabbard, for whatever reason, seemed immune to its edge.

Then I had my next unpleasant realization. I couldn't let go of the sword. My hand wasn't stuck to it or anything. I just couldn't, physically *could not*, make my fingers let it go. I eventually had to peel them off with my other hand, and even that was difficult.

I stared at it, and was genuinely frightened of the sword itself for the first time. Then, with shaking hands, I did up the restraining strap again. The instant I did the subtle, dangerous magic that had filled the room vanished as though I'd turned off a light switch.

Val had left a sword belt, too, thick leather with steel studs. As I fastened the sword to it and wrapped it around my waist, I had to admit that the weight of the sword at my hip made me feel...confident? That's not the right word, but I can't think of a better one.

That feeling was only slightly perturbed when I tripped and fell on my face walking out the door.

Roughly an hour later, I was wearing the sword concealed under my trench coat and knocking on Alexander's door. We went through the standard routine, enlivened slightly by the fact that he hadn't been expecting me until next week, and I followed him down to the lab.

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He immediately walked over to his favorite workbench. "Sorry, Winter," he said, "but you caught me right in the middle of a time-sensitive experiment." Sitting on the workbench over a Bunsen burner was a small, bubbling beaker of....

"Is that blood?" I asked incredulously.

"Werewolf blood," he corrected. "From your friend's payment."

During the Garrett incident, as I was coming to think of it, Dolph wound up trading a quart of his blood for information. "How do you keep it fresh for that long?" I asked.

"Preserving spell on the beaker," he said absently, watching the blood boil. "Pain in the ass, but worth it for some things. Excuse me." He turned the burner off and carefully removed the blood and carried it to another table, where he had what looked like very expensive sciency things set up. He doled the blood out into test tubes and started doing things I didn't understand to it. None of them seemed to involve magic.

"What are you doing?" I asked, curious even though I knew I had better things to be thinking about. It's one of my numerous character flaws.

"I was wondering whether a werewolf's regenerative abilities continue to function outside of their body. And also whether their blood is materially different from that of a human." He squinted at one of the machines and turned a few knobs minutely. "As it turns out the answer is yes to both. The erythrocytes are repairing themselves, which is quite unusual, and remarkably quickly at that. And the combined blood count shows exceptionally high levels of erythrocytes and thrombocytes, and a decrease in most leukocyte varieties. Quite interesting."

And I had exactly no idea what he was talking about. I was a liberal arts major, okay? Science, although a fine thing and not intrinsically opposed to magic the way some people seem to think it is, isn't *my* thing.

So I stood there and tried not to fidget too much for about twenty minutes while Alexander did whatever he did. Eventually, he turned to face me. "What's up?" he asked.

"I recently came into possession of an enchanted item," I said. "One which I suspect may be quite powerful. I was wondering what you could tell me about it."

"Really? Let's see it, then." Alexander doesn't get animated about much, but magic items will do it every time.

I carefully pulled the sword out and laid it on the table. He examined it, picking it up and rolling it about in his hands. Occasionally he muttered something under his breath that, even with superhuman hearing, I couldn't make out clearly.

That went on for about five minutes before I prompted, "Well?"

He glared at me. "Don't rush me, Winter. I'm still trying to figure out how many enchantments are even *on* this sword."

I blinked. "It's that good?" I asked stupidly.

"Possibly better than anything I've ever encountered before. I once held a brooch that was apparently made by Merlin himself, and this work puts that to shame. Do you know anything about it?"

"Um. The man who gave it to me said that it was a sword which might be powerful enough to kill a Twilight Prince. That's about it."

"Narrows things down a bit," he muttered. He examined it again, although I got the sense that he was looking for something specific now. He trailed his hands over the hilt briefly, then blanched and set it down very quickly. "Winter, this is very important. What else did he say about it?"

Wow. Alexander hadn't sounded this serious since I'd met him—including when we were working with energies powerful enough to kill. I recited my conversation with Val as best as I could remember it, which meant nearly word for word. When I finished, Alexander looked at the sword as though it were a viper that might bite at any moment, and took a couple steps back from it.

"I take it you know something," I said dryly.

"I can't say I know for sure," he said grimly. "But from what you've said I think this might be Tyrfing."

"Tyrfing?" I asked blankly.

He gave me a disgusted look. "You don't know what Tyrfing is?" he asked.

I frowned. "The name is familiar, but I'm not sure why."

He sighed. "What's the good of being able to recognize a kitsune at a dozen yards if you can't even...." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Well, there's good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Good."

"The good news is this," he gestured at the sword, "is powerful. Extremely powerful. I would say it's most likely on a par with any other weapon in the world that isn't actually divine in nature."

I blinked and stared at the sword. "Are you telling me that I'm carrying around freaking Excalibur or something?"

"Well," he said, "that's the bad news. Excalibur was created as a weapon for good. It's meant to protect the weak, defend the innocent, destroy evil, that sort of thing. Right?"

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

I nodded. "Let me guess," I joked. "This is the exact opposite, right? Meant to corrupt and destroy everything it touches?"

Alexander looked at me. He didn't laugh. He didn't smile. I felt my grin start to slip.

"Pretty much," he said quietly. "Yes."

Chapter Fifteen

I felt like I'd been gut-punched. I stared at the sword for a long moment, but I wasn't really seeing it.

Everyone who knows anything about them warns you to never, ever trust the fae. I had ignored those warnings. I'd trusted Val absolutely, a level of trust I extended only to a handful of people in the world.

And he'd betrayed that trust.

I wanted to think there had been some kind of mistake, that he hadn't realized what he had, but that was wishful thinking and I dismissed it almost instantly. Val wasn't an idiot. He had known exactly what he was doing.

"It's one of the most famous cursed swords in history," Alexander continued. He was still staring at the sword—at Tyrting—as though it might attack him at any moment. "It's been wielded by a number of rather infamous people. They say Mordred carried it into the last battle with Arthur, although that might just be because it's thematically pleasing—you know, good versus evil, godly sword versus pagan, creation versus destruction, all that. Other than that it's known to have been used by Attila when he laid waste to the Roman Empire. Most other accounts are unsubstantiated. Hitler, of course, but if Hitler had a tenth of what's attributed to him he would have won the war. Robespierre supposedly carried the sword for a time and then either lost it or voluntarily gave it up. Rumor claims it's also been used by Vlad Tepes and a handful of highwaymen and pirates, most famously Bartholomew Roberts."

I blinked. "Damn. How old is this sword?"

He grimaced. "Can't say for sure. Reliable information about Tyrting is extremely hard to find. Most of what I just told you is hearsay, and I'd be surprised if a quarter of it is true. It's safe to say at least fifteen hundred years, though. Possibly much more. It's attributed in one Eddaic poem which has survived in relatively good condition. Other than that there are accounts—"

I held up one hand to interrupt him. "That's fascinating," I said, "but I kind of have a full plate. Could we maybe stick to the short version for now?"

"Sure, sure. You want to start with the bare bones and then hear the most common interpretation?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Okay," he said. "The creation of the sword is described in the poem. There was a king whose name I forget, whose grandfather was Odin. One day he found two dvergar—dwarves," he added, seeing my look of confusion. "Being a generally greedy bastard, he imprisoned them and made them



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swear to make a sword for him. I believe his specific request was that it would never rust and would cut stone like cloth."

I nodded. That fit with the almost unbelievable sharpness of the blade.

"They made the sword and brought it to him," Alexander continued. "And it was everything he wanted. As they gave it to him, though, they pronounced three curses over the sword. The first, that it would kill someone every time it was drawn. The second, that it would be the king's own death. The third, that it would cause three great tragedies." He paused. "I'm guessing you're not interested in all the sordid details of what was done with it?"

"Some other time," I promised.

"All right, then. Suffice to say that a mercenary betrayed the king, stole the sword, and killed him with it. He eventually died as well, and the blade passed to his daughter, who was a notorious brigand and used it to terrorize most of the country. She married a foreign prince, and one of her sons inherited it. He used the sword to murder his brother and a number of other people, and rose to prominence. Eventually he tried to kill Odin, who was in disguise. It went about as well as you'd expect."

"And?" I asked.

He shrugged. "And that's it. Nobody knows for sure what happened to Tyrfing after that. The only sighting since then that I'm absolutely sure of was Attila. I'd wager all of the rest are false."

"Most modern scholars are convinced that it's mythical, and as a result pay relatively little attention. However, some people who are aware of the supernatural have examined the legend, and there are a few reasonably solid conjectures. The reference to the original wielder being Odin's grandson is usually taken to mean that he was a mage of some kind, since Odin was the god of magic and you'd have to have some fairly serious power to imprison two dvergar even momentarily."

"About that," I said. "How serious are we talking? I don't know much about the dwarves."

"They're a splinter group of svartálfar who broke away a long time ago—prehistory at least. I don't think anyone really knows what they disagreed about, but they've not agreed on it yet. They're generally considered to be the finest smiths and craftsmen in existence, along with the other álfar."

"Okay. And the curse?"

"Was significant. They meant for it to cause him the greatest suffering it possibly could—dwarves are not known for generosity, and they never forget an insult. I don't know whether the curse was meant literally or not—"

"Not," I said. "I drew it earlier. Nobody was killed." I paused. "Although I did have a very difficult time resheathing it. Maybe that's what they meant."

He frowned dubiously. "Maybe. Would you mind drawing it again?"

I shrugged. Then, carefully, I undid the restraint and slid the blade out about three inches. As before, the scent of magic flooded out into the room.

Alexander closed his eyes and stood there for a moment. "Interesting," he said. "Put it away, please."

I did. It wasn't any easier to let go of this time, although I was sure that the effect was psychological rather than physical. I got the sense that all Tyrfinn wanted, really, was to be used. That wasn't too much to ask, was it, after so many years confined to that scabbard. Just use it a little bit and it wouldn't bother me any more, it really wouldn't....

I shuddered and snapped it back into place.

"Did anything bad happen after you drew the sword last time?" Alexander asked.

"I nicked myself on it," I said. "Oh, and I tripped on the way out. Nothing serious."

He nodded as though he'd expected as much. "Right. That makes sense." He glanced at the sword again, with less distrust and more curiosity this time. "I think I know what they meant by that," he said conversationally. "There's an entropy curse on the sword."

"A what?"

"Probability magic. It's an extremely difficult field. This particular application is designed to influence things for the worse. It makes any possible event which is harmful, dangerous, or destructive more likely to occur."

I'd never heard of anything like that. Magic is typically pretty direct; you can do subtle things with it, but the actual process of casting a spell requires that you have a clear idea of what you're doing. This seemed a lot more nebulous.

"How common is this sort of spell?" I asked.

Alexander smiled. It was not a friendly smile. "I've seen entropy curses twice in my life. Neither one lasted more than a minute. If you'd asked me yesterday, I would have said that creating a permanent one was impossible."

"Oh," I said, shivering a little. It was easy to imagine all the worse things that could have happened to me. It was also easy to imagine how seriously I had underestimated the danger this sword posed. I was starting to get the impression that I had made a bad mistake. "Isn't that dangerous?"

He shrugged. "Of course, but not to a great extent here. Very little in my lab happens by chance, which is the only thing that curse can affect. Besides which, I expect it takes a certain amount of time to build up to anything really nasty. Probability magic isn't renowned for efficiency."

I mused on that for a moment. "Probably explains the tragedy bit too. If bad things happen everywhere the sword goes."

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"More than likely," he agreed. "In fact, I'd say that's probably the only curse on the sword." He paused. "Although it's more than enough, really. I imagine if you stayed within its area of effect for any length of time it would kill you."

"Yeah," I said. "Guess I'd better get rid of the thing."

"You can't."

I glared at him. "What do you mean I can't? Why not? It isn't worth the power to be carrying around the embodiment of bad luck and destruction."

He looked at me with something like pity in his eyes. "You can't, Winter. Literally cannot." His voice was unlike I had ever heard it. Calm, and perhaps a little bit sad, as though he were explaining something obvious and tragic to a child.

"I don't understand," I said. The truth is that I did understand, perhaps had understood since I first saw the sword, but I was desperately hoping that I might be wrong.

"It's not that easy," he said in the same tone. "It's never that easy." He shook his head slowly. "Leave it if you want to. Throw it away. Drop it in the ocean. It doesn't matter. Eventually the sword will find its way back to you. That's how these things work."

I laughed bitterly. Of course it was. I stared at Tyrfing, just now beginning to realize what it had meant when I accepted it. In my memory I could hear Val saying, grimly, "Until death do you part." It hadn't occurred to me at the time quite what he was saying, but I couldn't say I hadn't been warned.

There wasn't much to say after that. I stood, belted Tyrfing back around my waist, and turned to leave.

And then the trapdoor exploded in and a huge, emerald green dog fell into the lab after it. It hit the ground and, never pausing, turned to face me. Its face set in a wide, mad snarl, it flung itself at me with all four legs, landing on a worktable about halfway between me and the exit. It tensed its muscles for the leap that would take it the rest of the way to me and, in all probability, end my life.

I should explain something. I had, in my twenty-seven years of life, been in a lot of fights. Generally speaking I came out on top. I had survived encounters with gunmen, werewolves, demons, and fae. I wasn't hugely powerful, but I wouldn't say I was a lightweight either.

That said, it's important to recognize why I survived and they, for the most part, didn't. Most of the time it's because I was more prepared. Not more powerful, or skilled, or fast; just more paranoid.

See, in those fights I had made use of a staggering variety of tools and weapons. My magic, of course. Guns, usually using specially prepared ammunition. Occasionally more exotic things, including grenades, knives, and even water balloons. In other words, I had cheated. I'd hit the enemy with things they weren't expecting and pressed the advantage ruthlessly. I'd taken full advantage of the element of surprise in most of those fights.

Take away those advantages and I'm not all that tough. Oh, more so than the vast majority of people—but not more so than most supernatural players. Surprised in Alexander's lab, I had none of those things. I'd disarmed myself before coming there, as always—I didn't want him to feel either threatened or insulted by my bringing weapons into his home. All I had brought were the magical foci I occasionally used there. My bronze ring and new leather bracelet, neither of which was really meant for fighting.

I went for Tyrfinn first thing, the action feeling perfectly natural. The restraining strap got in my way, though, and that dog was faster than any mortal beast. It would close with me before I ever drew the sword.

It launched itself into the air. I finally cleared the strap and started to draw Tyrfinn. And then I saw something I hadn't ever seen before, and everything changed.

I saw Alexander angry.

I should make something else clear, as well. The old wizard was vastly my superior in magic, but I have to admit I had occasionally thought that in an actual fight, I would take him. Most of the things he had shown me were slow, subtle manipulations of forces and energies that had no place in a quick, frenzied battle. As a result I thought that, aside from his extensive wards, he wasn't all that dangerous in immediate terms.

I was wrong.

While the hound was still in the air, Alexander barked a single word in a voice of absolute authority. The dog stopped, midair, and was snatched straight up with terrible force. It hung there, writhing against the force that held it without success, and stared at us. Its coal-black eyes were eerily intelligent.

Alexander looked at it for a moment. There was nothing of pity in him now. And then he spoke another word.

There was a flash of light, intensely bright and so pure it was almost painful to see. There was a hollow thump unlike anything I'd ever heard. And then, when my vision cleared, there was no green hound.

Just a mound of fine grey ash slowly drifting down to the floor.

Damn.

Alexander turned to me, and there was something terrifying about him. He wasn't shaking with rage. Nothing like that. He was calm, his expression neutral, his movements perfectly controlled. His voice, when he spoke, was the same. Only his eyes betrayed a fury that frightened me to the core.

"Winter," he said. "Did you bring that thing in here?" Something in his voice promised that, if I had, I would shortly meet the same fate it had.

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"No," I said hastily, making sure my hands were nowhere near the sword. "I've been the subject of several assassination attempts in the past few days, but this was the first one that involved an actual attacker. I swear to you that if I had known it were following me I would never have brought danger to your home."

He looked at me for a long, nervous moment, then relaxed. Tension seemed to flow out of the air in a tangible wave. "I believe you," he said.

I let out my breath and fastened Tyrfing back into its sheath. That had been entirely too close for comfort.

"Still," Alexander said thoughtfully. "That's odd. One Cu Sith isn't much of an assassination squad. Even for you."

I wasn't sure about that. I mean, it had looked like a dog, more or less. There was a chance that, if it had attacked me alone, I would have fallen back on my magic to communicate with or dominate it. I could do that to about any animal—but if this thing was fae, as I expected it was, it wouldn't have worked. It might well have ripped my throat out before I even realized what was happening.

I was pretty sure I'd seen its work before, too, or that of something very like it. It seemed to me that those huge paws and teeth were an excellent candidate for the werewolf imitator which I had, in some sense, been chasing for some time now.

"Cu Sith?" I asked.

"Faerie hounds," he explained. "Also called barghests. They're part of the Sidhe Courts. This one was Seelie."

"How can you tell?"

"Color," he explained briefly. "Seelie hounds go mostly for green. Unseelie prefer black, white, or dark blue."

Huh. Good to know. "There has to be a simpler nomenclature," I muttered absently.

He smiled, seemingly back to his normal self. "There is. Several, actually. At the moment the preferred terms are Daylight and Midnight."

"So it's the Daylight and Midnight Courts?" I said. He nodded. "I take it Midnight is Unseelie?" He nodded again.

I thought for a moment. So if that was what they called the Sidhe Courts....

I broke out laughing as I finally understood a joke I'd been hearing for years. Alexander stared at me. "What?" he said.

"The Twilight Court," I choked out through the laughter.

He frowned at me severely. "I don't get it."

I got myself back under control. "The Twilight Court," I repeated, wiping tears from my eyes. "This whole time I thought they called themselves that because they rule the fae, and the fae are in decline." I shook my head. "But that's ridiculous. The fae are doing just great. It's a joke. The whole *concept* of the Twilight Court is a joke. Halfway between noon and midnight. Twilight."

"Congratulations," he said, unimpressed. "You have explained the obvious. Excellent work."

I looked at the pile of ash and sobered up. "I thought the Seelie were the good guys."

He shrugged. "Good and evil are imprecise words when applied to the Sidhe. The Seelie aren't the type to hunt you down and kill you for sport. But even if they were inclined to help humans, which most of them aren't, they seldom understand us well enough that we could distinguish between their blessings and their curses. And if you get involved in their business, they can be every bit as ruthless as the Midnight Court."

"Yeah, yeah," I sighed in answer to the unspoken question. "I'm involved. And you don't need to tell me how dangerous that is. I'm getting out of it as quick as I can."

He smiled sadly. "Oh, Winter," he said, his voice once again reminding me of a mother explaining to her child that every fire, however lovely, burns. "It's not that easy. It's never that easy."

About ten minutes after I left, my phone started ringing. I pulled it out, glanced at it, and answered. "Hello, Kyra."

"Christopher's dead." Her voice was blunt and matter-of-fact.

Probably I should have been shocked and horrified, or at least acted that way. I'd been expecting this for a while, though, and instead I sounded almost cheerful. "Let me guess. He was apparently assaulted by the same thing that killed that man at the bakery. Wounds are consistent with a werewolf attack, but you can't find a scent. You may have found at least one print, though, which also seems like a werewolf track. There's very little sign of a fight. You were the one to find the body because he'd called you, probably less than fifteen minutes before the apparent time of death, and asked you to come talk to him in person. He might have said something about knowing the message we were actually supposed to get from that murder, but in any case he wasn't willing to speak about it over the phone."

There was a shocked pause from the other end of the phone. "How did you know that?" Kyra said eventually, awe and suspicion about equally mixed in her voice.

I felt myself grinning. Damn, it's nice to be right sometimes. "Lucky guess," I said. "Listen, there are a few things I think we need to talk about. Can you meet me at my house in twenty minutes? Oh, and best not tell the rest of the pack about this. They'll want to get all formal and we don't have time for that right now."

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

Not too long after that, Kyra, Erin and I were sitting around my old kitchen table. Aiko wasn't there, because although she was many things, a werewolf wasn't one of them. And this was werewolf business.

"You know," I said, setting my glass of iced tea on the table, "there's something that's been bugging me for a while about Garrett. Why here? I mean, he was from Boston originally, right? So why attack here? Well, when I asked him about why Christopher didn't know about the murders sooner, Conn told me that the pack was in a bad way because he wasn't dominant enough to really be Alpha."

I grinned and took a drink of tea. "At the time we assumed that Garrett knew about it and that was why he picked Colorado Springs. Because he knew it was vulnerable. Even then, though, something bothered me about that explanation. I mean, that's the kind of thing that isn't common knowledge. "

"So?" Kyra asked impatiently.

"So who told him about it?" I asked. "It was someone who had an interest in keeping the Twilight Court from coming to an agreement with the Khan. And it was someone who likes to do their work indirectly."

"We were already pretty confident it was a fae backer responsible," Erin said dismissively. "That doesn't help us with what's going on now."

I grinned. "Ah," I said, "or does it? Consider the following. One," I said, counting it on my fingers, "that doesn't explain why this pack, specifically, was targeted. This pack wasn't perfectly stable, but they weren't *that* bad, and I know they aren't the only target that would have worked. Two, everything I know about the fae says that they don't do things for obvious reasons, and they like to achieve multiple goals at once. Three, Christopher has been involved in a disproportionate number of problems related to the Twilight Court recently."

"So have we," Kyra pointed out.

"Have we?" I challenged. "Think about it. The thing with Garrett, sure, but neither of us was targeted specifically. And then this time, the fae mercenary told us to give a message to Christopher. Think about it. Not the pack. Not the Khan. Christopher, personally. Doesn't that seem suspicious to you?"

"Maybe," Erin said doubtfully. "You think this was targeted at him specifically?"

I nodded. Then I suddenly noticed a plain white envelope sitting on the table. It hadn't been there when we sat down, which meant that someone—or something—must have dropped it off while the three of us were sitting right there watching. And none of us noticed. Gulp.

I picked it up and found, unsurprisingly, that it had no marking of any kind on it, although it was securely sealed. I opened it and pulled out a few sheets of paper. They were typed, and although there was nothing to say who it came from, I knew.

"What's that?" Kyra asked.

"I bargained for information on that mercenary," I said absently. "Looks like he delivered." I read a little more. "Says here he's a high-ranking Sidhe of the Midnight Court. Made himself useful to the Queen and she gave him permission to work independently. He's been active for about ninety years." I whistled. "Expensive, too. Looks like his last contract was bodyguard work for a witch who pissed off a vampire lord. Cost him seventy pounds of gold." I did a little quick math in my head and realized that that came to about two million cash. Damn.

Erin frowned. "If he's Midnight, his employer probably isn't Seelie after all."

"Not necessarily," I said. "He's done jobs for the Midnight Court, but it says he's primarily freelance. Works for anyone willing to pay. Prefers to take payment in kind; he'll accept cash but his rates are even more exorbitant then. Even if he is Midnight, he has an excellent rep. Not too unlikely that the other Court would hire him."

"That's awesome," Kyra said dryly, "but how does it help us?"

I flipped over the last page and showed my teeth in a feral grin. "It helps us," I said, placing the sheet of paper in the middle of the table where they could clearly read it, "because I know where he's going to be tonight." My grin grew even wider. "I think maybe we should have a chat."

Blaze's dossier specified a location way out on the eastern edge of the city, where the merc would apparently be around dusk. I was glad for that; dusk is a good time of day for me.

Here's the thing. Magic isn't restricted to arcane laboratories and mystical forests. It's everywhere, all the time, and everything that happens affects it. Take the moon, for example. Have you ever walked outside one night and looked up, and seen the full moon hanging in the sky, and felt a sudden rush of some emotion you couldn't quite put your finger on? A longing, perhaps, for something you couldn't name?

That's what the werewolves feel; it's not a compulsion, but that energy calls to them, tells them on a subconscious level that it's time for the chase and blood in the night. Sometimes humans can feel an attenuated version of the same thing.

The point is that there are all kinds of energies like that. Sunrise is a time of beginnings. If you want to create something, dawn is a good time to do it; that's when things start. Spring is full to bursting with the energy of new life.



## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

And there are, of course, grimmer things as well. The dark of night is a dangerous time, a time of stealth and secrets. It's no coincidence that the Unseelie, who are often dark and vicious, call themselves after Midnight. Winter, although I love it, is still the season of death, when the nights are long and cold and it's a struggle just to survive. There's always a balance; that's how magic works. For every action there is a reaction.

Dusk is an interesting time, magically speaking. Although people tend to think of them as opposites, it's actually very similar to dawn. Like sunrise it's a time of change, of one thing becoming something else. There's a period, too, when the world is hanging between day and night, neither one holding full sway. Dusk and dawn are the in-between times.

They're also, like the moon, associated with the hunt. Most predators are especially active at dawn and dusk. They're when you see the most shadows; at noon things are too bright, and at midnight there isn't any light to cast them.

As you may have noticed, predators and shadows are the things that call most strongly to my magic. I wouldn't say that I'm more powerful at dusk; that's an oversimplification. It's more like the energies I'm manipulating are more in line with my nature, so that I don't have to work as hard to exert the same amount of power. A small difference, maybe, but in my neck of the woods a small difference is often the deciding factor. Going in at dusk wouldn't give me much of an advantage, but I was happy to take whatever I could get.

That gave me several hours, which I spent getting ready. I had no particular desire to fight the mercenary—we weren't really on opposite sides, and in fact I was counting on his employer to help me out.

But he didn't know that. From where he was standing, he had offered me a serious insult, the kind of thing that would make plenty of supernatural beings absolutely furious beyond words. If he saw me, he would probably assume I was there to fight. And, if he was anything like I thought, he would react with the same merciless practicality as he'd shown before.

Which is to say that he would strike first, and strike to kill before I could fight back. I wouldn't necessarily get a chance to explain. And, thanks to how I had worded my request for information, the dossier hadn't included any other way to contact the mercenary.

So, because I wanted to survive long enough to prove that I wasn't interested in a fight, I came ready for one.

Smell the irony there, eh?

My preparations were pretty simple. I called Enrico first thing, and asked for photos of the crime scene.

"You learned something about that?" he asked immediately.

"Maybe," I hedged. "We'll know after tonight. Can you get me those pics?"

"Maybe," he said. "If you agree to bring me in when you bust them."

"It's likely to be dangerous," I warned him. "Lethally so. And we aren't exactly sticking to the letter of the law."

"Not the first time I've encountered those conditions," he said dryly. "Promise me."

I sighed. I couldn't say I was happy about it, but he was an adult. If he wanted to make a stupid choice, and he'd been informed, it wasn't my place to tell him no. "You'd just be a liability tonight," I said bluntly. "But if I can arrange for you to be there for the main event, I will. You have my word."

"Fair enough. The pictures will be there within an hour."

One step down. After that was what I thought of as my standard procedure before a fight. Sharpening knives that were already sharp. Cleaning guns, loading them, and then changing my mind and unloading them again. Filling my numerous pockets with about a dozen tools that would be of varying amounts of use if it did come to a fight. Then, because I still had a couple of hours to burn, I did it all again.

It was only an exercise to keep me distracted, after all. I'm always too high on nervous energy right before a major fight to focus on anything else anyway. If I didn't have something to keep my hands busy I'd start thinking about all the things that might go wrong again, and that doesn't help anyone.

Finally, a little less than an hour before sunset, it was time to get ready for real. I slipped on the heavy, beat-up leather jacket I use in place of actual armor. I belted Tyrting on, with my Bowie knife on my opposite hip, and then shrugged into my trench coat so that it wouldn't show. I grabbed my ten-gauge and my 9mm and checked all my pockets one more time before heading out.

Erin was already waiting for me. She was wearing a jacket not unlike mine, which isn't surprising considering she's where I got mine in the first place. She was carrying the sniper rifle I'd acquired from Loki, which she'd apparently had no difficulty finding ammo for. She was leaning against my trailer with her version of a jo stick next to her.

If you're not familiar with what a jo is, suffice to say that it's a contender for the simplest serious weapon in the world. A traditional jo stick is about four feet long and half an inch thick, weighs about a pound, and is made of oak. It doesn't look like much, but a skilled person can do some very impressive things with it. I've never had the patience to really learn.

Erin's was made of steel. It had to weight fifteen or twenty pounds, but to watch her use it you'd think it was no heavier than a newspaper. Oh yeah, and she's had a couple hundred years to practice.

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How she got it to Colorado on a commercial flight I have no idea. Some lines of inquiry are simply not worth pursuing.

Kyra, already in fur, came around the corner of my trailer about the same time Aiko pulled up. Neither of them had made any obvious preparations, although I knew the kitsune owned a full set of literal armor and at least one military-grade gun.

Aiko's car was a bit crowded with all of us in it—Kyra, in particular, took up a lot of room—but we made it work. Nobody said much on the way out; we all knew the plan, and none of us was in the mood for chitchat.

Oh, theoretically, this wasn't all that dangerous. Not by our standards, at any rate. But, as anyone who's had experience with violence knows, when the shit hits the fan there's always a certain amount of risk involved, simply because you can't predict what's going to happen. You can make some fairly decent guesses, sure, but you can't account for randomness, and you can't account for unknown factors.

Chapter Sixteen

The mercenary's hideout was an old lumber yard on the edge of the city, where the forested mountains give way to low, rolling plains that stretch to the other side of Kansas. Like a lot of the other buildings I'd been seeing recently, it looked to have been abandoned for a long time.

It was covered in protections similar to those around the last place I'd found him, albeit much, much more powerful and finely tuned. As before, there were all kinds of symbols and formulae hidden in the graffiti on the walls. There was no sign of life, but I was confident of the information I'd gotten.

I dropped my trench coat in the car. I didn't want it getting in my way if it came to a fight. Aiko, too, ditched her outermost layer of clothing, revealing a set of scale armor that looked like it should be adorning a medieval samurai. She'd left off the armored gloves and helm this time, at least.

Erin fetched her metal staff from the trunk, and passed Aiko a sword belt. It held the same pairing of wakizashi and tanto I'd seen her use before. The kitsune also pulled out a carbine which, perhaps in an effort to prevent people from thinking she's old-fashioned with the armor and sword, looked like it would make the average military supplier envious.

It was already loaded, of course. Aiko did not have as much respect for words like "risky" as she perhaps should have.

Kyra, who currently had the sharpest sense of any of us by a wide margin, led the way in. I was next, then Aiko, and Erin brought up the rear. We were all on high alert, with at least one weapon held ready at every step, but at first it seemed like there was little to justify it. We made our way across the empty yard without incident. Kyra made it to the door of the warehouse, and started sniffing around for traps.

And then, without any warning, the door freaking exploded. Shards of wood maybe a foot long were flung nearly ten feet to land at my feet, and there was a literal cloud of splinters around the door itself.

Most of it, though, flew straight out as a single piece. Kyra managed to turn enough that it hit her shoulder instead of her face, but it still impacted with terrible force, throwing her back. She landed hard, but rolled aside almost immediately to avoid what was following the door out.

The thing was better than six feet tall, but so broad it looked squat. Its ash-grey skin was covered with a rough tunic, and it carried an axe in one hand that looked too heavy for me to even lift. It had an ugly, monstrous face, with tiny eyes and sharp, protruding teeth.

It was also one of the few faerie creatures I recognized. A troll, widely used as muscle by the Midnight Court. Depending on what you paid you could get either a stupid, brutish thug, or an extremely skilled, brutish craftsman—and thug. I was hoping this one was the former.

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It turned its beady gaze on me, and its mouth split open into an inhuman grin. It took one step forward, raising its axe, and my heart sank as I saw that it moved with calm precision rather than the shambling, lumbering gait I had somehow expected.

The smart thing to do would have been to back up, opening fire with my shotgun and buying time for my allies to hit the thing hard. In fact, that was what I intended to do.

Somehow I didn't. Without even thinking, I dropped the gun to hang from its strap against my chest, and went for the sword instead. The troll grinned even wider when I did, and it raised its axe invitingly.

The strap was undone in an instant. When I grabbed the hilt, it fit into my hand in a way that seemed bizarrely familiar. More than familiar, actually; it felt *natural*, as though I'd been missing something all my life and only now realized what it was. Tyrfing seemed almost to sing as I drew it, a high piercing note that spoke of blood thirst and an eager, wild hunger. It might have been my imagination, but I thought the troll's smile faltered somewhat when it saw the blade. I felt myself grinning as well, savage and feral, and started advancing on the troll.

A more rational part of my mind viewed all of this with deep concern. I was moderately skilled in a handful of martial arts thanks to Dolph and Erin, and I had a werewolf's strength and speed on top of that. The fact remained that I'd never trained with a sword, certainly never *used* a sword in my life. Meaning, essentially, that I was just knowledgeable and skilled enough to recognize that I wasn't anywhere near skilled or knowledgeable enough to go toe to toe with a troll and walk away.

But the instant Tyrfing was in my hand, none of that mattered. My thoughts and doubts alike seemed to vanish, and I was running on pure instinct. The troll swept its axe at my head, the motion far too fast for such a huge bulk. I ducked under it easily, took another step in, and slashed at the thing's arm.

It shouldn't have done much. I was in a pretty poor position to actually swing the sword. On top of that, I hadn't had the time to feed the wolf inside me more power, so I hit it barely harder than a normal human would have. And the troll's forearm was as thick as my leg, with hide like leather. Between all of those things I was sure that my strike would barely penetrate, and leave me vulnerable as well.

But I hadn't accounted for the supernatural sharpness of Tyrfing's edge. The mirror-bright blade didn't just penetrate. It cut cleanly through both of the troll's arm bones and came out the other side in a spray of blood a little bit too dark to be human. There was a certain amount of resistance, but not nearly as much as there should have been.

I'm not sure which of us was more surprised. We both stared, shocked, at the stump of its arm for a second. Behind me I heard the troll's axe, along with its hand and most of its lower arm, clatter to the ground. Its flesh, where the steel sword had touched it, seemed to be smoldering with almost-invisible blue fire, which just added to the effect.

I recovered first, probably because I wasn't the one who'd actually been injured. I brought Tyrfing around and thrust it hard into the troll's chest about where the heart would be on a human. The sword sank in almost to the hilt, the tip protruding from its back. I twisted the blade and ripped it back out, bringing with it another gush of blood and fire. The troll dropped to its knees, then its face.

I hardly even noticed it. I was overwhelmed with a rush of emotion, strong and wild in a way I'd never quite experienced before. I felt the thrill of victory, a mad and vicious joy, satisfaction that it was me that had been victorious and my enemy dying in a pool of their own blood. I wanted to dance and sing, and—

And what was *wrong* with me? I'd felt satisfaction in victory before, but nothing like this. I staggered a couple steps away, eyes closed, fighting to keep from losing my lunch. I dropped Tyrfing and it rang against the ground beside me. As it did, the feeling lessened considerably.

I would like to say that the cursed sword was responsible for all of the joy I felt. I would like to say that, but it wouldn't be true. The truth is that I am, at heart, a predator, and like all predators I have a certain reaction to other predators invading my territory.

What I'm saying is, essentially, this. Tyrfing played with my emotions in a way I hadn't experienced before, inspired a savage joy in battle. It made me a worse person—but it had plenty to work with.

I opened my eyes and bent to pick up the sword. It brought with it a slightly muted surge of the same emotions as before, which I managed to largely ignore this time. I looked for something to clean it with, but a moment later realized it was unnecessary. The troll's blood was vanishing into the sword the same as mine had when I cut myself on it. Within only a few seconds it was gone entirely, the mirrored surface of the blade shining as brightly as ever.

If it had sung when I drew it, it sighed contentedly as it was sheathed. I didn't have to work at all to let it go this time, and I strapped it back into its scabbard with a definite feeling of relief. The more I learned about that sword, the more convinced I became that if anything, Alexander had understated how dangerous it was.

I was extremely careful as I walked back to the dead troll, where the others were standing waiting for me. I did not want to take another embarrassing, potentially dangerous fall as a result of the entropy curse on the sword. Aiko nodded to me and said, "Nice one." Erin was too busy looking at how cleanly cut the bones were, and then looking at me with a calculating expression which was frankly a little scary.

Kyra took the lead again as we proceeded into the unlit interior, which was still full of shelves. Erin, fortunately, had brought a flashlight, which put out just enough light to cast some really frightening shadows.

"Do you know where he is here?" Aiko asked.

## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

"Not a clue," I admitted.

"We search the whole place then," Erin said. "Kyra, you're lookout. Make sure nobody leaves."

She barked once and then stalked into a patch of deep shadow near the door where she would be able to see, hear, and probably smell anyone coming. That left me going first as we filed deeper into the darkness.

Trolls are a lot of things. Sneaky, as it turned out, wasn't really one of them. I heard the next one coming down one of the side aisles in plenty of time to turn, draw a handful of ball bearings out of my pocket, and throw them at its face. They sparked a dozen tiny, barely-visible fires where the iron touched its flesh.

Like I said. When I fight, I cheat.

It reeled back with a bellow. I sidestepped out of the way as Aiko continued behind me, her short sword and dagger both in her hands.

They were not anything like as deadly as Tyrfing. But they were steel, which—as I'd just seen—trolls do not like. And they were sharp. And Aiko, as it turned out, was good. I'd never really seen her fight before; now that I did, I understood a bit better why she'd never seemed particularly concerned about the prospect.

The fight didn't much resemble my performance. That had been a short, brutal thing. This was like watching a dance recital. The kitsune wasn't as fast as a werewolf, or at least wasn't choosing to show it if she was. She didn't need to. She moved with the same inhuman grace I'd noticed earlier, and somehow every time the troll swung its axe she wasn't quite where it hit. She lashed out with both blades as she moved, perfectly timed, and within a few seconds the troll was dripping blood and fire from half a dozen small wounds. Eventually she enraged it enough that it charged her, bellowing again.

I tensed. Aiko was absurdly smooth, but she was still on the small side by human standards, and the troll could have given the average powerlifter fifty pounds. If Aiko went down with that thing, she wouldn't be getting back up.

It got closer and closer, and I realized that she wasn't going to be able to get out of the way in time. she was about to get crushed by a charging troll, and I was too far away to do anything about it.

Then Aiko sidestepped with casual grace, letting the troll run past her, with maybe an inch of space between them. I'd half-expected her to trip the thing on the way by, but that was ridiculous. Its sheer mass would have broken her leg.

So she slashed its ankle instead. It tumbled headlong into a set of steel shelving. Then, while it was lying on the floor stunned, she sliced its neck open with her sword.

All in less than thirty seconds. Erin and I never even had to get involved. And Aiko wasn't even breathing hard.

Damn. I guess Alexander wasn't the only person whose dangerousness in a fight I'd underestimated.

I stared at the body, and even Erin looked impressed. "Nice one," I said, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

She grinned at me fiercely and wiped the blades clean on the troll's tunic before sheathing them. "Thanks."

The third troll attacked from behind as Aiko was standing back up, which was good, because I was worried Erin wouldn't get a chance to participate.

That fight was shorter and more brutal than either of ours. It swung at her with an axe and missed. She swung at it with her steel staff and didn't. The tip of the stick impacted the side of the troll's head. It fell down and didn't get back up.

Like I said. Erin is a really scary werewolf when she decides to be.

Other than that, nothing much happened inside the darkened warehouse. We didn't see anything alive other than the three trolls. After maybe ten minutes of searching, we reached a simple door set into the wall.

When I opened it, we saw the same mercenary from before seated at a table playing solitaire. He was using an ordinary deck of cards this time. The lamp over the table illuminated the table, the merc, and not much else.

He looked more or less the same as before. Gaunt and dangerous, dressed in dusty black clothing, he wasn't the sort of person you approached lightly. The only difference was that his ears were tapered this time, maybe because he was aware that I knew who he was.

"Hey," I said, stepping inside. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

It was the same ploy as before, of course. Get the mark's attention and hit them when they're distracted. He didn't have his trolls to take us from behind this time, but he didn't really need them either.

Fortunately for me, I'd been expecting something like that. And, say what you will about repeated and absurd assassination attempts, they really sharpen your awareness. And reflexes. So when a small dart flew out of the shadows in the corner of the room, I dodged without even having to think about it. It hit the wooden door and stuck, quivering.

I was sure he had other things planned. And, as a result, I'm not quite sure what would have happened next if Erin hadn't suddenly said, "Samuel?"

There was a sudden, startled pause. "Erin? What are you doing here?" The voice was the same one I remembered, and came from the same corner as the dart had.



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"Came to have a chat with you," she said. "But your guards had different ideas."

There was a brief pause, and then the image of the mercenary at the table flickered and vanished. Wow. I hadn't even noticed the spell—he was good at that trick.

The actual mercenary walked out of the shadows a moment later. He was carrying a short blowpipe, and had the same expression of perfect calm as before. "You didn't hurt them too badly, I hope."

"Killed three trolls."

"Damn it, Ferguson. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find decent help?" He shook his head and turned his attention to Aiko instead. "You," he said, pointing at her. "I don't know you. Who are you?"

"Call me Aiko," she said simply.

He grunted. "And what are you doing here, Wolf? I thought I told you not to do anything stupid?"

I winced. "Call me Winter. Please. And like she said, we came to talk."

He paused, then sat down in the same chair as his vanished illusion had used and pulled out the same deck of cards. "What do you have to say?" he asked bluntly, dealing a hand of solitaire.

"You mind telling me how you killed the man at the bakery?" I asked.

"With a knife." His voice was perfectly matter-of-fact; he didn't even pause in moving cards around. He was playing faster than I'd ever seen, too fast to think, but every move was right. It was the kind of subtle note that could make a scary person even creepier.

I silently pulled out a few folded sheets of paper and handed them to him. He took them, glanced at the lurid photos Enrico had given me, set them aside. "Nice," he said. "And I care why?"

Erin spoke up. "Pretty sure that was a rival of your employer's. Screwing with her message and all."

"Obviously. And?"

"And that seems like the sort of thing she'd want to know?"

"And?"

She paused. "Doesn't that seem like something you should tell her?"

"She didn't hire me to tell her things."

"What about doing it just to be nice?" I asked.

"I didn't realize you were a comedian," he said. He wasn't smiling.

I was rapidly losing my patience with this particular game. "How about," I enunciated carefully, "you tell her because if you don't, I will gut you like a Christmas goose." I rested my hand on Tyrfin as I spoke, just to give it that little bit of weight as though I might be serious. I'd already taken the restraint off the sword.

He looked up at me and paused in his game. Then he smiled, the expression cold and flat, and resumed playing. "I like your style, kid." He looked at Erin. "You could stand to take a few pointers from the kid here. He knows how to get things done. I'll make the call." He finished his game as he spoke—he won—and swept the cards back into their box.

Erin was giving me an unamused look as he left, while Aiko was grinning like she'd heard a particularly good joke. "What?" I said to Erin. "It worked, didn't it?"

She considered that for a moment, then nodded grudgingly. It wasn't much comfort. I mean, a Midnight Court mercenary had just said he liked my style. That didn't exactly say good things about me. The Unseelie Sidhe have...a very bad reputation in the supernatural world. I wasn't entirely comfortable with the thought that I might be solving problems in a way that one of them would approve of.

About five minutes later the mercenary walked back in, holding a folded sheet of paper. He handed it to me and sat back down.

I opened it and found that it contained only a single line of neat handwriting. It listed an address on the southeastern edge of the Springs. Nothing else.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Where you can find the one you're looking for." He shrugged carelessly. "That's what the boss says, anyway. She's usually right about things like this."

"You're not coming with?" I asked.

He pulled his cards back out and dealt another hand of solitaire. "Not getting paid for that." His voice was so casual and unconcerned you'd think he was talking about the price of gas rather than someone actively working against his employer, and who was responsible for at least one murder in the past few days.

"Oh," he added. "You might want to hurry. I don't know how long he'll be there."

We turned and left. The mercenary watched us go; his eyes, the color of clouds in winter, were flat, without even enough emotion to call them bored, and held all the cold savagery of Midnight.

It wasn't until then that I realized what had struck me wrong about that whole scene.

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How had Erin known that the mercenary's employer was female?

"I take it," I said dryly once we were outside, "that was Samuel Black."

Erin looked at me and shrugged. "That's what he calls himself. I never knew he was from Midnight until just now."

I sighed. Of course it would be the mercenary she'd offered to ask for information before.

I hate irony.

"Guess I should have taken you up on that offer."

"Wouldn't have mattered. He wouldn't have told me anything." She shrugged. "He has no morals to speak of, but he's a professional. He never talks about his customers. He'd rather die than break a contract."

"Think he was on the level?"

She hesitated a beat before answering. "Probably. I know him well enough that he wouldn't deceive me unless he was getting paid to do it."

"And if someone hired him to?"

"If someone hired him," she said without hesitation, "he would put a bullet in my back without a second thought. He might regret it, but he'd do it. He won't take more than one job at the same time, though, so unless his employer's playing a lot deeper game than we realized he's on the level."

I nodded slowly. "Doesn't really matter. We don't have a better idea. If any of you want out, this is the time. I wouldn't blame you."

Two werewolves and a kitsune looked at me with varying degrees of eagerness and, I was pretty sure, disgust that I had even bothered to ask. None of them seemed inclined to take me up on the offer.

I pulled out my phone and stared at it for a moment before, reluctantly, dialing Enrico. I didn't especially want him involved in this, but I had promised. Besides which, getting involved in supernatural badness was his choice. I didn't have the right to make it for him.

He arrived about fifteen minutes later. I glared at him. "I thought I said to come ready for a fight."

He grinned and drew his Hawaiian-patterned shirt aside to reveal a Kevlar vest and a standard-issue sidearm at his hip. "I listened."

I looked at him doubtfully. It was perfectly valid equipment, don't get me wrong, but...kinda wimpy looking compared to the rest of us. "Tell me you at least brought steel-jacketed rounds for that thing."

He shook his head. "Don't have any on hand, and you said you were in a hurry."

I sighed. "You know how to handle a shotgun?" He nodded, and I handed him my ten-gauge. "Careful, it's loaded. Okay, I don't have much time. These people," I gestured at the rest of my motley crew, "are with me. We're going to take down the person responsible for that murder the other day—and probably, to one extent or another, the ones a few months ago. It will be bloody. And illegal in the extreme. You don't want in on it, speak now or forever hold your peace."

He frowned slightly. "Who are we going after?"

"We don't have time to go into that right now. If we both live I'll explain later, but for now you just have to trust me."

"All right. I'm in."

I nodded tightly. "Great. Follow us. When we get there, no matter what you see, don't start shooting unless we do. Let's move."

With two cars it was significantly less crowded for this part. Kyra rode with Enrico, partially because she took up the most space and mostly because she was the only one of us currently mute. I wasn't trying to hide information from him, exactly, but I was well aware that I was currently mixed up in some seriously scary business. I'd rather not get him any deeper into it than absolutely necessary.

Chapter Seventeen

I had to wonder whether there had been an abandoned building sale a month ago that I hadn't hear about, or what. I mean, I couldn't even remember how many this one brought us up to for the past week.

It was, I had to admit, not like Black's lairs had been. This was a big, beat-down old shed on the edge of town. It didn't just look abandoned; it looked like it ought to be condemned. There were holes in the roof and the sheet metal walls; the interior had to be drafty as hell. There weren't any of the protections Black had used, either.

Inside was a different story. There was a small antechamber inside the huge front doors, obviously there simply to keep something of the elements out. We trooped right across it and through the opposite door, which was made of oak and looked significantly nicer than the exterior of the building would suggest.

The other side was a bizarre amalgamation of the abandoned building the exterior suggested and a well-furnished house. The whole shed appeared to consist of a single cavernous room, unheated and without insulation and as a result possibly even colder than it was outside—not that it bothered me or anything. There were no holes in the roof, though, or the walls, although they were made of the same corrugated metal as the exterior.

Inside that space were an old four-poster bed, complete with canopy, and a mahogany dining table that could seat thirty. At the moment there was only one person there, though, a male Sidhe sitting at the head of the table eating some kind of roast.

Oh yeah, and scattered along the length of the table were around twenty barghests. All of them were bright, beautiful Daylight green, with glittering onyx eyes. They had their own sections of meat as well, and were devouring them with every sign of enjoyment.

The room was sunk maybe ten feet into the ground. As a result, though the door was at ground level, inside we were at the top of a short flight of stairs leading down into the room. As Enrico shut the door behind us, the Sidhe stopped eating.

He wasn't in a hurry. He set his utensils down and even took the time to wipe his mouth with a cloth napkin. Then he called, in a perfectly calm voice that nevertheless conveyed immense irritation, "What is the meaning of this?"

And just that fast there were twenty pairs of glittering black eyes staring at us. Gulp.

"We have reason to suspect you of tampering in the affairs of the Pack," I said as confidently as I could manage. I didn't bother mentioning the murder bit. The Sidhe Courts, Day and Night alike, had

little concern for the life of a single mortal. Or a million. But they had a deal with the Pack, and breaking deals was serious business for them.

"Take it up with my employer," he said dismissively.

Huh. So both sides had been acting through intermediaries. That was interesting.

"Thanks," I said, "but I think I'll take it up with you first."

He looked at us for the first time. "Isn't a mortal's life short enough," he murmured, the soft sound somehow carrying with perfect clarity, "without such foolishness?"

"Look," Erin interrupted before things could get any more heated. "Our conflict is with your employer, not you. Talk with us, maybe tell us who we should get in contact with, and we won't bother you any more."

"Not interested. However, as you at least know what courtesy is," he glared at me, "I have a counteroffer. You have ten seconds to get off my property. Do so and I'll forgive your trespass." He turned his attention back to his meal.

I glanced at the people with me, and gestured slightly down at the table. Erin nodded, her lips pressed tightly together. Aiko grinned and fondled the grip of her carbine with one hand. Kyra was almost snarling. Enrico mostly looked confused, but he didn't actually argue in favor of leaving, so I took that as agreement.

See, here's the thing about the Sidhe. If they don't respect you, they'll walk all over you. You have to earn that respect, too. With Black, that hadn't been a problem; we'd killed his trolls already, after all, and he knew Erin besides. This fellow, though, still looked at us as something he could brush off casually.

Worse, if we let him we couldn't expect the Courts to respect us, either. They would assume that his judgment had been accurate, and as a result any effort we made to resolve things peacefully would be mocked.

So instead of answering him, I bounded down the stairs about as fast as I could. The hounds were standing as I touched the floor, and at the same time I took the restraint off of Tyrfing. I wished that I still had my gun; Tyrfing was incredible, but there's a reason modern soldiers use shotguns more often than swords.

"You are insane," the mercenary said, rising from his seat as well. "You will be destroyed. And even if you aren't, Court law is on my side."

I grinned at him, maybe a little maniacally. "Maybe you haven't noticed, mate. But I don't see anybody from the Courts here. And I'm really getting sick of not getting the answers I want. So either you start talking, or we're gonna have problems."

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"So be it," he hissed. He made one small gesture with his hand. And then a number of things happened all at once.

All of the barghests started moving as a single unit. They surged toward me in an unbroken emerald tide, faster than any real dog, flowing under the table and leaping over it. They snarled and growled as they came, showing long white teeth.

Almost simultaneously, the sound of three different guns broke out overhead, completely drowning out the noise the hounds made. One of the hounds, hit by Erin's steel-jacketed sniper round, simply dropped to the ground. Three others suffered lesser wounds and continued to charge, dripping blood and emerald flame as they came.

The nearest hound threw itself at me in the air, not touching ground at all for fifteen feet. It was preternaturally fast, covering that distance in a matter of instants.

But reacting quickly isn't as important as reacting *intelligently*. If it had waited a second or two so that it wasn't attacking me alone, it would likely have done for me in the opening seconds of the fight.

As it was, not so much.

It was uncannily fast, but it had to move its whole body fifteen feet. All I had to do was draw a sword—and, although I'm nothing like as fast as those things, I'm still faster than human. You can do the math.

The cursed sword impacted on its right foreleg while it was still airborne and cut cleanly through it. It struck high on the barghest's shoulder and cut through that too, before lodging in the clavicle. Good to know Tyrfing had some limitation, at least. I sidestepped its jaws and used the motion to throw it to the side. It slammed into the side of the staircase and immediately rolled to its three remaining feet, pouring blood and fire. If the injury bothered it at all I couldn't tell it.

I managed to kill two more hounds in a couple heartbeats, before three charged me at once. There was no way I could stop them all with just the sword, no matter how powerful it was.

Fortunately for me, I have magic. And, although I'm still a bare apprentice in most ways, I've picked up some things pretty quickly. Air magic is one of the main ones. I wasn't up to anything like the display Alexander had put on fighting—slaughtering, rather—the first Cu Sith. But I didn't really have to be, either.

One of the things I've always been relatively competent with is making magical foci. A focus is basically a magical cheat code, one that lets you skip a lot of the difficult and complicated work involved in casting a spell. A well-made focus can let even an amateur like me pull off some useful magic.

My most recent focus was a braided leather bracelet designed to assist with manipulating air magic. Granted, I hadn't meant it for quite this sort of thing—but a good focus should be able to do lots of things.

In this case it converted a surge of power and will into a gale-force wind directed at the only barghest stupid enough to jump at me.

Jumping, as any martial artist will tell you, is a stupid thing to do in a fight. It lets your opponent know exactly what you're going to do. And, because muscle doesn't do much without something to push against, for those few seconds you're powerless to alter your course.

My blast of wind didn't hit the hound hard enough to break bones or anything. It didn't need to. It was powerful enough to reverse its momentum and toss it back into another hound, sending both of them to the floor. That left only two fighting me for a brief moment. I ducked away from one and beheaded the other with Tyrfing.

A fight is a chaotic thing even with only two participants. With more than twenty it was impossible to follow anything beyond my immediate surroundings, impossible to think of the future beyond the next handful of seconds. As a result, I'm not sure when the mercenary stood up and jumped thirty feet or so to land near the door.

I am sure that when he did, he immediately grabbed Aiko and Enrico both by the muzzles of their weapons. He let out a bloodcurdling scream of pain at the touch of iron, but it didn't stop him from throwing both of them to the ground below. Aiko rolled immediately to her feet, both of her hands full of steel, and the hounds showed a certain amount of wariness about attacking her.

Enrico hit hard and, for an instant, lay stunned on the ground. It wasn't long—but it was long enough. The barghests swarmed him, and he disappeared beneath a sea of green fur.

Up until that point I hadn't really wanted to fight. Oh, I'd done it, because I knew that I had to—but I'd seen it as a necessary evil. I'd resisted Tyrfing's insatiable thirst for blood, because I hadn't wanted to kill or even injure any more people than necessary.

Now I was pissed. And, for the first time since I hit the floor, I went on the aggressive.

I turned back toward the stairs. I killed the three-legged hound almost in passing, gutted another and left it bleeding and mewling in agony on the ground, and swept three barghests into a tangled pile with another blast of wind. Then I was at the staircase. I leapt and caught the handrail a good seven feet above the ground with one hand.

I don't look like much, but I have the strength of a werewolf. It was, in my current state of mind, not too hard to pull myself up and onto the stairs with one hand.

I arrived at the top just in time to see Erin and the mercenary dueling. She was using her steel staff; he was unarmed. But somehow, just as I got there, he ducked under her swing and clubbed her on



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the head with one fist. She staggered to the side, staff dropping from her hand, and collapsed against the wall, her eyes closed.

Well, shit.

The mercenary turned to me, with a sharp-toothed smile. He had produced a short, crystalline sword from somewhere, and looked entirely willing to spar with me.

So, naturally, I cheated. I dug out another handful of ball bearings and threw them at his face—

Only to see them deflected, without ever getting close to him, by a burst of wind not unlike those I had used. One of them struck my wrist and made my hand go sorta numb. Two more hit me with painful but less immediately worrying force, one in the chest and one in the thigh.

Dammit. I hate it when the other guy is as ready to cheat as I am. It takes all the fun out of fighting dirty.

The mercenary took two long steps and closed with me. I tried to slash at his face, but, well....

Remember what I said about my not being all that good with a sword? Yeah, well, I wasn't actually joking. Against trolls and faerie hounds I was adequate, largely because I had Tyrfing and they hate the touch of iron. That's a pretty big handicap.

Against one of the Sidhe, armed with a sword and a lot better at it than me, it wasn't nearly big enough. He deflected my first attack with laughable ease, not even bothering to riposte. The second parry sent Tyrfing down at my own left thigh, where it sliced through cloth and flesh with equal ease and only stopped at the bone. The disadvantage of a supernaturally sharp cursed sword, I guess; even an accidental blow is potentially deadly, and once Tyrfing had been drawn for more than a few moments accidents were inevitable.

That time the mercenary did counter, a simple cut that took me across the left side of my ribs down nearly far enough to join onto the cut on my leg. It was painful, irritating, and not life threatening. He was playing with me.

On the third stroke my grip, weakened by that stupid ball bearing, gave out entirely. Tyrfing flew out of my hand, bounced off the wall, and totally failed to accidentally impale the mercenary as a result. Figures that the bad luck would only hit me. The sword rested on the floor just behind him, but it might as well have been on the moon for all it would help me.

I backpedaled, and the mercenary advanced, still smiling. I tripped. I fell. I continued to scabble backward, because what else are you supposed to do in that situation?

He smiled, standing over me. He spun the crystal sword in one hand idly. "You know," he said conversationally, "you really should have taken my offer and fled. But you wouldn't. You have all of the arrogance for which your kind is famed, and none of the power." His smile widened. "I've never killed one of you before. I think I'll enjoy it."

Things looked bad. Like, really bad. My allies were grotesquely outnumbered, and almost certainly badly injured by now as well. Enrico and Erin might well be dead. I was disarmed—well, I had a handful of weapons still, but I didn't think I would have the chance to use any of them, and I didn't really think that any of them would work anyway. I was already bleeding seriously from multiple wounds, and in a second or two none of that would bother me much because I would be dead.

The mercenary drew his sword back. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see the stroke that would end my (admittedly rather shitty) life. And, as a result, I didn't see what happened next.

The sword didn't come. A moment later, a familiar voice rasped, "Surrender and call them off, or I shove three feet of steel through your spine."

I opened my eyes. From my angle, I couldn't see anything but the Sidhe mercenary, standing on tiptoe and bent backward, with a look of utter shock on his face. There were pale fingers tangled in his hair, pulling his head backward. His sword clattered to the floor.

There's no feeling quite like when a megalomaniacal ego freak takes time to gloat before they've quite won, and gets totally burned as a result. It had only happened to me a couple of times, because until recently I mostly didn't run with that crowd, but believe me, the look on their face is priceless. I mean, seriously. MasterCard is totally missing out.

I stood, slowly and painfully, and saw Erin standing behind him with a grim expression and Tyrfing pressed to the small of his back. My imagination was more than adequate to fill in the gaps from there. The old werewolf hadn't been knocked unconscious at all; she might have been stunned momentarily, but that was it. Once she'd seen her opportunity, she'd snagged the fallen sword off the floor and snuck up behind him.

The mercenary didn't move or speak, but I felt a subtle burst of magic that smelled like growing grass, sunflowers, and long, lazy summer afternoons. And, in the same instant, the noises of battle cut off.

I walked slowly to the railing, limping heavily, to see that the barghests had stopped fighting and were all sitting, staring up at us. There were about seven of them left standing, and they looked at me with pure hate in their black eyes.

Aiko was still standing, holding two blades dripping flaming blood and grinning in a manner that suggested she was happy to keep going if they wanted. Kyra was soaked with blood, making it largely impossible to tell if she was wounded, but her left foreleg was held off the ground slightly.

Enrico was lying on the ground where he had landed, with a slowly spreading pool of blood around him. He wasn't moving.

I must have missed something, because when I turned back Erin had let the Sidhe go and was standing, holding Tyrfing in a posture that wasn't quite relaxed. I took the sword from her and sheathed

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it, strapping it carefully into place. Then I looked at the mercenary. I'm not sure what he saw in my face, but it made him blanch slightly.

"Your employer is stirring up shit between the Khan and the Court," I growled. "I think trying to make the Twilight Court go back on its sworn word is bloody stupid. I would like you to convey to the Twilight Court this opinion, along with the identity of your employer and all the information you have regarding their plans and activities. Do you understand me?"

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Yes."

"Swear it. That you will deliver this information to all of the Twilight Princes you are capable of contacting. Immediately."

"I swear, by my name, my power, and my Court, to do as you ask. I will convey this information to the Twilight Court: the identity of my employer as far as I know it, my knowledge of their actions, and what you have said."

"Also," Erin interrupted, "you will seek no revenge upon those here today, nor upon the Pack, including economic, political, and indirect harm. You will not hire others to do such for you, nor engage your proxies to act against us in any way unless we offer you fresh insult. You will not provide assistance to other agents for the purpose of causing any of us, our associates, our agents and proxies, or our employees and servants any direct or indirect harm. Following your performance of the agreed-upon task, there will be no debt, grievance, or other imbalance between you, your employees and associates, or your employers and any of us or our associates, agents and proxies, employees or servants, or superiors or employers."

Wow. I guess Erin knew how to talk to these people a little better than she'd let on.

His jaw twitched again. "I swear this as well."

"Go," I growled. "And take your dogs with you."

They vanished in a burst of Daylight-scented magic, leaving behind a godawful mess and a number of corpses.

The first thing I did was check on Enrico.

It was bad.

I had a certain amount of medical training. Not a whole bunch, and not especially official; mostly it boiled down to recognizing who can be saved, and who can't. Enrico was firmly in the second camp. There were bite wounds on his abdomen, his shoulder near the neck, both legs, and probably a bunch of other places. Even if he were in a hospital this instant his chances wouldn't be good.

There are injuries a human cannot survive. Sometimes it really is as simple as that.

And then I realized what that meant. Injuries a human cannot survive. That isn't the same thing as injuries which are downright unsurvivable. "Kyra," I called.

She trotted over, favoring her left foreleg heavily. She looked at Enrico, and I could practically see her draw the same conclusions I had. She looked at me and whined softly.

"You know what has to be done," I said heavily. She nodded and turned back to him.

I looked away. I knew that, at this point, for her to try to change him into a werewolf was the only real chance he had to survive. On the other hand, I didn't want to watch one of my best friends maul the barely-living body of another friend.

Technically you don't have to be severely injured to become a werewolf, and you don't have to be bitten by a werewolf. All that has to happen is that you get a significant portion of werewolf magic in you, and your own power is too depleted to fight it off successfully. Serious injury is simply the easiest way to deplete your magic. Having that injury inflicted by a werewolf in fur is the easiest way to get that power inside you.

His odds weren't all that great. Only about a third of people who try to Change without preparation survive the experience. Plenty of those die shortly afterward. And if you're heavily injured already it's even harder.

Still. More chance than he had otherwise.

While I was trying to find something else to pay attention to so that I could try and ignore the horrible wet sounds in the background, I saw something strange. There was frost on the ground. I walked over to inspect it and found that it formed a distinct pattern. More specifically, it formed a footprint.

More specifically still, it formed my footprint. A number of them, in fact, leading from where I had been standing when Enrico fell over to the stairs. There was frost on the handrail where I'd grabbed it, and more footprints on the stairs themselves.

Which brought my disturbing revelations of the day up to: Erin having known something about Black's employer before he told us, Enrico either about to be a werewolf or about to be dead, another person making reference to my having a heritage known for arrogance, and another case of frost forming around me when I used my magic.

I sighed. There are days I hate my life.

In another case of the anticlimax that seemed to be the theme of the day, that was the end of it. I had a number of injuries, but the only really major one was, ironically enough, the one inflicted by my own goddamn sword. The rest of them I managed to heal in a matter of minutes with magic and the werewolf side of my nature. Apparently, though, there's something to the claim that wounds inflicted by

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Tyrfing never heal and anyone injured by the sword will die, because I couldn't even get that cut to stop bleeding.

Kyra had two cracked ribs, a sprained wrist and enough bite wounds that they probably would have killed a human. Erin had a concussion, a broken wrist, and several torn muscles. Aiko, surprising me, came out best of us. She had sprained an ankle during the fall, and been bitten by several barghests, but all of the bites were shallow; they wouldn't have threatened even a normal person at all. Aside from a really impressive black eye, that was all.

As a result, Aiko and I went to the hospital while the werewolves took Enrico and our weapons of questionable legality to the pack house. Fortunately, once I got there, nobody expected me to answer questions. Or maybe they did and I didn't notice; by that point I was pretty loopy with fatigue and blood loss.

## Epilogue

The next day was maybe the strangest I've ever experienced.

To start with, I woke up in my bed at home. The wound on my leg, which had been covered in bandages when I went to sleep, was entirely gone. I didn't even have a scar.

The next thing I noticed was that, according to the computer, it had been three days since the fight. When I called Kyra, she confirmed this, but seemed confused that I found it surprising. Apparently I'd called her several times to assure her that I was healing properly, but it would be some time before I felt well enough to be up and about.

Enrico had gotten lucky and survived to become a werewolf. He was currently living with the pack and learning the details of what he'd become. I felt a little guilty about that—Enrico was hardly the ideal candidate for lycanthropy, and I was sure that this was a little more than he'd intended when he said that he wanted to get involved with the supernatural—but at least he was alive.

All of that was strange enough. But what really threw me was how much seemed to have changed in the few days that I was unconscious, or whatever happened there. The murders had already been pinned on a gang with a wolf fetish, with impressively thorough evidence. There were weapons improvised from the claws and teeth of wolves and dogs that matched the injuries, transcripts of incriminating conversations, and reams of personal correspondence. DNA samples from the scene, which had somehow been overlooked before, were a perfect match. The accused protested that they were innocent, and in fact didn't know each other at all, but in the face of the evidence their claims rang hollow for the jury. They all received a long prison sentence.

I watched the coverage of the trial afterwards. It wasn't until that point that I realized that one of the supposed gangsters had been the same asshole customer I'd intimidated at Val's shop. I was pretty sure the Twilight included him in the frame-job purely as a favor to me, and made a note to never get on their bad side.

I'd also slept through Conn's big reveal, which was televised live by most of the news outlets in the world. There were public letters, and testimonials—including one by the Colorado Springs Police Department. Christopher had apparently sealed the deal with them, although I hadn't known about any of it beyond my conversation with the Chief.

Conn isn't taking any chances with this plan, and he isn't rushing things. The videos and letters were all delivered anonymously, including the live films. Quite a few people have publically admitted to being werewolves, a lot of them fraudulently, but most of the actual werewolves are keeping it very quiet. There are still rules against doing anything werewolfy in public. Only a handful of trusted, reliable people are allowed to talk about it at all.

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My name was signed to a couple of the letters, apparently, and for me to deny it would raise some serious doubts about the other alleged werewolves. So, for the sake of Conn's publicity stunt, I wound up publically admitting that I was a werewolf, even though I technically wasn't.

The universe seems to delight in such small ironies.

When I woke up, I found a number of things had been left in my house. The first was an envelope containing several thousand dollars in cash and a note from the Khan asking that, in the future, when I was planning to do something idiotic beyond the wildest nightmares of sane individuals, I let him know in advance so that he would have some small chance of saving my stupid ass. In exactly those words. I smiled and took the money.

The second thing was a green glass vase containing a bouquet of roses in a plethora of colors, all of them perfect blossoms. The attached card read, simply, *Excellent work*. I'm not sure who it was from, but I threw it out immediately. I wasn't sure whether they'd put some kind of spell on it and I didn't want it around me.

And the third thing was Tyrfing, resting neatly on my mantle. It looked...satisfied, somehow. Kyra still had all of my other weapons for safekeeping, and when I asked her she didn't know anything about how it had gotten back. I chalked it up to the weirdness Alexander had told me about and stuck the sword in a closet for the time being.

As it turned out, the first house I found Black in had been provided by his employer. She arranged for it to be given to me as a sign of her gratitude. I spent most of Conn's money refurbishing it into my new lab. It's nothing like Alexander's setup, but it's a hell of a lot better than nothing, which is what I had previously. I even have a skeleton to add ambience to the place. Aiko pieced it together out of a dozen barghest corpses and gave it to me as an April Fool's Day gift.

Speaking of Aiko, we've been sort of dating, which I guess I should have seen coming ever since that party at Ryujin's palace. I say sort of, because neither one of us is quite right in the head, and I think we bring out the worst in each other on top of that. The first time we went out to dinner was a Mexican place. She dosed my drink with some sort of hallucinogen, and I bribed the cooks to put finely chopped habanero all through her fajitas. The resulting night was...amusing.

Aiko and I were both invited to the formal investiture of Kyra as the next Alpha, two days after I woke up. It was a rare privilege to be extended to a nonwerewolf.

It was held at noon in a small clearing in the woods, not too far from the city. The whole pack was there, of course, about twenty-five werewolves in human shape. That was on the small side for a pack, thanks to the numerous deaths of recent months—and, before that, more deaths under Roland's rule. Kyra stood at the center of the pack, surrounded by her people.

Aiko, Enrico and I weren't part of the ceremony. It was something for the pack alone, and none of us was a part of that. Enrico might be soon, but the pack wouldn't take a new wolf until they made at least one full moon without dying or going crazy, and the ritual proper wouldn't take place until the next

moon after that. We stood at the edge of the trees and watched. Enrico had a thoughtful, faintly disturbed expression on his face, and made no move to speak with me or Aiko.

The kitsune asked me, "Why so glum? I'd have thought you'd be proud of her." Her voice was quiet, so as not to disturb anyone.

"I am," I said quietly. "But I wouldn't have wished this on her."

She looked at me as though confused. "Isn't it a step up?"

I sighed. "Maybe. That kind of power...it changes you. She won't be the same person after this."

We were silent after that for a while. In truth, her new position was changing Kyra already. It was there, if you knew how to look. I did. I could see it in her stance, in how she moved as though when she spoke, the world would bloody well listen, in the way the pack looked at her. She was becoming the axis around which they moved.

That was what the Alpha was. The cornerstone, the solid point around which the pack was built. It was inevitable. It was necessary. My personal feelings on the matter were irrelevant.

So, for that matter, were hers.

"Everybody changes," Aiko said eventually. Her voice was quiet and sad.

I nodded. I mean, I knew that from my own life. I'd probably changed as much in the past few months as Kyra would under the burden of her new position.

"I'm kinda curious, though," she said. "You didn't get this broken up over your cop friend over there. Isn't that worse?"

"Probably," I admitted. "But he made his choice knowing what might happen to him. She didn't." I sighed. "Kyra never looked for power. She didn't even choose to be a werewolf. But she'd rather die than betray what she sees as her duty." I shook my head briskly. "You about had enough of this?"

She looked at me and smirked. "I," she pronounced gravely, "have had enough of werewolves to keep me for at least a year or two."

We left together. She tripped me into two different snow banks, but I laughed harder than she did. It wasn't like I could feel the cold anyway.

Not every change is bad. It's important to remember that sometimes.

Kyra drew me aside when we reached the pack house. I wasn't sure where she'd come from; she just appeared next to me while Aiko and Enrico were getting into their respective cars. I'm not sure either of them noticed when I disappeared.



## Seasons Change (Winter's Tale)

Kyra ushered me silently up into the study, where she shut the door behind us and sat down, looking a little dwarfed by the huge desk. "Christopher never told anybody about you joining the pack," she said without preamble. She didn't elaborate, letting me draw my own conclusions.

I thought about what Kyra had said about the pack still being in flux. I thought about how much worse it would be now that the Alpha was changing too. I thought about Christopher lying to me. I thought of all the beings who were starting to show an unhealthy amount of interest in me, and how little concern they were likely to have about collateral damage.

"I think," I said slowly, "I'd better wait on that. It's not a good idea right now. Maybe someday."

She looked at me soberly, and I got the impression that she had seen pretty much the entirety of what I'd been thinking. "Maybe that's best," she said quietly.

I walked home, lost in thought. On the way I dodged, almost without thinking, a remote control plane rigged with explosives. There was confetti involved.