

Wolf's Moon

Emrys Vaughn

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Wolf's Moon (Winter's Tale)

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Emrys Vaughn

I'm starting to run out of ideas for dedications. I guess this one is dedicated to my cat, though that seems a bit dishonest given that she doesn't like me writing.

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Chapter One

The phrase "werewolf society" is intrinsically misleading. In most respects, werewolves belong to the same society as their human neighbors; they speak the same language, celebrate the same holidays, and complain about the same politicians. By and large a French werewolf is going to have more in common, culturally, with a French human than an English werewolf.

There are, however, a few exceptions to the rule, a few elements of a shared culture which bring lycanthropes together. Probably the most universal example is the lunar festival. I've never encountered a pack of werewolves that didn't celebrate it, and that most definitely includes the Colorado Springs pack.

They don't hold one every time the full moon comes around. Usually it's every third or fourth moon, and it's kind of a big deal. Most werewolves regard it as something between a party and a religious holiday, and they wouldn't miss the event for love or money.

Being the Alpha's best friend, I always got invites and usually attended. For most of my life I'd been too upset over not being a werewolf to want to, but in recent months that had stopped bothering me so much and I'd started to actually enjoy them.

Admittedly, there was a lot to enjoy. When werewolves throw a party, they go all out. It starts with a massive barbecue at around noon. Most of them show up human, and there's always plenty of raw meat for the rest. That lasts 'til sunset, and goes through an almost absurd amount of food. You might think your guests eat a lot when you throw a party, but trust me, it doesn't begin to compare to what an entire pack of werewolves can put away.

Around dusk is when it stops resembling a human party. As the shadows lengthen werewolves start changing, filling the air with sounds more suited to the primordial forest than a suburban backyard. By the time the moon's fully risen, all of them are in fur. That's when the hunt starts, and God help you if you get in the way. Thirty moon-happy werewolves out hunting is a dangerous thing.

There is such a thing as the Wild Hunt, but I think a lot of the legends about it were actually started by full-moon werewolf hunts. It's incredibly beautiful, in the same way as a forest fire.

Shortly before dawn, the hunt finally winds down. They've almost always caught something by then, and as the moon's influence starts to wane they start to pull themselves together. Or some of them do, at any rate; the festival formally ends with the conclusion of the hunt, but it's generally accepted that there's an unofficial third portion. Usually, the only people who participate in that aspect of the celebration are the ones who either aren't in a romantic relationship or don't take that sort of thing as seriously as most. Odds are good you can imagine what's involved, and if not you *definitely* don't want me to describe it for you.

It's a commonly cited fact around werewolves that wolves mate for life. Commonly cited, accurate, and totally worthless. The thing people often forget is that a werewolf is every bit as much human as wolf, and there are plenty of humans who can't hold down a relationship for two weeks. Given that a werewolf can live for, theoretically, forever, and that they aren't human no matter what they sometimes look like, it shouldn't be too surprising that some of them have attitudes which are, by the standards of society, odd to say the least.

So far this one was just at the tail end of the feasting portion. The sun was mostly down, and I was one of the few who still looked human. If it had been winter I might have had a cup of hot cider or something, but even in Colorado it doesn't get cold enough to bother the likes of me in July. Even in December the cup would have been mostly decorative; I don't really get cold under natural conditions, unless I'm in the Antarctic or something.

So I was pretty much standing around bored waiting for the last of the wolves to finish the change, idly spinning webs of shadow between my fingers. I'd gotten a lot smoother at that over the past few months, enough that I didn't even really have to think about it. Practice makes perfect, in magic the same as everything else.

I felt it, when the moon rose. I couldn't *not* feel it; it was too much a part of me. As the light of the full moon touched my face I felt a sudden need to hunt, to chase things and revel in the blood, the same urge the werewolves were feeling. It's a combination of psychology and magic that, while not a compulsion to the hunt, is certainly a very strong encouragement.

That wasn't unusual. Most of the time I would have shaken it off easily. Tonight it was stronger than usual, and I considered using my magic to sort of ride along in the minds of the pack. It was something I'd done before, more times than I could remember. With my power buoyed by the full moon, it wouldn't even be an effort.

As I debated whether I wanted to do that tonight, I felt myself reaching automatically for the power that would let me change my shape to join them physically instead of just mentally. That wasn't too unusual either; even after more than a decade had gone by since I stopped being a werewolf, I still tried to change occasionally. It was instinct, especially under the full moon.

What *was* unusual was what happened next. I felt a sort of strain, as though I were pushing against something almost too heavy to move—except this was a purely mental sensation. Then, to continue the analogy, it started to move with a feeling like I'd broken the seal of ninety years of rust. *Then* the really worrisome stuff started.

I felt sensations which, although entirely familiar to me, I hadn't felt in my *own* body for years and years, and which I'd never expected to feel again. A tension to the muscles. Elevated heart and breathing rates. Things slowly beginning to shift under my skin....

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I looked at my hand and saw that it wasn't my imagination. The shapes were...not right. The bones had started shifting around, which I felt with hot, tiny pains. My nails were elongating, ever so slightly. Thickening, becoming claws.

In other words, I had started to turn into a wolf.

I thought, absently, that I should have felt *something*. Pride, maybe, satisfaction that I was finally able to change when it had eluded me for so long. Terror because the last time I managed it turned out really badly for me and a bunch of other people. At the moment, though, I was too stunned to feel any of that.

A moment later, I realized that if I didn't want to change right there, right then, I'd better do something about it. I closed my eyes and focused my will, forcing the power I'd called back down. A few years ago I probably couldn't have done it, not under the full moon, not as hard as it was hitting me right now. Fortunately, I'd been practicing a lot with magic, and doing serious magic requires absolute strength of will. I managed to choke the wolf back down, although it felt like I was trying to bottle up a geyser.

I opened my eyes and looked at myself. Everything seemed to be back where it belonged, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Moving very carefully, I gathered my things and collected my mostly-dog Snowflake, clipping her leash on. She didn't need it—she was at least as intelligent as most people—but it would make people feel better.

All of that was pretty normal. I usually left at this point, only "staying" for the actual hunt about one time in three. Snowflake trotted along beside me cheerfully.

She figured out something was wrong about the time I was sure we were out of sight and earshot of the werewolves, and I started to run. Normally I would have said that was a bad idea around a bunch of hunt-minded werewolves—like dogs, they have an instinct to chase things which run. Fortunately I knew that they were hunting the forest tonight, and I had no intention of leaving the city.

Snowflake kept pace easily. She's a Siberian husky, in good shape, and the things that make her not quite a dog had recently started showing up physically as well as mentally. She could have outstripped me without making an effort, and I can move faster than any humans but dedicated athletes.

My magic is good at communicating with predators. Up until recently, in fact, that was about all it was good for. As a result I could feel Snowflake's worry in the back of my mind. Even under the full moon, which makes my magic significantly stronger, I couldn't distinguish actual words (another way Snowflake differs from a dog; normal animals don't really form distinct thoughts as you understand the term) without skin contact, eye contact, or an effort on my part.

I'd spent enough time around her that I didn't need to. I knew how her mind worked. She was concerned for me, wondering why I was in such a hurry. I sent back reassurance as strongly as I could and picked up the pace a little.

I was in good condition, and physically somewhat superior to the average human. I was still somewhat out of breath by the time we reached my house, most of the way across the city from the pack's house where the party had been held. The whole time the urge to change and go hunting became more powerful, not less, and by the time we were there I was starting to feel genuinely afraid.

We stopped at the door for me to lower my defenses. At Alexander's suggestion, I'd started putting up wards around my cabin. They were nothing like the multilayered fortress around the old wizard's house, but they were still pretty good. Attack my home and you'd best be ready for blasts of wind to hit you like a sledgehammer, shadows to try to trip, tangle, and disembowel you, and (my particular favorite) a bit of magic that would make every animal within a two mile radius start raising hell. I figured that last one alone would be enough to make most people bent on stealth go running. Generally I only left them up when I was away, so that nobody could sneak in while I was gone.

The problem was that they wouldn't allow me through, either. In the circles I'd started running with, shapeshifting into a perfect imitation of me wasn't all that difficult. As a result my wards were programmed to try and kill me if I didn't disable them first. Most of the time I considered constantly lowering and raising my defenses to be good practice. Tonight it was an irritant and an expenditure of time that I resented.

A minute or so later I opened the door and we went through. I took Snowflake's leash off and locked the door behind us, raising my wards again as well. I made my way to my quasi-living room and sat down on the floor not too far from the fire.

After that I spent a while...meditating, for lack of a better word. Concentrating on relaxing, as much of an oxymoron as that is, focusing on being calm and peaceful until the wolf inside me finally started to fade from the forefront of my mind. It wasn't gone, not even close—the urge to slip into fur and go hunting was still there, would be there at least until the sun came up. But my mind was clear enough that I could think straight.

I could, for example, think about how it was July and as a result I hadn't set a fire today. Even if I had, I'd been gone for hours and hours at the party. The fire should have been out long since. The fact that it wasn't suggested that someone had been feeding it. That, in turn, implied that someone had been here, inside of my wards and locks, and I hadn't even known it.

About the same time I noticed that, a voice spoke for the first time since I came in. "It hurts, doesn't it?" The voice was male, and fairly deep, but otherwise not that remarkable.

I opened my eyes and looked at the source of the voice. There weren't any lights on and he was between me and the fire, so I couldn't make out much beyond a silhouette. He was tall, I could see that much, and very thin. He was squatting comfortably next to the stove, warming his hands at the fire.

I got up and turned on the lamp without answering him, casting a dim light through the room. As I did he turned around and I got a look at his face for the first time.

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Silvery-grey hair. Golden eyes that reflected the light like a cat's. Gaunt features, with hollow cheeks and pronounced bones that made him look like he'd come from a concentration camp. He looked somewhat disturbing and entirely too familiar. I'd seen his face only once, but I wouldn't ever forget it.

I was raised around werewolves, and tried to become one myself when I was sixteen. It worked, sort of, and drove me mostly insane as a result. A number of people died, and I spent about three months locked up and getting steadily crazier. At some point in that time this entity—I wasn't sure if the term "person" applied—had appeared and undone the change somehow.

Except that I had started to shift tonight. Which suggested that I hadn't fully understood what happened that night.

This time I wasn't feverish and hallucinating, so I noticed a few details that I either hadn't seen the last time, or which hadn't been there. He was wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, both well-worn. More noticeably, there was a silver ribbon that shimmered in a way I hadn't seen before around his neck, and his lower lip was pierced. It didn't look much like jewelry; it was just an ugly metal spike in his mouth that gouged at his gums when he spoke. Creepy looking. The instant I saw him I also became aware of the scent of magic, so thick it was almost choking, reeking of a predator's musk.

"I wondered when I'd see you again," I said eventually.

He raised one silvery eyebrow. "That's it? I was expecting at least a little surprise." His voice, at least, sounded normal this time. The last time I'd seen him it had been made up of hundreds of unrelated sounds combined into speech that was nothing like human. Although I might have hallucinated that part; you never know.

I shrugged. "Nah. I've been expecting this for years now. And after what happened earlier, makes sense I'd see you again. I take it you're here to settle that debt?"

He looked confused. Then, suddenly, he laughed, and there was an echo of that earlier, inhuman voice in it, the sound of a windstorm blended with howling wolves. "Oh, you mean from when I helped you out a few years back?" He waved one hand carelessly. "You don't owe me for that. That was common decency."

Well, that was a weight off my shoulders. I'd spent half my life, almost, thinking he owned me and I was just living on borrowed time until he decided to collect.

He turned back to the fire. "Do you remember what I said to you back then?" he asked.

I moved up to sit more or less next to him. The fire was very nice. "You asked, 'Do you want to be free?'"

He nodded. His features were even weirder in the flickering orange light. "Good memory. Can you guess why I asked that?"

"Because you thought the answer was important?" I guessed.

He shrugged. "Maybe a little. Mostly it's because it's natural to talk about what's precious to you. Ask a starving man what he thinks of steak and he'll wax eloquent for hours on end." He shrugged again. "Only natural."

I considered that for a moment. I don't know *why*, but most supernatural beings of any age or power seem to delight in talking around the subject. You have to pay careful attention to really see what they mean.

"To a starving man," I said slowly, "steak is important because it's what he wants but can't have. It's precious because it's the thing he lusts for most."

He smiled at me, showing teeth that were very sharp. He said nothing.

I thought some more. He looked a lot like me, really; both of us were only vaguely human in appearance. We looked more like wolves than men, in a lot of ways. Amber eyes and grey hair, in particular.

He looked and smelled like a wolf and spoke of freedom the way a starving man speaks of steak. I looked at the silvery ribbon, which I saw now had no seam or knot, as though it had been woven in place around his neck. No way to get it off without snapping it, and somehow I knew that I could tug on it all day with superhuman strength and not affect it at all. I looked at the spike in his mouth, which had to be pure agony when he spoke.

For some reason, at least some ancient and powerful beings take great pleasure in making their disguises as transparent as possible. I don't know why; maybe because, even when they try to blend in, their pride demands that people have a way to recognize them. Maybe they just think it's funny.

"You're the Fenris Wolf, aren't you?" I asked him.

He smiled delightedly. "Oh, you are good. What gave me away?"

I rolled my eyes. "What didn't? I thought you were supposed to be bound until the end times."

"Who's to say I'm not?" he asked seriously. "A silver cord around my neck and a sword stabbed into my mouth. Admittedly I couldn't fit the whole sword, but I think the symbolism is there nonetheless, don't you?"

"Funny," I said dryly, "but I was kind of not joking."

He looked back into the fire, staring at the tongues of flame as though they held answers to my questions. For all I know they did. "The old poets weren't stupid," he said abruptly. "Not stupid at all. Some were brilliant. But they were still human. Even when they heard the truth, which was seldom, they didn't have minds to process it. So they translated it into something they could understand. That's what you grew up learning."

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"So what is the way things really are?" I asked curiously.

He glanced at me almost regretfully. "You can't really understand it either. You're too much like them, and not enough like me."

"Try," I suggested.

He seemed to spend a moment thinking. "There is more than one kind of binding," he said eventually, "and more than one way to be free. Sometimes if you want to be free in one way, you have to be bound in another. And that really is the best I can explain it." He waved one hand vaguely and both the ribbon and the spike vanished as though they'd never been. "The accoutrements were metaphors at best, and at worst outright lies."

I thought about that. It sounded like a paradox on the surface, but it actually made a kind of sense to me. "Sort of like when I was a werewolf," I said after a moment. "When you took that away from me, you were restricting my freedom in some ways. But it made me free to think clearly and control my own actions."

"Not a bad example," he allowed. "But you've never been a werewolf."

I raised one eyebrow, a trick that took me *forever* to get down. "That's funny," I said dryly. "I distinctly remember being changed into one."

He shook his head. "No. Changing you into a werewolf would be like trying to drown a fish. You're closer to the source than they'll ever be. You just...woke some things up, inside yourself, that were sleeping until then. I just put them back to sleep."

"That's why I started to change tonight," I said suddenly, realizing it even as I spoke. "It woke back up."

He shrugged. "Has been for a while now. Nothing sleeps forever." He glanced at me slyly. "And you've been helping it along, too. Playing about with things you don't understand. Spent quite a lot of time with werewolves lately, haven't you?"

I mused on that for a moment. "Will it affect me the same way it did last time?"

He shrugged again. "Maybe. Probably not. You weren't ready for it to wake up back then. Now I think you might be. I can put it back to sleep for a while if you want, but it won't last as long as last time. Especially if you keep using magic and such."

I thought about it, but I didn't really need to. The truth is that if I had had a chance to be a werewolf anytime in the past twenty years or so without going crazy, I'd have taken it without a second thought. "Maybe later. For now I think I'll just see what happens."

He nodded and didn't say anything, still watching the fire. We sat like that for a minute or two, not speaking. The silence felt...oddly companionable, in a way I wouldn't have expected while speaking

with Fenris. I'd encountered a couple of beings like him before, including his father Loki, and never been comfortable in their presence. They had scared me just by *being*. Fenris...didn't.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked suddenly. "Help me out when I was going insane."

He shrugged. "I value freedom. Seemed like offering you yours was the right thing to do."

"I notice you aren't staging prison breaks worldwide," I said wryly. "What made me special?"

He didn't say anything for a minute, and I thought he might not answer. "You reminded me of myself, a little," he said eventually. He shrugged again. "And I knew your mother. I thought she might like me to take care of you a bit."

My eyes widened. "How'd you know my mother?"

He looked at me like an idiot. "How did *anybody* know Carmen?" He smirked suggestively, in case I hadn't caught on already.

I sighed. I knew my mom was...not what you might call discriminating, in the slightest, but seriously. I would have hoped she had enough sense to not have sex with divine monstrous wolves older than time, maybe literally.

And then my eyes widened. I never knew my father, never even knew who he was. All my mother said (and not to me, because she'd killed herself before I was old enough to talk) was that he had been an enormous, beautiful wolf in Canada. A wolf who had impregnated her when that should have been physically impossible, who had left no tracks and no scent.

I looked at the Fenris Wolf, who could easily fit that description. "Are you my father?" I asked. It sounded strange, phrased so simply.

"No. Sorry, no. We just...had a good time together." He shrugged. "There aren't many people willing to be near me once they know who I am. I liked her. Tried to help her out when I had the chance."

There was another long pause, during which I stared into the fire too. I wasn't sure whether I had been *afraid* that Fenris was my father, or hopeful. Maybe I hadn't had enough time to get used to the idea to know. In any case, it was a disappointment to go back to not having any idea.

"I did know your father," he said abruptly. "Decent fellow. I was the one who kept Carmen from following him." He sighed. "Oh, she wanted to. I think she really might have settled down with him, you know? But it was for the best."

"Who was he?" I asked.

"Didn't have a name," Fenris said. "Not one you'd understand, anyway. He really was what he looked like."

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I frowned. "My father was an actual wolf?" I asked incredulously.

He shrugged. "Mostly. A wolf bigger than most. Smarter. There're a few of those around." He looked at me, inviting me to finish the train of thought.

I thought for a moment, then smiled. "Let me guess," I said slowly. "You were in western Canada a while ago. Having a good time."

Fenris grinned, his teeth red in the firelight. "Good guess. About two hundred years ago. It was a nicer place back then, I think." He frowned and looked back into the flames. "Not sure how many generations back that was. Generational time in wolves varies a lot, anywhere from about two to ten years."

Which made Fenris anywhere from my hundred-times-great-grandfather to a meager twenty generations back, roughly. "Long time ago," I commented.

He shrugged. "It lingers. They're still wolves. Just not quite like other wolves." He shrugged again and prodded at the fire.

I frowned as I saw an incongruity in his story. "If you were trying to help me, why wait until then? I can think of a few times when I was younger you could have helped me a lot."

He put another piece of wood on the fire. "Didn't know about you. I still don't know how she carried you to term—she must have gone somewhere else for help with that. I didn't find out you existed until about a month before I saw you." He shrugged. "After that, I hung around a little. You seemed happy enough. You didn't need my help."

"And after I left?"

"You were trying so hard to blend in," he said quietly. "Trying to leave all that behind you. Having me around wouldn't have helped you any. You had to make your own way." He smiled again, sadly this time. "I knew it wouldn't work. Walking away from what you are never does. But you were trying, and I had to respect that." He sighed and stood up. "I have to be going now."

"Will I see you again?" I asked.

He grinned. His teeth were very white, and very sharp. "Probably before long. Looks like if I wait very long you'll be dead. No offense."

I snorted. "None taken. As much trouble as I've been getting myself into I'd bet against my living very long, except I can't find anybody to take it."

He smiled at me in an almost proprietary way. "I like you," he said with satisfaction. "Much more amusing than any of my other toys these days."

I bristled. "Toy?" I demanded.

He shrugged. "No offense. I'll admit words aren't my strongest suit. But you're one of mine. How could I not take pride in what you do?" he asked rhetorically. Then, while I was still processing that, he said, "You should get some rest, Winter. Big day ahead of you and all that."

And, as though triggered by his words—which it probably was—a wall of blackness hit me like a crashing wave.

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Chapter Two

The next thing I remember is waking up in bed the next morning. I felt incredibly comfortable, and so well rested you'd think I'd slept twelve hours, although my clock said it was barely six and I couldn't have gone to sleep earlier than midnight. Snowflake was curled up next to me, staring at me with an expression of concern in her ice-blue eyes.

It faded the moment I woke up. *You're awake*, she whispered into my mind. *Good. I was worried about you. That was a very dangerous man.*

I tensed up. *That wasn't a dream?*

I wish.

I shivered. The Fenris Wolf was...a very scary person if even a fraction of what was said about him had even a kernel of truth.

This is the short version of his story. Loki, the god of fire and chaos and, at least occasionally, a terrible enemy of the gods, had sired three children with a giantess. The gods prophesied that they would cause great harm, and as a result cast one of them into the ocean and another into the underworld.

Fenrisúlfur was the only one they raised themselves. He was a wolf, and quickly grew to such a size that the gods themselves came to fear him. They arranged for him to be bound with a fetter purchased from the dwarves, made with magic and utterly impossible to break. He was bound at the edge of the world, and a sword was thrust between his jaws so that he couldn't close them.

But he won't be bound forever. Eventually Ragnarök, the battle that will kill the gods and destroy the world, will come, and his bindings will break on that day. And he will go forth with a hunger fit to devour the world, his jaws stretching from the earth to the sky. Odin himself, the strongest of the gods and their king, will go to do battle with him and fall.

That's what the myths say, anyway. I found his version, in which most of that was a metaphor for something humans weren't really able to understand, more likely. Not so much because I trusted him—only an idiot trusts a god that easily—as because it made sense. I could imagine that deific beings were so far beyond human experience that we couldn't really understand them at all.

I got up, dressed, and ate, thinking. I was worried about Fenris's visit. Part of it was simply that the freaking Fenris Wolf was paying attention to me—but not much, because at this point there were enough powerful people looking my way that one more wasn't too critical. More of it was because of the things he said about my not being a werewolf. That worried me, because if I hadn't ever been a werewolf....

What had I been?

I thought about that for a while, and got no closer to an answer. I could turn into a wolf, I had all the secondary abilities associated with werewolves—strength, speed, healing, and such—I was pained by the touch of silver and affected by the full moon. That seemed like a pretty clear portrait of a werewolf to me.

Clearly, I needed to speak with someone who knew more about werewolves than me if I wanted to understand what was going on. Unfortunately, people like that are few and far between.

I knew a few of them, though. So I called a familiar number and left a message when nobody answered. Then, as I was getting ready to go to work, I had another thought.

Why had Fenris said I had a big day ahead of me?

I frowned and grabbed another handful of toys to throw in my pockets. Somehow, whatever Fenris had been referring to, I was pretty sure I couldn't over-prepare for it.

I used to work at a sorta weird repair shop owned by a fae called Dvalin Kovac. He hired me while I was still in college, and I'd been working with him since. For years it was a pretty important part of my life.

In some ways I guess I was still working there. I mean, it was the same shop, and I did a lot of the same work. Val was gone, though. Not long after he presented me with the dubious gift of a powerful, powerfully cursed sword, he'd given me the shop and disappeared for parts unknown. Okay, maybe not completely unknown; the last I heard, he was planning to return to the Otherside for a while and visit his family.

I felt a bit ashamed when I heard that. In all the years I'd known him, it had never once occurred to me that he might have a family. I mean, it was obvious, but...it's hard for me to wrap my head around the idea of a fae with family. Even harder when that fae was Val.

I'd mostly quit doing repairs in favor of making and fixing furniture. It was sort of funny, because I had two almost completely different groups of customers. One of them were the people who'd been coming for years, mostly since before I started working there, who kept coming for the plethora of services Val had provided. I helped them with what I could, and apologized for the things I couldn't do. Considering the variety of things Val had done for most of them, I wound up apologizing a lot.

The other group were the new customers, who mostly didn't realize that I had only had the shop for a couple months. They're mostly gawkers who come in because I'm publicly known to be a werewolf even though I'm not one (complicated story, don't ask), and werewolves are new enough to the public eye to make me a kind of celebrity around town. A lot of people are still convinced the whole thing is a hoax, and I honestly can't blame them. Werewolves are still banned from giving clear evidence that it isn't, after all, and that tends to limit the credibility of the claim. At this point most of the support for

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their existence is in the form of various videos, and while those videos are *very* plausible, people don't take that kind of thing on faith these days.

Either way, though, people are still fascinated by the prospect. There are plenty of people who are willing to go to my shop just so they can say that they bought something from a werewolf.

I vastly prefer the first group. There are people who would probably kill to get that much attention, but I'm not one of them. It makes me feel like I'm in a zoo.

On the way to work a fire hydrant exploded and sent a chunk of metal the size of my fist at my head with lethal force. I dropped to the ground instantly and without thinking, rolled under the spraying water, and came up on the other side. The whole incident barely interrupted my stride.

It's probably a bad sign when you get that accustomed to assassination attempts, but I couldn't help it. In the past six months I'd encountered two hundred and forty-seven of them, none of which had come all that close to succeeding. I wasn't quite sure what to make of them. There wasn't any pattern to them that I could find. Sometimes weeks would go by uneventfully. On the other hand, I'd also run into twenty-three in one day. They had been as absurd as a basket of exotic venomous snakes launched out of a catapult, as difficult to arrange as a car crashing into a store downtown while I happened to be standing near the window, and as unlikely to succeed as a paper airplane that had somehow been sharpened, reinforced, and sent flying at my head one evening.

I'm pretty sure whoever's behind it isn't actually trying to kill me, because there's been a distinct lack of...more or less anything which makes sense as an actual means of assassination. I mean, if you really want somebody dead, most of the time the simple plans are best. Guns work pretty well. If you really have to go all Wile E. Coyote, you should probably pass on the catapults and skip right to a metric ton of dynamite. That works pretty well too. Failing that lighting somebody's house on fire while they're sleeping isn't a bad choice, and of course you can always fall back on poison.

None of which had been used on me so far. Well, technically poison had shown up a few times, but not in any practical way. I mean, a poisoned apple placed on your table while you're gone isn't exactly subtle, and you'd have to be tragically stupid to eat it if you already *know* somebody's trying, in even a very casual way, to kill you. The pie that had been laced with strychnine and dropped on my doorstep without a note was almost worse, because that's a bad idea even if you *don't* have any enemies.

The repeated and ridiculous attacks have accomplished one thing, though. I mean, I thought I was paranoid before, but that's got nothing on now. Case in point: fire hydrant. I'm fast, but not fast enough to duck that unless I was already sort of expecting something bad to happen.

Once I got to work things were pretty uneventful. There were a handful of people there throughout the morning, which was moderately irritating since I had to drop everything every time somebody came in, but not serious. Certainly nothing like what you would expect to bring a warning from the Fenris Wolf.

About noon, when I'd just started thinking about wrapping up for lunch, the bell at the front counter *dinged* again. I walked out and found a pleasant-looking young man with dark hair and bright green eyes waiting for me. I must have had an interesting expression on my face, because when he saw me he laughed. It was a pleasant, light sound, but not especially remarkable.

"Conn?" I said incredulously. "What are you doing here?"

The Khan of the werewolves looked at me with laughter in his eyes. "Aren't you the one that called me looking for advice?" he asked.

"Well, sure, but that was just this morning. I hadn't even heard from you yet. I sure wasn't expecting you to visit in person."

He shrugged. "When you called I was flying home from California with a layover in Denver. Wasn't hard to get from there to Colorado Springs."

"And you didn't call me back because...?"

He grinned slyly. "I thought it would be more fun to surprise you. And I was right."

I sighed. "You," I said, "are ridiculous." It was the kind of thing I would be more likely to expect from a twelve-year-old than the oldest and most powerful werewolf in the world.

Conn ignored me, instead lounging on one of the chairs I had in the office portion of the shop for waiting customers. I idly noted that he had already flipped the sign in the window to CLOSED. "How do you like being in business for yourself?" he asked me.

I shrugged and sat down as well, so that it wouldn't seem like I was looming over him. Conn is secure enough in his authority that he doesn't care if people act in a way that suggests dominance to him, but I generally don't anyway. "Could be worse," I said. "I never realized how many things Val took care of that I didn't know about." Things like licenses and taxes, both of which I was pretty sure he had ignored with a casualness that I could only envy.

Conn nodded sympathetically. "You doing all right for cash?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Speaking of, why did you send me that money back in January?"

He shrugged. "You took care of an element in the Courts that was bothering me endlessly. Seemed like the least I could do to pay you for your trouble."

I estimated that he'd paid quite a bit better per hour than my day job, not even counting the other rewards that I'd gotten for that particular event. Considering the condition I came out in, I wasn't arguing. It might pay well, but I wasn't going to be taking a job as a supernatural mercenary any time soon.

"So what did you need advice on?" he asked.

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I hesitated. "It's kind of complicated...."

"Goodness," he said dryly. "A situation involving you? Complicated? I never would have guessed."

I tried to look indignant, but couldn't manage to keep from smiling. If you can forget what he is and what he represents, Conn is actually very good company. Then you remember that his job description includes ruling a good chunk of the world's werewolves with an iron fist, and ruthlessly killing anyone that gets out of line, and you go back to being scared of him.

"Well," he said, "it's lunchtime, and in my experience complicated problems seldom suffer for being discussed over food."

Of course not. In a werewolf's mind, there isn't *anything* that doesn't benefit from the addition of food. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well," he said slyly, "I hear a new place opened up around town recently. Sort of a theme restaurant, I understand. I think it was called the Full Moon Grill. Maybe you've heard of it?"

I sighed. Of course. "Ridiculous," I repeated.

"You really think it's a good idea to talk that way to the person buying you lunch?" he asked. "Besides, from what I hear it isn't *that* ridiculous of a place. I mean, we might even see a werewolf."

I followed him out the door with a sigh.

The Full Moon Grill is an interesting place. It reminds me of a casino in some ways, simply because the glamorous image it presents is so utterly different from the reality. If you know what's really going on, it seems incredible that so many people get taken in by the glitzy facade.

To the outsider, it's a theme restaurant that's made its reputation on the recent werewolf craze. Everything about it is engineered on that basis. The menu items are overpriced, have ridiculous names to fit the theme, and tend to involve lots and lots of meat. The furniture is all wood, mismatched, and some of it looks like it's been chewed on. All of the publicly acknowledged werewolves in town, including me, eat there on a semi-regular basis. Werewolves in fur, hang out there as well. In just a few short months it's become a popular tourist destination for those who are, or think they are, enamored with all things lycanthropic.

The behind-the-scenes look is a little different. I made most of the furniture myself, and as a result know perfectly well that it isn't my best work. The chewed-on look was produced with power tools rather than teeth. The food isn't much different from what you would get at any steakhouse in the city, except that it maybe costs a little more. Oh yeah, and the werewolves? We spend most of our time there talking about how much we hate the attention we've been getting. None of us is the type to enjoy

being in the public eye. It makes it even worse being in a place where practically everybody is guaranteed to recognize us, and stare.

The only reason that most of us go is that, as I think most of the customers suspect, the pack owns the place. Kyra, the recently minted Alpha and my good friend, asks us with exceptional vigor to spend a certain amount of time there every month. The idea is to make werewolves seem both everyday and a bit ridiculous, so that even the people who believe the stories can't take us seriously. Strangely enough, it seems to be working. Love 'em or hate 'em, it's hard to see someone as mysterious and terrifying when they're basically a sideshow at a tourist trap.

I'm sure it's a total and unintended coincidence that the restaurant also rakes in cash hand over fist. Sure it is.

Not that it's all worked out that smoothly. There have been quite a few lynchings in rural areas, and wherever you go it's not hard to find people muttering that werewolves ought to be shot. Honestly, it makes me sort of glad that Conn's taking the low-key, careful approach that he is. The werewolves went public six months ago, and since then almost nothing's changed. They aren't allowed to change in public, and any breaches of secrecy are treated as harshly as they've ever been. The government is still treating the whole thing as a hoax.

I think my favorite part of the restaurant's act is the werewolves in fur, though. Conn and I walked past one lounging near the bar as we entered, a dark-furred wolf named Robert that I knew very vaguely. Anywhere else he would have been assumed to be the owner's dog or something, and treated like part of the scenery. Werewolves don't really look all that doglike, but in my experience, most people will if given the slightest opportunity gladly deceive themselves to an absolutely absurd extent to avoid an uncomfortable truth.

The amusing thing is that the same goes in reverse, too. So, elsewhere, people mistake werewolves for dogs. In the Full Moon Grill, they mistake dogs for werewolves. See, there are a relatively few werewolves in the pack willing to loiter around in fur in a restaurant all day. Maybe a dozen, tops. Most of them are the same wolves who are currently known to the public and therefore have to appear there in human form on a regular basis anyway.

So, to make up the difference, Kyra has dogs come in and pretend to be werewolves. Several of the pack have dogs, and most of them are pretty well trained. Snowflake does her share, and in fact she's actually one of the most frequent choices, because her uncanny intelligence makes her an excellent actor. She find the whole thing very amusing, as do I.

Conn and I sat at a small table near the railing on the upper level. From that position, both of us could see the door, and if we really wanted to it wouldn't be hard to get down there very quickly. A ten-foot drop isn't all that much of an impediment to a werewolf.

"I'm surprised you wanted to come here," I said.

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He looked at me as though puzzled. "I thought the whole point of this restaurant was that it appealed to werewolves."

"It's more of a tourist trap than anything. Most of the serious people on the scene go to Pryce's place."

Conn frowned, and it seemed as though a shadow were passing over his normally cheerful features. "I don't care for that man. What he's done to himself is wrong in every sense of the word."

I looked away, shivering a little. For an instant—just one instant—Conn had stopped looking like a pleasant young man, and started to resemble what he really was. He might not look like much—actually, I know he doesn't look like much—but Conn is scary. No one's ever been willing or able to tell me how old he is, but I know that his youngest child is at least two hundred years old, and she says that Conn was old when she was born.

More than that, though, he's the Khan, with everything that means.

Alpha werewolves are powerful. They are, by virtue of the personality traits that enable them to be Alpha in the first place, generally domineering and disinclined to take orders. Thanks to the position they hold within their packs they don't generally have to, which just makes them like it less.

Conn rules all the Alphas in a good portion of the world. All of them. If he tells them to jump, the only question they ask is how high. You don't get that kind of authority by being pleasant.

Oh, don't get me wrong. It isn't a lie. Conn really is a nice guy, most of the time, and he has a sense of humor—the fact that he chose a title phonetically identical to his first name is ample testament to that. It's just that underneath that is an old, powerful werewolf who brooks no threat to his authority, and is perfectly willing to kill those who challenge him. I'd seen him do it once. It was...memorable.

And when I mentioned Pryce's name, for one second I saw through the surface to the darkness underneath, and was reminded of why I was usually more uncomfortable around Conn than this.

And then the moment was over. Conn shook his head like a dog shedding water, and I got the sense that he was aware of what I had seen—and it made him as uncomfortable as it did me. "What did you call me about, anyway?" he asked in the too-casual tone of someone trying to change the subject quickly.

I was happy to comply. "I realized that there are a few things about werewolves I don't know that might be important to me."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, where do they come from? I know that people can be changed into werewolves," I said, forestalling his immediate response. "But that only works if there's a werewolf to change them, so obviously that can't be where it started. So where did werewolves originate?"

He seemed to think about that for a moment, staring past my shoulder as though looking at something only he could see. "An interesting question," he said slowly. "One I've often wondered myself."

I blinked. "You don't know?" I asked. Logically I knew there was no reason he shouldn't be as ignorant as I was, but on a subconscious level I was used to Conn knowing *everything*.

He grinned briefly. "I'm old, but I'm not that old. Werewolves had existed for a long time before I was born. That said, I am familiar with a few stories about our origins."

"Such as?"

"Well," he said slowly, as though remembering something he hadn't thought of in a long time, "one of the more common is that werewolves are as ancient as humanity, or more so. Some say that in ancient times, before the magical and the mundane were seen as being quite so separate, there were men and women who had a talent for what we call magic. These people, like many of that time, were hunters, and their nature was such that other hunters found in them a kindred spirit. They sought greater and more powerful knowledge and magics, and in the seeking they changed. They became as other hunters, as the beasts that preyed on them as they preyed on others. Over time, these people became the first of what we now call werewolves."

Conn's voice had taken on a measured, almost ritual quality, which reminded me of the long hours I'd spent hearing old stories from Dolph and Erin—unsurprising, given that they're his children. In spite of that, though, there were cues if you knew what to listen for. "You disagree?" I asked.

"I find it an incomplete explanation. If that were the case you would expect to find shapeshifters everywhere, which you do. Actual werewolves, though, are native only to western Europe. If it's a universal magic that was formed from shamanic traditions in prehistoric times, why would it only have developed in a small part of the world?" He shook his head.

"So what do you think the answer is?"

He frowned. "The story I find most believable is that once, long before the birth of Christ, the fae were as powerful as gods in that part of the world. Much more powerful, even, than they are now. In that time there was a young warrior who was favored of one by the greatest of the fae. He was smart and strong and dangerous, but it came about that he was also tired and outnumbered, and he knew that he would die on the morrow. So, as desperate young warriors have been known to do, he called upon those more powerful than himself for aid. And, of course, this fae lord heard him, and answered. He was given power enough to defeat his enemies, but like all fae gifts it came with a cost." He smiled a little. "I think you can guess it from there."

Well, that was interesting. It made sense, in a way. I knew that some of the greater fae had been worshipped as gods by the early Europeans, especially in the British Isles. It was true, too, that being a werewolf was about equal parts gift and curse. I could see a faerie gift taking that form.

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Of course, the fae weren't the only ones who might do something like that. "Have you ever heard Fenris mentioned in that context?" I asked.

Conn frowned again, more deeply. "Fenrisúlfr? Not specifically, no." He shrugged. "Fenrir is as likely a source as any. It would explain a few things, I suppose. Now what brought this on?"

I frowned and opened my mouth to explain. Before I could, though, somebody kicked the front door in. Two young men walked through. One of them had the arrogant swagger of a kid with more bravado than sense who hadn't ever been in real danger. The other moved with a kind of nervousness that suggested that he was just starting to realize that this might not have been the best idea, and it was too late for him to back out now. I saw him glance longingly out at the street a few times as the duo entered the restaurant.

Oh yeah, and both of them had already drawn pistols which looked significantly more deadly than the men themselves.

It is days like this that I hate my life.

Chapter Three

I have a pretty fast reaction time, and thanks to my ever-increasing paranoia I was especially quick off the draw. By the time most of the people downstairs had even seen the newcomers I was already standing, with both hands shoved into my pockets. I usually carried a pretty impressive assortment of tools and weapons in my pockets, and thanks to Fenris's visit I had extra today.

Conn, though, made me look slow. By the time I had stood halfway up he was standing next to the balcony, seemingly without crossing the five feet between it and our table. His hands were gripping a section of rail in a way that suggested that he was perfectly ready to rip it free and use it as a weapon.

The swaggering young man, whom I immediately nicknamed Blondie, took another few steps into the room. He seemed to enjoy the attention he was getting. "You monsters have been getting too comfortable lately," he said with a sneer. "I think it's time someone taught you a lesson." Wow. That was a first. I mean, in my experience, bad guys don't actually go in for the melodramatic speeches so much these days. Seriously, who *talks* like that?

The barman gave a long-suffering sigh. "The *werewolves*," he said, emphasizing the term, "are legal citizens with the same rights as everyone else. Now how about you fellows get out of here before I call the cops?" From my angle I could see that he already had one hand on his cell phone, and the other on a shotgun tucked behind the bar. Smart man.

The nervous man leaned closer and muttered something, but Blondie wasn't listening. He sneered even wider and, by way of answer, lifted his pistol and shot Robert where he was laying near the bar. There was a sudden, shocked silence broken by the werewolf whining in pain and surprise. Blondie grinned and lifted the gun to point at the bartender—particularly unfair in his case, since he was just an average guy trying to make a buck. Only two or three werewolves actually worked there; the rest were normal people or those tangentially involved with the supernatural.

A number of things happened very quickly in the instant after that shot. First, Conn ripped a three-foot section of railing out so easily you'd think it was rotten pine instead of oak. He dropped to the floor below with it, and I could hear his snarl from where I stood.

At the same time, I pulled my right hand out of my pocket. I was holding a stone, a smooth river rock that fit neatly into the palm of my hand. I'd been using it in some of my recent magical studies, and forgotten to take it back out of my pocket afterward.

You might think that, as a result, I would have done some complicated magical ritual with it. You could think so, but you would be wrong. I can do a little earth magic, sure, but it isn't my forte. I wasn't very quick at it either, and this was a situation that called for rapid and decisive action.

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So I threw it instead. I used my power to give it a heavy tailwind too, which combined with my moderately superhuman strength to propel the rock pretty damn fast. Not like bullet fast or anything; I fully expected Blondie to dodge it. But for a second it would make a pretty nice distraction.

Except that as it turned out, I had been overestimating these folks. He never even saw it coming, and the stone hit him in the temple hard enough to snap his head to the side. He crumpled, the gun dropping from his hand. In the same instant I threw more wind, a concentrated blast of air that I was hoping would knock the other man from his feet.

That was when things got really interesting. There was an impediment to its progress about a foot away from the nervous man. I felt another will come into conflict with mine, someone using magic to keep anything from coming near him. It was a kinetic barrier, one of the simplest shielding spells possible; basically just energy bent to prevent things from crossing, and exert force sufficient to stop them. I wasn't much good at making them. Raw kinetic energy isn't something I work with well, which is why I tend to use blasts of wind instead. But Alexander *was* good at them, and he could throw up barriers that would stop a catapult or a machine gun with equal ease. I'd tested my skills against his shields before, and I couldn't even ruffle his feathers.

This shield, though, was nothing like that. It wouldn't have stopped bullets. It barely even stopped my gale, and what leaked through was enough to stagger him. He looked straight at me, his face gone pale, and I saw him lift his gun to point my way.

Then Conn threw his piece of railing like a javelin. It wasn't sharp. It didn't need to be. I was stronger than I looked, much stronger than the average human, but Conn outclassed me enormously. That piece of wood flew maybe twenty feet with no noticeable drop, smashed through the kinetic barrier with such contemptuous ease that it might as well not have existed, and hit the young man in the chest. It didn't stop when it hit his sternum, either.

He, too, crumpled to the ground. He looked very surprised, very bloody, and very, very dead.

I dropped to the floor below, crouching to absorb some of the impact, and walked over to join Conn near the intruders. He bent to check the pulse of the man I'd hit with the rock, and then stood, shaking his head. He tossed the stone back to me as he did.

The air around them was quietly charged with magic. As I approached I could smell it, a tingling almost-burn in my nostrils. The scent had a familiar note to it that was almost like disinfectant, and which was common to human magic. It wasn't strong, certainly nothing like as strong as Alexander's, but it was there.

"I hate this job," Conn muttered under his breath as I approached. No one without superhuman hearing would have heard him. "Doesn't matter where I go, it's waiting for me." He looked at me directly. "You should get out of here. The cops will be along shortly."

"Shouldn't I stay, then?"

"Things will be easier if there's only one person answering the questions," he said dryly. "And I can afford it more easily than you. Now go."

I went.

On the walk back to the shop, I drew a few conclusions. Number one, and most obviously, two human mages had just attacked the best-known werewolf hangout in town. That in itself raised a number of other questions. Like, why would people that raw be attacking anything? You have to be pretty inexperienced at violence to get taken down with a thrown rock. I wasn't sure about the arrogant one, but the man whose barrier I'd felt had to be even worse at magic than me, and I'm an apprentice as such things go. Nobody that clumsy ought to be getting in a fight with *anyone*, let alone challenging a bunch of werewolves.

The second thing I realized was that, unless my life was about to get even more complicated than usual, this was what Fenris had been referring to, which raised a few questions as well. For example, what was so important about this event that an immortal, divine being better known for terrifying gods would be paying attention to it? And, equally important, how had Fenris known it would happen? As far as I knew nobody had ever really proved the existence of prophecy beyond a few minutes, or an hour or two at the most. Certainly I had never heard of the Fenris Wolf having that kind of ability. Generally his powers are more oriented around death, destruction, and endless hunger.

Such were my thoughts as I approached my shop and found Anna Rossi waiting for me. After I unlocked the front door, she and a woman I didn't know followed me in. The stranger took a very short time to select one of my stock pieces, a small china cabinet made from rosewood that I wasn't particularly proud of. She paid and left, without even being introduced to me.

Anna lingered. "Late lunch," she said, seeming very casual unless you looked at the tension in her posture. Having spent most of my life near werewolves, I looked. She wasn't here for chitchat.

I wasn't about to rush her, though. Anna doesn't typically approach topics directly, at least not with me. "Foster family's in town," I said with what I hoped was an appropriate grimace. It was partially true—I hadn't been raised in Conn's pack, but I spent a couple years there after I (maybe) turned into a werewolf with disastrous results.

She nodded sympathetically, and we spent the next ten minutes looking at various finished and half-finished pieces. We made small talk, which I have gotten slightly better at over time; she commiserated about the unwanted attention I'd been receiving, and I laughed at stories about her latest inept boss.

Eventually, though, I got fed up with dancing around the subject and turned to face her. "What really brought you here?" I asked bluntly.

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She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "It's about my brother," she said. "I'm concerned about him. He's been avoiding me lately."

"That's not uncommon for new werewolves," I said awkwardly. Enrico had made the choices that led to his being injured severely enough that turning into a werewolf was his only chance to survive, but I still felt responsible. If it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have been there. He wasn't one of the publicly acknowledged wolves—no new werewolf would have been put into that position—but Anna knew about it.

"Should I be worried about him?" she said quietly.

I considered lying to her for about half a second before discarding the idea. I'd been lying to friends most of my life, but that hadn't made me any fonder of it. "Some," I said. "The first year is a dangerous time for a werewolf. Some people don't take well to it." I shrugged. "I haven't seen any sign that he's one of them, but sometimes you don't."

"What will happen if he is?"

I looked away and didn't say anything, which was answer enough. Being Enrico's sister and one of my best friends, Anna knew more about the wolves than most people. She knew that they weren't the cuddly, ridiculous people they were presenting themselves as.

I like werewolves. I've spent most of my life around them, and I'm close to them magically and psychologically. I don't let that blind me to what they are. The truth is that werewolves are monsters. They're dangerous, violent, and kill people on a regular basis. That doesn't make them evil, but it does make them hazardous to be around sometimes.

Anna nodded as though she wasn't surprised, which I don't suppose she was. "What are the odds?"

I shrugged. "It's hard to say. He's already survived the initial change, which is one of the biggest hurdles. At this point, I'd say there's anywhere between a thirty and sixty percent chance he finishes the adjustment process and comes out okay."

"I see," Anna said. "Do all werewolves have odds that low?"

"No," I said. "It depends on how well you mesh with the wolf. Some people have personalities that can roll with the changes. Your brother...doesn't. That makes it a lot harder."

Anna nodded. Her eyes were thoughtful. "I think I understand," she said. "Take care of him, Winter. No matter what happens."

I sighed. "I will," I said, though I suspected I didn't mean it the way she wanted. If he snapped and started killing random people—which has been known to happen when somebody really, *really* doesn't do well as a werewolf—not only would the pack need to kill him, he would want them to.

If it came to that...well, I'd take care of him. I'd done such things before, for other friends that couldn't handle the change. It wouldn't be pleasant, but what in life is?

"Thank you," Anna said, quietly but with great sincerity, and then she walked out the door.

I was understandably distracted on the walk home, and as a result the quasi-rabid flying squirrel actually drew a little blood before I smashed it into a building with another gust of wind. That wasn't especially dangerous to me—I healed the injury within a few seconds, and even if the animal had been rabid (which I doubted) werewolves are generally immune to disease. But it was irritating, and a sobering reminder of why I take such pains not to become complacent.

Once I was home, I started throwing some stew together. I am not a good cook, not even a little, but I can make stew. I mean, all you have to do is throw stuff into a pot and cook it 'til the bleeding stops, right? Can't be all that hard.

Conn showed up about the same time it finished cooking. I dished up two bowls and carried them into the living room. He tried one bite and grimaced. "I see," he said, "that your cooking skills, at least, haven't changed."

I glowered and ate some stew. It was perfectly acceptable, I thought, so long as you dumped a bunch of pepper and garlic into it. If you can't taste the food, everything tastes good, right?

Conn put his almost-untouched bowl back on the table. "I think that you were about to explain something when we were interrupted."

I grunted an acknowledgment and finished my food before speaking. "You remember that after a few months, I stopped being a werewolf?"

He nodded.

"Well, that might not have been as permanent a condition as we thought." From there I explained the whole of Fenris's visit, maybe spending a little less time on the part about my parents than the rest. I valued Conn's advice, but some things are private.

When I finished, he frowned and didn't speak for a few minutes. "You think he was who he said?"

I shrugged. "Probably. I mean, who would pretend to be Fenris? Besides..." I struggled to phrase it for a moment, then shrugged. Conn would understand. "He felt right. He felt like I would expect the Fenris Wolf to feel."

He nodded slowly. "Might be you should ask Bryan. He knows those stories better than I do. He was a skald for a while."

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I hadn't known that. I tried to envision the grim, taciturn, almost emotionless man I'd known off and on for much of my life as a traveling Nordic poet and singer. "I have a hard time imagining that," I admitted.

Conn looked away from me. "He wasn't always the way he is now." The old werewolf brooded for a moment, maybe thinking of what had changed his son. I didn't *even* want to know about that.

"You must know something," I urged, more to break the silence before it could really settle in and become oppressive than anything.

Conn nodded again. "Fenrisúlfr. You'd be wise to step carefully around that one. He doesn't involve himself in mortal affairs often, and when he does it's never good. Chaos and destruction follow in his wake." Conn paused and looked at me in a way I wasn't entirely comfortable with. It was too...considering, given that it came from the Khan of the werewolves.

"What is it?" I said irritably.

"Just wondering if that's why he said you remind him of himself. You aren't entirely different in that regard, after all."

"I don't know if I'd go that far. I mean, things happen around me, sure, but chaos and destruction in my wake? That's a bit much."

"How many people have died around you?" Conn asked. His voice was more conversational than accusatory. It didn't have to be accusatory. He knew the answer as well as I did, and it was: a whole lot.

I shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not that different from any werewolf in that."

"No," he allowed. "Death isn't a stranger to us. But do you know how many female Alphas there have been?"

I frowned. "No."

"Three that I know of." He ticked them off on his fingers. "One was overthrown and killed within a week. One is old and powerful. A French werewolf I would say is roughly on a par with me. And the third is Kyra Walker." He was silent a moment to let that sink in. "She doesn't have anything like the power Marie does. But the pack follows her without question. They obey her as surely as any Alpha."

I shrugged. "Maybe people are just more open-minded these days. I mean, there's no reason females shouldn't be Alpha. Not like they can't do the job just as well."

"Granted, but the fact remains that it represents a major break from tradition. Not to mention that werewolves have been publically acknowledged. That's a serious change, don't you think?"

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "I wasn't exactly important to either of those things. You could just as easily say Kyra's a harbinger of chaos. She played at least as much of a part."

I could tell that he wasn't convinced, but he let the subject drop. "I take it that's why you were asking me where werewolves come from?"

I nodded. "He said I'm closer to the source. I think maybe that's what he meant. If he's where werewolves originate, and I'm related to him somehow, that might explain it."

He made a thoughtful noise. "But he said his children were mostly just wolves, not werewolves or godlike sorcerers. After twenty generations you'd think it was even less than that, not strong enough to make a werewolf's power look like small change."

Before I had a chance to stew on that, Aiko came in. "Ah, good," Conn said, not looking up from the dog. "I was hoping I'd have a chance to meet your girlfriend while I was in town."

"Hey," Aiko said, dropping a dripping wet umbrella next to the stove—even though it wasn't actually raining outside. "I take it you're the überwerewolf I've heard so much about." She swept a complicated-looking bow in Conn's direction which ended up with her sitting on the floor next to me eating his bowl of stew.

He raised one eyebrow. "'Überwerewolf' is a new one in my experience," he commented.

Aiko shrugged carelessly. "You spend too much time with boring people then."

"Quite likely," Conn said gravely. "I take it you're the psychotic kitsune I've heard so much about."

"That's me," Aiko said cheerily. "You know, Winter, you were totally right about that prison break helping my rep. People *recognize* me now."

"Ah yes," Conn said. "The great escape from the dungeons of the Dragon King. Was that *really* wise?"

"Don't look at me," the kitsune protested. "It was his idea."

I shifted uncomfortably. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Besides, so far nothing catastrophically bad has happened which I can definitely say was his doing as a result of that event."

"When you have to hedge that much," Conn pointed out, "it's usually a sign that your life is a wreck." Which was hard to contest. "Did you need any more answers before I go?"

"Well," I said, "I'd love some, but I think first I'd better figure out the right questions."

"Finally," he said dryly. "Just when I was starting to think you'd never learn. Well, as much as I enjoy your company, I'd probably better be going. You know how the pack gets when I'm not around to ride herd on them."

"Actually," I said as he stood up to leave, "I did have one question. How'd things turn out at the restaurant?"

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"That? Not much to say. The cops got there about a minute after you left. Turns out both of those men had a criminal record already, and one of them was wanted in relation to another crime. The police were perfectly happy with the self-defense explanation." Conn shrugged. "It helps that I'm pretty sure your friend Kyra had already crossed their palms with silver beforehand." He walked out the door without another word.

"Nice guy," Aiko commented after he'd left. "Remind me to never piss him off."

I snorted. "No kidding. You should have seen the look on his face when I got a bunch of beavers to try and turn his house into their new pond." I'd never openly admitted to that before, but I figured Aiko would find it amusing.

"Nice one," she said admiringly. "What's he doing in Colorado?"

That, of course, prompted a full explanation, including the details on my discussion with Fenris. When I'd finished, she sat there and absorbed it for a minute, scratching Snowflake's neck as she did. "So let me get this straight," she said eventually. "You're the distant descendant of a deific wolf-monster that embodies hunger and destruction. Said wolf-monster thinks you're funny and is almost certainly setting you up just for kicks. That about it?"

"Yep, pretty much."

"Awesome!" she exclaimed. "I mean, that's way cooler than just being a distant niece of the Dragon King. Think you'll get invited to all the family parties now?"

"Maybe. His father already set us up with that one forged invitation, remember? So in a certain manner of speaking I've got ins with both of them."

Her expression turned wistful. "I remember. That was the most fun I've had in ages." She glanced at me slyly. "Speaking of fun, you can turn into a wolf now, right? 'Cause there's some things I've been wanting to try with that...."

And that was all that was said about gods, ancient monsters, and harbingers of chaos and destruction for quite some time. Anything else that might have happened that night is, quite frankly, none of your goddamn business.

Chapter Four

I slept like a rock until someone knocked on my bedroom door and triggered a burst of paranoia that sent me scrambling for one of the knives next to the bed before I'd quite opened my eyes. Fortunately I'd managed to convince Aiko that transforming for the first time in years under those circumstances wasn't the best idea, and as a result I was still human-ish. Aiko wasn't, which was unfortunate because she was a lot less dangerous in her fox form. Luckily, she didn't take nearly as long to transform as a werewolf.

"Get up," Enrico said.

Stabbing your friends is generally not considered good manners, so I settled for glaring at the door. "What are you doing here at," I checked the clock, "five forty-three in the morning?" I demanded.

The former cop and current werewolf pushed the door open. "Kyra wanted you to come give us a hand with something," he said as he came in. A moment later, he blanched and walked right back out, closing the door behind himself, his posture conveying embarrassment as clearly as if I'd seen him blushing.

I felt Snowflake's low chuckle reverberate through my mind. The dog looked like she was still sleeping at the foot of my bed, but it was an act; she's nearly as paranoid as I am and has much better senses.

Oh shut up, I sent back, dressing hurriedly. I found Enrico sitting at the kitchen table with a cardboard cup of expensive coffee in his hand. He hadn't brought one for me, because he knew that I'm not much of a coffee person.

"So," he said awkwardly, staring out the window. "I, ah, knew you were a bit *off*, Winter, but I have to admit I never got the bestiality vibe from you."

There were a lot of things I could have said to that, but I tend to be a bit surly at that time of morning. "I don't know," I said, with a carefully cultivated tone of academic interest. "'Bestiality' is a word coined to describe humans who have sex with animals, right? So if you have one nonhuman entity who *looks* like an animal but isn't engaging in consensual sexual activity with another nonhuman entity who doesn't look like an animal but in some ways *is* one, can you describe that as bestiality? It seems like another term is needed. Maybe—"

"Forget I asked," Enrico interrupted. "And Winter? Don't ever bring up that line of thought again," he said seriously. "It weards me out when you people start talking about that sort of thing."

I frowned. "Us people? What do you mean?"

"Not important," he said. "This conversation? Moving on now."

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I laughed. "What did Kyra want?"

He frowned. "Not sure," he said. "Freak squad called her around five. Whatever it is, she sounded pissed."

"Freak squad?" I asked.

"Officially," Enrico said dryly, "werewolves are ordinary citizens and require no special treatment by the law. Unofficially, they scare people and most cops want nothing to do with them."

"Ah. Does the freak squad have an official designation?"

"Yeah. Officially, it's designated as not existing. Mostly it's just whatever cops pissed off important people most recently. They take care of all the things that nobody else wants to deal with."

I grunted. "They call Kyra often?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I'm not allowed within a mile of police business." He smiled thinly. "People might start to wonder why I'm not living with my family in New York the way I said I would be when I quit."

Aiko walked out and sat on one of the misshapen kitchen chairs backward. Unlike the werewolves, she doesn't take more than a heartbeat to slide from one shape to the other; just now you'd never guess that she'd been a fox less than ten minutes earlier. "Sucks to be you," she told Enrico. "So what's the crisis?"

"What makes you say there's a crisis?" he asked.

"I'm awake before six," she replied dryly. "That is, itself, a crisis situation."

"Kyra wants some help with a crime involving weirdness and possibly werewolves. You interested?"

She frowned and stared blankly into space for a moment. "Love to," she said, "but probably better not. I have to work today. See you tonight." She sauntered out, having already collected her completely unnecessary umbrella.

"That is possibly the strangest person I have ever seen," Enrico said after she left.

I grinned. "You don't know the half of it."

"And I hope I never learn. You ready to go see what the boss wants?"

"Thought you weren't allowed near the police."

"I'm supposed to give you a ride and drop you off without dallying or talking to anyone." Enrico's voice was wry.

I shrugged. "Sure, why not. Not like I had anything better to do today."

Kyra was waiting for us outside the building. Enrico exchanged a few words with her that I didn't hear before he left. I didn't need to hear them; I could see the important bits simply in how they stood, how they interacted with each other. He was, ever so slightly, deferential; she took it in stride, acting as though it was the natural order of things—because, for them, it was.

Kyra had always been dominant. It showed in dozens of small ways—her stubbornness, the way that when she encountered a problem she acted to solve it, without spending any time complaining or wishing for someone else to make it go away. For most of the time I'd known her, though, she'd kept it pretty well hidden. Her psychological scars had been such that she kept largely to the background, preferring to let others claim the spotlight.

Since she became...what she was now...things had been changing. She moved with a quiet confidence—something that wasn't so much buried or muted as it was deemed too obvious to need stated. When she wanted my help—something that had been known to happen before—she didn't ask in person, didn't even call. She sent a minion with instructions to bring me.

She was still the same person. In fact, she might have been more the same person than she was before, if that makes any sense. And certainly the changes weren't bad ones. Her friends could hardly wish they hadn't happened.

I'd been telling myself that since January. Most of the time I even believed it.

She turned to greet me with a smile—that, at least, hadn't changed. "Winter. Thanks for coming out here."

"I was afraid I'd die of curiosity otherwise. So what's your merry band of werewolves gotten up to now?"

She grimaced and leaned against the wall of the building, a classy hotel in the middle of town. "It actually wasn't us this time. How much did Enrico tell you about what happened?"

"Virtually nothing," I told her. "I understand that the group of cops who were unofficially detailed to deal with werewolves called you in the middle of the night for help."

"It's not just werewolves," she said. "They get handed all the problem cases nobody else wants."

"Sounds like a worse job than mine," I commented. "They call you often?"

She shrugged. "Occasionally. They know I'm the one to talk to if it looks like the werewolves are acting up. Other than that...sometimes they run into something weird, right? And ever since we went public people assume werewolves are the ones to talk to about weird, God only knows why."

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I could sympathize. I'd recently had someone come into my shop and ask me to recommend a good exorcist. I mean, seriously. An exorcist? *Why* would you go to a furniture shop looking for an exorcism?

"So what'd they run into this time?"

She frowned. "Wish I knew. They found a body on the fourth floor. Not too big of a deal, except that they can't find any cause of death. There's literally nothing wrong with him, except that he's dead."

"Huh. That happen often?"

"No clue. They wouldn't have called me if they weren't concerned, though. I charge them." She glanced at me with an impish gleam to her eyes. "Speaking of which, they're paying you by the hour. I figure if they want an expert that bad, they can cough up the same as for the other consultants."

"Expert, huh?" I said dubiously. I wouldn't call myself an *expert* on much of anything. "What are they paying me to do?"

She shrugged. "Show up. Look around. Make cryptic comments for all I know. I really just wanted to know if it's something you recognize."

"Maybe. Any chance I could look at the place?"

"Officially, it's being treated as a crime scene and nobody gets in. Unofficially..." she grinned. "Unofficially, you're with me and I go wherever I want to."

It's good to be the Alpha.

I paused when we walked in the door, then proceeded more slowly across the room, looking around nervously. The scent of magic lingering in the doorway wasn't terribly strong, but it was *there*, and between that and the dead person I was feeling more than usually paranoid.

In the elevator Kyra turned to stare at me. "What are you so twitchy about?" she asked. "You've been on crime scenes before."

"Well, sure," I said. "But this time I'm *allowed* to be here. I mean, that's just weird." She snorted.

Kyra unlocked the door with a key. The room itself was totally unremarkable. I mean, it was so normal it was a little freaky. Everything looked just like you'd expect from a vacant hotel room. Everything clean, everything tidy. The bed was made with military precision, the carpets vacuumed. In the bathroom everything sparkled, and the towels had been straightened up.

If she hadn't told me, I would never have guessed that anything amiss had happened here, even with my unnatural senses. There was quite simply nothing there. No physical scent that didn't belong, no lingering trace of magic. Nothing.

"Did you get a look at the body?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "They took him down to the morgue already. It wasn't until after they couldn't turn up anything there that they called me."

I nodded. "You get any odd scent from the room?"

"Nope. You?"

"Nothing. Come on."

Back on the ground floor, I paused just long enough to confirm what I already knew. Once I was paying attention to it, I couldn't just smell magic at the doors; there was a fainter, lingering trace throughout the lobby, especially strong near the front desk and the elevator. The main tone was familiar, human disinfectant. There was another note, very slight, that was almost but not quite like blood; it was spicier, somehow, as though a dash of cayenne had been added.

"Did you find anything?"

"Maybe," I said. "There wasn't anybody checked into that room, was there?"

"No. How'd you guess?"

"Traces of magic on the ground floor, especially near where other people would have been. The desk, the elevator."

Kyra was fairly experienced, and there wasn't anything wrong with her mind. "You think somebody used an invisibility spell to sneak the corpse past the desk?"

"Um. Maybe, but probably not. Actual invisibility is a pain in the ass—very complicated, very difficult, and usually a waste of time. Most people just go for concealment."

She nodded. "Like that shadow thing you do."

"Yeah, sometimes. Or you can just convince people that they don't see you, even though you're right there—that's what Garrett did, remember?" I chewed on my lip for a second, thinking. "There's a supermarket not far from here, right?"

"Couple blocks north. Why?"

"I'll explain on the way." We didn't bother getting her car; it was a short walk, and neither of us was particularly upset by cold.

"The problem with concealment spells," I told her as we walked, "and with invisibility for that matter, is that there's only so much you can do. Unless you're, like, absolutely incredibly good, there's always going to be gaps in your coverage. Most skilled people know that, and they plan around them. Take invisibility, for example. It's hard enough to do that it demands your total attention—meaning that you're not putting any effort into stopping them from hearing you."

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Kyra nodded slowly. "That's why most people don't do it, right?"

"Right," I confirmed. "Why bother working so hard and still having to move quietly, when you can just be *really hard* to see and still have some left to cover hearing? That's what I do with the shadows—it's hard to see somebody covered in shadows standing in a dark corner, and 'cause I've been working out I can do a little to muffle things at the same time."

"What about the other kind of concealment? If you're just convincing people they can't see you, it shouldn't matter how much noise you make, right? You can convince them they can't hear you just as easily."

"Yeah. But that has its own limitation. See, because you're screwing around with their head directly, hitting one person won't do jack to keep they guy standing next to him from seeing you. You have to get every person individually, and that means you have to know they're there." I shrugged. "Like I said. There's always going to be a gap in your coverage. The trick is to make it overlap with something you don't need to worry about."

"So, if you're standing in a dark room, you put less effort into being invisibility and more into making sure nobody hears you?"

"Exactly. The thing is, humans are your main concern, right? So most mages put a lot of effort into blocking sight and hearing, and almost nothing else."

She frowned. "But I couldn't smell them either."

"Unless maybe you could. Mages don't smell any different from regular humans." She knew as well as I did that trying to sort out a specific human scent from a total morass of similar scents such as you find in a public place, like a hotel is functionally impossible if you don't already know the scent from somewhere else.

She considered that for a moment. "So I take it you're doing your freaky animal mind meld thing hoping they forgot to conceal themselves from nonhuman senses when they brought him through?"

"Pretty much, yep. I figure a fox is probably the best bet." Like I said, Kyra's not stupid.

"Yeah, I'm sure," she said, smirking suggestively.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Kyra." We walked into the store, one of those big twenty-four-hour places. "Don't suppose you have any cash on you?"

"Sure, if you answer two questions. One, what are we doing here? And two, wouldn't a spider make more sense? I mean, they say there's always a spider within three feet of you, right?"

I grimaced. "Maybe if I *could* do it with a spider. That kind of magic depends on making a connection with the object of the spell. In the greater scheme of things, there's relatively little difference between me and a fox. Both mammals, both predators—"

"Both interested in your girlfriend," she interjected, grinning.

I sighed. "We get the point, thank you. Anyway, we're relatively similar. The more similarity, the easier it is to bridge that gap. A spider is much harder for me to use—not only have I not spent much time thinking like a spider, it's a freaking arachnid. Not a lot to work with there."

"Okay. And we're here because?"

"We're here because I forgot to grab a pound of raw meat when I woke up this morning, and so did you or I would've smelled it."

She blinked. "You're *bribing* it?"

"'Bribery' is an ugly word," I said in a mock-offended voice. "I prefer to think of it as an honest wage for honest work. I mean, it's taking valuable time—one of the best parts of the day by its standards—to give me a hand. If a human does that, you give him cash. If a fox does it, you should pay him in what he values." I glanced at the plastic-wrapped packages of meat in the cooler. "Speaking of which, you're buying, right?"

"Technically, the pack's buying, and then the police are reimbursing the pack."

I put the hamburger down and picked up a package of steak. "Cool."

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Chapter Five

Back at the hotel I sat on a conveniently nearby bench and did some magic.

There are all kinds of magical rituals. The variety is truly enormous—everything from ominous chanting and pentacles drawn in goat's blood to incense and birdsong. The interesting thing is that, because magic is so intimately bound up with thought and emotion, theoretically *any* approach can work if it's done by someone with the right abilities who genuinely believes that it will. So, in some ways, every single description of magic is in some ways accurate, simply because if you *think* it's accurate and your will is strong enough, you can make the magic agree with you. It might not be the most technically correct view, it might not be the most efficient or practical, but you can make it work.

So there's a place in magic for complicated rituals and incantations. I've been known to use ritual setups myself for particularly difficult, involved, or foreign spells. But at the same time, the elaborate stuff isn't always necessary, especially not for something closely in line with your natural talents.

You would not have been able to tell by watching that there was any magic going on at all. I didn't paint intricate symbols on the ground, chant verses in Latin, or produce unnatural lights. All that happened was that I sat down on the bench and closed my eyes to concentrate.

Predators are close to my heart. There are all kinds of reasons for that. My blood came from a werewolf and what might have been a genuine wolf that bore some measure of power inherited from the Fenris Wolf. My longtime association with werewolves, which had a serious influence on me growing up. And, of course, endless hours spent in mental communion with predatory animals didn't hurt. When you do something like that, it's not just telepathic speech, at least not the way I do it; I share their mind and body, experiencing everything they do in real time, first person Technicolor. It's the sort of thing that leaves a mark on you.

So what I was doing was very much in line with my own nature. I sank into myself, carefully removing all distractions from my perceptions. In the resulting darkness, I felt the slight-but-noticeable pressure of other minds against mine. My magic was always active, always bringing in sensations from animals around me whether I instructed it to or not. I'd had enough experience with it that most of the time I blocked them out, filtered out everything that didn't come from inside my own mind without even thinking.

Now that I stopped blocking them, they intruded on my otherwise vacant perceptions. I could feel curiosity from Kyra, who was as much a predator as I was, and smell the distinctive aroma of city-at-night through her nose. I could feel the gentle dreams of a dog napping in a nearby home, and the significantly more active mind of an alley cat in heat. All of the sensations seemed to come from very far away, almost as though I were on a heavy dose of painkillers or something. That was to be expected,

without a solid connection. If it weren't for the nearly-full moon I wouldn't likely receive sensation at all, just an awareness that they were out there.

Eventually, I found what I was looking for, and whispered an offer. I opened my eyes a minute or so later and saw that a fox was sitting near my feet, looking at me with bright eyes, having been drawn by my power—not a compulsion, I don't do compulsion, just a polite request. Once I'd seen him, he jumped up onto the bench next to me. I reached out and rested one hand lightly on his shoulder—not a good idea, by the way, if you're a normal person. Wild animals don't react well to being petted. People seem to think they should, for some reason, to the frustration of zookeepers everywhere.

Physical contact helps a lot to focus my magic. I felt the fox's mind distinctly this time, without the previous sense of dislocation. I focused on that connection and, without anything resembling words, asked what he remembered of the past night.

He wasn't a kitsune or a magical beast or anything, just an ordinary fox. As a result his mind wasn't much like a human's. His response was a disjointed thing, like flipping rapidly through a disorganized photo book. There were impressions of memorable scents, a particularly delectable bit of garbage, a whole series of memories of catching a rat. I closed my eyes again as I began sifting through the memories—I knew from experience that trying to manage two sets of senses at the same time is a difficult, headache-inducing trick.

He'd spent most of the night near the hotel, and at some point in that whirlwind I saw what I was looking for. It was just a glimpse, but I've had a lot of practice at this sort of thing. Another mental nudge brought that incident back to the forefront of his mind, and—in bits and pieces—I sorted out what had happened.

The fox had initially seen the two men about three blocks away. He had little concept of time as I understood it, but from the position of the moon I guessed that it had been about two in the morning, the heart of the night. One of the men had smelled like any other man, unpleasant. He had been the one walking. The other man, being carried over the human's shoulder, had smelled different, sweetish and flowery, almost like a perfume. It had been an exotic smell to the fox, one that he hadn't encountered before, and he had been intrigued. Being not especially hungry and, like most of his kind, curious, he had followed the pair, sticking to the shadows and alleys. They never noticed him.

That wasn't as surprising as you might think. Most people, if trying to avoid detection in the city, will overlook an animal watching them. It's a psychological thing. It's easy to look at a big city, the ultimate triumph of human engineering over nature, and think that it's a place where only people belong. The truth, of course, is that all kinds of things make their home there. Pigeons, rats, stray pets, raccoons, ravens and the occasional hawk, and, naturally, foxes all make their homes on the streets. On the edges of the city you get things like rabbits, which for my purposes are useful primarily because they attract things that hunt rabbits, and coyotes, which are a rare treat to work with.

The point is that this was another such case. The man looked for pursuit by other humans constantly, but a little fox watching from the shadowed mouth of the alley? *Way* below his notice.

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The fox thought, and I agreed, that the other man was dead. He didn't move, not even a reflexive twitch, and the human's attitude reminded the fox of someone bringing their prey home to eat later. Eventually the pair came to the hotel, a place he was very familiar with—he had often dined on their refuse, and on the smaller scavengers it brought. He never tried to go in, though, knowing too well that it would end badly.

These two did. The human opened the door and entered. The fox saw the man inside start to stand, mouth open, then sit back down with a confused expression on his face. Then the door swung shut and hid them from his view.

While I pondered that, I thanked the fox for his assistance and tore open the package of meat. He seized the steak in his jaws and, looking comical with the relatively huge piece of beef hanging from his jaws, trotted off into the predawn darkness.

"Anything?" Kyra asked.

"Yeah. About three in the morning, two men. One had the other in a fireman's carry. They came in from the east, at least for the last few blocks. Man being carried was probably dead, probably the corpse they found. The man carrying him smelled human but didn't look to be having a hard time with the body. They went in through the front door like I thought. The clerk saw him then sat back down without saying anything, suggesting that the mage hit him with something mental. That explains why the fox saw so much, too; a spell that hits the mind directly has to be targeted specifically, and he didn't bother with confusing animals."

She blinked. "That much?"

I shrugged. "Foxes are curious and smart. If they see something that gets their attention, they can notice a lot of detail."

"I take it you've done this before," she said dryly.

"Somewhat regularly." I coughed self-consciously. "Actually, most of the animals within about two miles of my house spy for me at least occasionally. All of the cats, dogs, foxes, and coyotes, and most of the birds too." It's not flashy, but in my experience it's a seriously underestimated ability.

"Why didn't you do it when we were chasing Garrett, then? Or back in January?"

I shook my head. "Totally different situation. Then we *knew* what we were looking for, and the problem was just in finding them and killing them. Actually tracking somebody like that's a lot harder. This time I just wanted to get a glimpse of them so I knew what we were looking at."

She nodded. "So the mage was human and carried the body in. What about the corpse? He human?"

I grimaced. "That's where it gets tricky. At the door, I thought I smelled two signatures—one human, one vampire. The vamp was really, *really* faint, so I thought I was just imagining it. But the fox smelled something weird off the other guy, like it wasn't quite human."

"So we can assume the corpse was a vampire. Does that explain the magic?"

I shook my head. "Not really. Even people with magic don't leave a trace that strong unless they're actually *doing* something with magic, and if he was dead he couldn't have been. Even if he wasn't, why would he be helping at that point? Doesn't make sense to me."

"Me either," she said thoughtfully. "So that leaves two questions. One, why was there vampiric magic involved? Two, how do you kill a vampire without leaving a mark of any kind?"

Huh. That hadn't even occurred to me. "I don't know much about vamps," I told her. "Never much wanted to learn. Things give me the screaming creepies."

"Bad experience?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Not really. Never even met one that I know of. They just freak me out. I mean, they're the walking dead, they drink people's blood, they're supposed to be scary powerful and harder to kill than cockroaches. What's there to like?"

"Heh. Most of what I know about vampires comes from *Dracula*, so I'm guessing you're still one up on me. Think you can find out for me?"

"Maybe." I paused as something occurred to me. "How's Robert doing?"

"Not too bad. Bastard shot him with a silver bullet, but his aim was lousy. Deflected off the shoulder bone. Give him a week or so and he'll be all right."

"Glad to hear it." I paused again. "I'm pretty sure the folks that did that were mages too. Weak ones, but still human mages."

That gave her pause. "Think it's related?"

I thought that there was something going on that I didn't understand. I thought that it might involve a mage powerful enough to kill vampires without leaving a mark on the body and weave an illusion as solid as I'd ever seen without breaking stride, and there couldn't be that many people like that around. I thought that the freaking Fenris Wolf was paying attention to this one, and that alone should tell me there was something bigger going down than two kids shooting a werewolf and one dead vampire.

Out loud, all I said was, "I think these days coincidences are harder to find than unicorns."

She snorted. "Fair enough. Look into it for me, would you? I'll make sure you're compensated for it."

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"No problem." I mean, at least this time I was getting *paid* to do something stupid and stick my nose into dangerous things bigger than me. Most of the time stupid is free.

Chapter Six

After a quick breakfast, I wound up back at the shop.

Part of that was simply that, without Val around, if I wasn't there it would be closed all day, and I needed the money too much to do that casually. Part of it—but, given that Kyra was offering cash, not much. Mostly it was because I found making things, magical or mundane, deeply satisfying. It was like a balm for the spirit.

Oh, don't get me wrong. A lot of the time it's just a job, and a pretty sucky one at that. There are times when the customers are impossible to deal with, when I've screwed up the same piece five times and number six doesn't look much better, when I want to scream from pure frustration, and at those times I wonder why I keep doing that job. There are times when I think that mercenary work, although dangerous and unpleasant, is still a pretty attractive prospect.

With magic it's even worse. Take my latest toy, for example, a rope twenty feet long woven of shadows. For a month, I spent most of my free time working on it, either actually doing magic or working out formulae and patterns in my head. It took me nine tries to figure out that it needed a solid base to build on or it wouldn't hold. Another five to settle on moonbeams as that base. Seven to work out that it worked better with a variety of shadows and moonbeams. Eventually I used moonlight gathered from full, half, and crescent moons, and shadows cast at dusk, dawn, noon, and midnight. It took me hours and hours to gather all the materials, more hours to work the magic itself, all for a piece of rope currently coiled up into a lump the size of my thumb sitting in my jacket pocket. *Frustrating* doesn't begin to describe it.

But sometimes, just occasionally, you finish something and look at it, and think *That looks awesome*. There's a satisfaction to it, a pride that's hard for me to describe. There are times when I look at something, and see that it's well made, and get a feeling that's absolutely incredible. I realize that it makes the world better, *and I made it*. My hands, my mind, my will the forces that shaped it. It's an awesome feeling, really.

I started working with Val because I needed money, but I stayed for that feeling. I worked at the shop until about three, and left feeling much better. It's like therapy, but they pay you to do it instead of the other way round.

After that was through, I walked into town to attend my next lesson in manipulating the fundamental forces of the universe for fun and profit. On the way, in what was possibly the easiest assassination attempt to deal with yet, an animate shadow tried to strangle me. I dissipated it with hardly more than a spare thought and kept going. I mean, seriously. After mortal animals, shadows are the *last* thing you'd want to attack *me* with. Somebody really should have done their research.

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My lessons with the wizard called Alexander Hoffman had started tapering off recently. He still taught me a great deal, but more and more he'd been pushing me to pursue my own research and projects. I didn't especially mind; making things with magic was hard but, now that I knew how it worked a little better, it was also really fun. I'd even stopped working weekends at the shop for the most part in favor of working in the lab.

My lab has been steadily improving over the months, largely because I've been pouring significant quantities of effort, time, and money into it. That said, it's got *nothing* on Alexander's. His laboratory is a concrete box which, if I weren't pretty short, would have an uncomfortably low ceiling. It's *big*, though, a single enormous room that probably had as much floor space as my entire house.

When I first saw the place, I looked at the incredible and frequently baffling clutter, and I was confused out of my skull. I smelled the magics in the room, a thousand aromas that blended and swirled and clashed like a spice shop on crack, and I was overwhelmed.

I'd spent a lot of time there since, and I'd focused my skills a lot. My senses were much keener now than they had been, and they weren't exactly dull to begin with. I could look at the lava lamp on one bookshelf, sliding slowly through a range of vivid colors found nowhere on earth, and tell from the look and smell of its magic that it was a magical focus of some kind, and if I'd put some time into it I probably could have guessed what it would do. Several of the knives burned with low, dangerous enchantments, smells of pepper and rust with an edge of old blood; the nasty looking stiletto, in particular, seemed to lust for violence. Having wielded Tyring in a fight I knew better than to discount that feeling, and I stepped carefully around all of the weapons.

There were other things, too, that I still only vaguely understood. The assorted bits of glass, metal, and stone were (obviously, to me) stored spells, which I had only recently learned to make—sort of like a focus, but it does a specific spell instead of just focusing and tinting energy, you don't have to be a mage or expend your own power to use it, and (most importantly) *it only works once*. They're extremely difficult to make, especially considering that it's a one-off. In the month and a half since I'd learned how to do it I'd produced exactly two. Alexander had at least thirty that I could see, which probably meant he had another hundred that I didn't know about. Any one of them might do something as innocuous as perfume the surrounding area with the scent of lilies, or it might release a fireball big enough to turn an entire building into a rapidly expanding cloud of smoke, flame, and debris. And, without setting it off or studying it for at least an hour and a half or so, there was absolutely no way for me to tell which a given spell would do.

Long story short, I understood Alexander's lab a lot better than before—but, if anything, my respect for the place (and person) had increased. I was *extremely* careful around the lab.

Alexander himself looked little like a person who should inspire that kind of respect. As always he greeted me at the door, which was locked and chained and warded, and as usual he looked a bit ridiculous. An old man in a flannel robe, his grey hair sticking up more or less at random from his head, he resembled your eccentric neighbor more closely than a powerful wizard. He'd replaced the stained Godzilla rug covering the trapdoor to his lab with one depicting a snarling mountain lion that was

probably meant to seem ferocious but looked more constipated than anything else. It was new since my last visit a week and a half earlier, and already stained with half a dozen unsavory-looking substances. It stank of bromine and sulfur, and I was just as glad to leave it behind.

Down in the lab things were pretty much the same as always. There were a handful of worktables, so cluttered that the surface was hardly visible. The walls were lined with bookshelves packed with everything from ancient-looking books as thick as unabridged dictionaries bound with black leather that could have starred in a Stephen King book, to things actually *written* by Stephen King.

Alexander makes his money by selling magical items, for the most part—things like stored spells. There's always a market for, for example, a bit of glass you can break to release a fog bank a hundred feet across and so thick you can't see your own nose. Something like that is *perfect* for arranging an untraceable assassination.

The result of that business was that the contents of the lab were constantly changing. Some things—the lava lamp, the knives, the jars and bags and crates and tubs that contained reagents and raw materials—were constant. Other things come and go on a weekly or daily basis. This time he'd ditched the shimmery, diaphanous, iridescent curtain that had hung on the opposite wall for nearly a month. In its place was a ten-foot length of thin chain made from some black metal I didn't recognize, which stank of magic and fire even from across the room.

"What do you want to work on today?" Alexander asked as he crossed to the big workbench in the middle of the room, which was the only one not covered in materials or half-finished projects. There was a big, leather-bound book lying open on it, which he casually shut as he sat down. The cover was largely unmarked, but embossed with a single rune—a single vertical line, crossed by a short slash halfway up. I recognized it as the Norse rune Nauthiz, which could stand for need, hardship, or the letter N. I shivered slightly at the ominous-looking thing and looked away.

"I had a few questions," I told the wizard.

"Oh, good. Your questions are usually entertaining. Even if I do have to clean the lab afterward."

"It was just the once," I protested. "And it was the Cu Sith that did it, not me."

He raised one eyebrow. "And the incident with the acid last month?"

"I helped to clean that up. Besides, it wasn't entirely my fault. That one could have happened to anyone."

"I'm sure you find yourself saying that everywhere you go," he said dryly—and accurately, was the worst part. "What was your question?"

"First off, what do I owe you for this month?" I pay Alexander on a monthly basis, more or less, for the tutoring. His prices are...odd. Even by my standards.

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"Thirty one-dollar bills," he said promptly. "Preferably Canadian. One pound of herbs, gathered from a wild environment by moonlight. Two ounces of werewolf saliva. One half-pound of dried apricots. A piece of gravel swallowed by that kitsune you chum around with and then regurgitated not less than half an hour later. A quartz crystal at least one inch in diameter, which is found rather than purchased. One you find yourself, mind, that's very important."

I wrote it down, where it looked like the world's strangest grocery list. "Do you care what kind of herbs?" The really sad part is that that wasn't all that weird, by his standards. Some of the things he asks me for I know can be used in potions, which I was just beginning to learn about, and others could play a part in rituals. There are a lot, though, that I frankly have no idea why he would want. I think my favorite was the pound of raw organic almonds which (he'd stipulated this very specifically) I'd had to steal one at a time from a local health food store. Personally, I think he does it just to see how far he can go before I object.

So far I hadn't complained. The prices were, frequently, not only difficult but time-consuming, expensive, and sometimes downright unethical to meet. In spite of that, it was a *lot* cheaper than it could be for training by someone of his caliber. I didn't know much of anything about Alexander, but he was one of the best.

"I care that you know what kinds they are, and that they're stored separately and labeled. Other than that, no."

"Right." I finished the list and tucked it back into a pocket. "I'll try and have it for you by next month."

"No hurry," he said easily. "Did you have any other questions?"

"A bunch, actually."

He smiled eagerly—ever since I brought back Tyrfinn for him to study, he's excited by my having questions. I guess bringing back an ancient, powerfully cursed relic to examine is the kind of thing a wizard remembers.

"First off," I said, "how much of the legends regarding the Fenris Wolf is accurate?"

"No idea," he said promptly. "I've never spoken to anyone who had a source for them besides the Eddas. Certainly, if they are accurate, his birth wouldn't have been witnessed by anything mortal, and the prophecies of Ragnarök are—thankfully—unsubstantiated so far."

"Is he really Loki's son?"

He hesitated. "Possibly. They certainly have some kind of relationship with each other, but what it is nobody knows for sure. Some mages think he really was the wolf's father. Others think the relationship between them is more adversarial than anything, although the two aren't mutually exclusive by any means. Now what brought this line of questioning on?"

I told him about my encounter with Fenris, in as much detail as I could remember. Given how much time I'd spent working on my memory recently, that basically meant reciting the conversation word for word. Ordinarily I wouldn't have been so open, but with Alexander I'd long since learned better than to keep information back. The wizard was not inclined to take no for an answer when it came to topics he found intriguing.

"Interesting," he mused. "If you thought he was Fenrisúlfr, by the way, you were probably right. Beings like that have a very distinctive aura, and even if you hadn't encountered him before I don't expect you could have been fooled about that. Besides which, there aren't very many people who would be willing to imitate him."

"Because they don't want people to think they're the godlike embodiment of hunger?" I guessed.

"No," he responded wryly, "because the godlike embodiment of hunger gets upset when people pretend to be him. And Fenrir is...let's just say that when people, even very powerful people, hear that he's up to something, they go the other way at a run. There are very few who would chance his anger lightly."

Well, that was reassuring. Sort of.

"Interesting," he said again. "Very interesting. Do you think he was telling the truth?"

I frowned. "I honestly have no idea. He was...very hard to read. If I had to guess, I'd say he was keeping a lot of information from me, but what he actually said was probably true."

He nodded slowly. "I would consider the idea of him being the creator of werewolves to be very unlikely. Fenrir isn't a creator. Rather the opposite, if anything. For him to be the progenitor of an entire species would be very unexpected."

"Makes sense," I admitted. "I got the feeling that wasn't even what he was trying to say. Maybe it was something more like...I don't know, that there was too much power in me to change? Or that I was too close to a wolf for it to *be* much of a change?" I shook my head. "I don't know. Have you ever heard of Fenris having children?"

"Oh, certainly. He was the father of the wolf that will swallow the moon at the end of days—never can remember his name. I think he might have fathered the wolf that will eat the sun, too—"

"*Mortal* children," I clarified.

"Oh. No, but if they were as wolflike as he claimed I wouldn't have."

I grimaced. It had been a long shot, but I was hoping that he would have known a little more than that. "Okay, next question. What advice do you have for me about fighting a magical duel?"

"Don't," Alexander said seriously. "You aren't anything like ready for that."

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"Let's say the other guy isn't going to go along with that plan," I said dryly.

He thought for a moment. "Your shields aren't worth much, so don't go toe-to-toe with them," he said eventually. "And a mage of any skill can stop any magic you can throw at them. My advice would be to make it as little like a classical duel as possible."

I considered that. "So hit them when they aren't expecting it?" I asked. "Ambush, hit-and-run, that sort of thing?" It was a lot more in line with my talents than outright combat anyway. My magic lends itself towards concealment and mobility, along with access to a whole lot of information and a facility for making things. Those are all useful talents, but they aren't exactly good at making people dead.

"Yes," he confirmed. "Or hit them with *what* they aren't expecting. Most mages have very little skill at physical combat, for example. That sword of yours could probably cut through most shields with a little time, as well. I think breaking magical defenses is part of what it was made to do." Alexander had appreciated the chance to examine Tyrving, but he didn't like the sword. He seldom referred to it by name, and had told me to never bring it into his home again after the first visit.

"So can you think of any reason for two relatively untrained human mages to attack the werewolves with what they claimed was a motive of...justice, I suppose you'd call it? They seemed to fancy themselves monster-hunters." I briefly described the incident at the restaurant.

"I have no idea," he said simply. "They weren't from one of the clans, I can tell you that much."

"You sure?" I said skeptically. "I mean, surely not every clan mage is as skilled as you are. There have to be apprentices, if nothing else."

"Yes," he said patiently. "And even the dimmest apprentice would know better than to aggress upon the werewolves like that. Challenging the wolves is equivalent to challenging the Khan, and no mage clan wants to do that. They would hang the offenders out to dry."

Huh. I hadn't thought about it like that, but Conn was the ruler of all the werewolves in North America and a few other places besides. He would quite likely take what they had done as a personal insult.

I'd known that he was powerful, but I'd never really thought about what that meant in a concrete sense before. Now I did, and it was terrifying. Never mind that he was quite possibly the single oldest, most powerful, and most knowledgeable werewolf in the world—that was only the tip of the iceberg.

I didn't have an exact count, but when I'd grown up I'd learned that there were a few thousand packs in the U.S. Another several thousand in Canada, maybe a hundred in Mexico and Central America, a dozen in Japan, around fifty in Iceland. All of those werewolves answered to the Khan. Call it an average of forty or fifty werewolves to a pack, and there had to be a few hundred thousand werewolves in that group.

I tried to envision the damage an army of two hundred thousand werewolves could do, and quite simply couldn't. The scope was too big for me. I'd seen a *piece of one* pack, about fifteen werewolves, most of them relatively inexperienced, in action. It had been impressive and there aren't many people who could stand against it. Compared to that army it was too tiny to bother with.

And that was *still* just scratching the surface of what the Khan could do. He had extensive contacts among the European werewolves, so call that another hundred thousand at least that would help him if he asked, including a number that were nearly as powerful as Conn was. On top of *that* you have his alliances within the Pack, a sort of loosely affiliated group that represented the common interests of various sorts of shapechangers. Werewolves make up the bulk of their numbers, but the Pack includes a number of other creatures as well, some of whom are quite nasty.

First you have shapeshifters, humans who've developed a natural, magical ability to turn into animals. Most of them aren't as scary as, for example, werewolves. But they're still intelligent, dangerous, and quite a few of them have other magical talents as well.

And then you have the heavy hitters. A few hardcore mages with a talent for shapeshifting—they could do everything a shifter could, but they also had a solid grounding in other kinds of magic. They were basically like having any other mage on your side, except that they were additionally dangerous in physical combat—and, because that was no easy trick for those who aren't strongly enough inclined to it to be a shifter, they tend to be very skilled. One step nastier are the skinwalkers. They're heirs to a powerful Native American magical tradition. Very powerful, very scary, very evil. I knew barely anything about them and they still terrified me.

On top of that there are a few groups who have embassies there—the kitsune, for example. Although they were largely an independent neutral party, they still maintain friendly relations with the Pack. There are quite a few groups that can say that, including various fae beings, a couple of dragons, and various stranger, less easily classifiable things.

I imagined an army of thousands and thousands of werewolves. They would be supported by shapeshifters and mages and skinwalkers, and who knows what all else that I couldn't even *name*. And hell, Conn could probably get some of the fae on his side too, especially now that they were technically allies for the moment. The whole force would be directed by the strategic and tactical genius of Alphas with centuries or millennia of experience.

I thought maybe I was starting to see why people treated Conn with as much respect as they did. And why a mage clan would sooner lose almost any number of apprentices than start a fight with him. When a force like that goes against you, there are really only two options. One is that you get utterly destroyed. The other is that you manage to arrange an equal or greater force against it, and with that much sheer power involved on both sides the resulting conflict would make World War Two look like a food fight. It would be the kind of war where you counted yourself lucky if the continents had the same general shapes afterwards.

"Okay," I said after a moment. "I think I get it. So how much do you know about vampires?"

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He looked at me with something between disbelief and disgust in his eyes. "Vampires too? Good Lord, boy, how many things have you got yourself mixed up in?"

"Like I said," I said wryly. "The other guy wasn't inclined to let me keep things simple. So can you think of any way to kill a vampire without marking the body?"

He thought for a moment. "Not really. Research on that sort of topic is...strongly discouraged, so my knowledge is fairly basic. Most of the time, killing a vampire doesn't leave a body at all, just a pile of ashes. I could probably design a ritual setup to do something of the sort, and I've seen a couple of witches use tricks that could likely manage it, but once you start considering those kinds of people, well, all bets are off."

I sighed. "Thanks anyway."

"It sounds to me," he said, "like you really needed more information than that."

"I sort of do," I admitted. "How do you think I can get it?"

"I'm guessing asking more knowledgeable people than me is out of the question?"

"The last time I tried that," I said dryly, "was that Sidhe party in January. I got screwed by Loki and I still owe him a bloody *favor* for it. I wound up being used by a Twilight Prince as a tool in his political game. *And* I made an enemy of the Dragon King by escaping from his dungeon, even though the only reason I did was because Loki slipped me a fake invitation and I was imprisoned because I was, accidentally, trespassing." I shook my head. "I don't think I can afford to do that again so soon."

He chuckled softly. "Point. The next possible choice is a vision quest."

"Wait a second, you mean those are for real?"

"The concept is sound," Alexander said. "The basic idea is actually common to a number of cultures."

"And that concept is?" I asked. Alexander is a great teacher, but sometimes getting actual *information* out of him is like pulling teeth. He firmly believes that knowledge you gain for yourself is better than that given to you by another, because you remember it better and the process of actively learning is good for your mind. Logically I can see where he's got a point. In the moment it sometimes seems like a bit more annoyance than it's worth.

"Basically, the idea goes that what you experience as reality isn't, actually, real. It's your mind's *perception* of reality. Everything you see and feel goes through that filter. With me so far?" I nodded. "Well, your mind contains a lot of barriers to true learning. Filters and blocks and so on that keep you from actually realizing the major portion of what you know."

All of that made sense. "And the idea is that by fasting and dehydration and near-hypothermia, you're breaking those barriers down?"

He nodded. "Essentially. The hope is that severe privation will degrade your mental blocks. Things like the difference between past and future, this world and others, me and you. It's actually the same concept that's used by, for example, Asian monks. They do it by fasting, exposure, and chanting, but the objective is the same." He paused. "Of course, that's a bit of a long-term process, and you sound like you're in a hurry. A vision quest would take you at least two weeks, maybe more."

"Wait a second," I protested. "I thought shamans did vision quests for, like, healing sickness and stuff. That doesn't sound like something you take two weeks about."

"Yes," he said patiently. "And they were *shamans*. Experienced mages who did things like that all the time." He shook his head. "Those barriers are there for a reason, Winter. It would be difficult or impossible to live in this world without them. Break them down too far, too quickly, without a great deal of prior experience, and you might never get them back in place. That's how people go mad doing things like that."

I sighed. Somehow I knew that offer was too good to be true. "Okay," I said. "Two weeks it is. I don't have that much time. So maybe I'll leave the vision questing for later. Next option?"

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "I still think a familiar spirit would be a good idea for you."

Alexander had been trying to get me to take a familiar for quite a while, and he was very persistent about it. I'm not quite sure *why*, actually, given that I don't think he had one himself. Maybe he just wanted me to go to someone else with my stupid questions. "You really think I'm ready for that?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "In terms of power you're more than ready. I think you have the skill for it too. Beyond that only you can say for sure. It's not a decision anyone can make for you."

"How exactly does that work, anyway? I don't really know the specifics of how a mage and a familiar relate to each other."

"Essentially," he said in a lecturing tone of voice, "a familiar is a spiritual entity you've made an ongoing bargain with. It owes you loyalty as a result. Exactly what services it provides varies. Some mages are looking for a research assistant. Others desire a thug. Some are interested more in companionship than anything. Needless to say all of them have different needs."

I blinked. "It owes you loyalty? That's it?" He nodded. "So, theoretically, it would do whatever I wanted. Anything."

"Within the bounds of your agreement," he confirmed.

Damn. "What do they get out of it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "That, too, depends on what bargain you make. As a spiritual entity they require a body to act in this world—most of the time the mage provides an animal, which is where the common use of the term 'familiar' came from. In addition the mage provides for the familiar's needs. You protect

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it from harm. If its body requires food or shelter, you provide it. You might also be obligated to provide it with energy or amusement. It depends."

I frowned. "Still seems like the spirit gets the short end of the stick."

He smiled thinly. "Of course, if they happen to know that a powerful being wants them dead, protection and shelter are valuable things. Other spirits are simply interested in the physical world and wish to experience it. Because they are dependent on someone from this world to provide them with a body, they don't have many other ways to do so. Keep in mind that most of the spirits interested in becoming familiars are also fairly weak, as such things go. Service in exchange for protection and opportunity is not a bad deal for them."

Huh. It would answer any question I had. That was...a bit scary, really. I knew better than most that some knowledge really is dangerous and unpleasant and in hindsight not something you would choose to learn, could you have the choice again. And it seemed like the kind of deal that would be absolutely guaranteed to bite me in the ass later.

On the other hand...any question I had. At no additional price. It would be like having a mentor, research assistant, and living computer all at the same time. I wouldn't just be able to find out more about my current problems, vampires and mages and the Fenris Wolf. I would have something on hand to help with my magical studies.

It might only have taken me one try to make that rope of shadows if I'd had a decent source of advice right there while I was planning it.

I would like to say that the deciding factor for me was helping people like poor Robert, shot because he had the misfortune to be there at the wrong time. I would like to say it, but it would be a lie. I am not that good a person.

Ultimately the deciding factor was thinking about all the things I could learn. All the knowledge I wouldn't have to blunder into on my own. The things I could do, the things I could *make*.

I have often proven to be...not as good at resisting temptation as I might like.

Alexander saw the decision in my eyes. "When?" he asked simply.

I chewed on that for a moment. He might say that it was within my abilities, but that wasn't the same as saying it would be easy. I would definitely want to be operating at my best when I did it. The peak of my power was at the full moon, which had already come and gone. If I were going to wait for the next one, I might as well fall back on the vision quest. That meant that the longer I waited, the harder it was going to be.

"Tonight," I told him. "Probably around midnight."

He nodded. Then he took the next several minutes to explain the specifics of what I had to do, writing out several formulae of how the energy would have to be manipulated. I paid close attention

and took notes. This kind of magic was far from my specialty, and I didn't want to screw it up. When he'd finished I put those sheets of paper, too, into a pocket. "Thanks," I said, standing up.

He frowned. "You haven't done your exercises yet."

"Maybe I should save my power for tonight's ritual. I thought I'd skip them today."

His frown deepened. "Winter, if you're going to be dueling you need to practice your exercises today *especially*."

Which was, annoyingly, impossible to argue with. I sighed and sat back down.

Alexander had recently started me on an extremely irritating set of exercises. They were, theoretically, meant to improve my focus, concentration, and precision. Difficult does not begin to describe them. Neither does frustrating.

Today was no different. First I had to light one specific candle out of a dozen in a room upstairs I hadn't ever seen. To make things even more fun, Alexander devoted his energy to screwing with me—not as hard as he could, of course, that wasn't even remotely a fair contest, but still. At first he spent his magic keeping the candle cold. Then, without warning, he stopped, then started trying to *help* me so that the heat I was putting into it would light *all* the candles, or make them explode for that matter. He switched back and forth irregularly, and each time I had only a fraction of a second to adapt what I was doing or I would fail. It took me seven tries to get the right candle lit with all the others extinguished. The effort took almost an hour and left me sweating.

After a short break, he turned on a small laser pointer in one corner of the room, and set up a piece of paper in the opposite corner. I had to bounce the light around the intervening objects, change its color from red to blue, and get it to land on the paper using nothing but magic. Every time I got it right, he changed the relative position and colors of the two points. I was a little better at that game. After four repetitions of that we moved on.

The third exercise was a trickier one. He set a glass of lemonade on the table. Working with my eyes closed, I had to form four ice cubes in the drink—without affecting the rest of the liquid at all. To make things even harder, the cubes couldn't be made of lemonade, meaning that I had to filter sections of the drink into water, then freeze them into the appropriate shapes, all while keeping the rest of the lemonade room temperature. All without using anything but pure magic. Without even being able to see whether the cubes were forming or not—I had to feel everything with just magical senses. It was hard, irritating, and took me five attempts. All the same, I was clearly improving; the last time I did the same exact trick, it took me seven.

Alexander sat and drank the lemonade while I kept working. He'd gotten the big leather book back out and was paging through it with an unconcerned expression, the bastard.

After that, there was a Ping-Pong ball I had to navigate through a miniature dog agility course. Again, blind. There were poles, ramps, tubes, and balance beams. This, fortunately, was more in line

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with my talents. I managed, using carefully timed and placed puffs of air, to guide it through the course, only slipping up once on a ramp, and even then I caught it before it hit the ground.

The last trick was a little easier. I took a deck of cards and, wearing a blindfold, dealt a solitaire pattern. And, without ever removing the blindfold or peeking around it, proceeded to play several hands. I lost, badly—but I never misplayed or had a hard time figuring out which card went where. Then, just for fun, I did fancy shuffles without using my hands, relying instead on solidified planes of air and carefully controlled gusts to move the cards around. When I finished I swept them together and returned them to the box—also without hands, of course. Alexander applauded me sardonically, not looking up from his book.

They might seem like useless things to be able to do, largely because they are. I have never yet had call to change the color of a laser pointer during a fight. In fact, none of the things I'd just practiced was a particularly valuable skill. Generally speaking it's easier to use a freezer than turn lemonade into ice cubes.

That wasn't the point, though. It was a bit like complicated math in a way. Calculus isn't valuable because it lets you do fancy things with numbers, at least not to most people. It's valuable because learning it stretches your mind and makes you think in ways you otherwise wouldn't. The magical exercises were the same way. Those specific skills weren't useful, but the things they taught me—precision, delicacy, absolute control over how much power I exerted—were very useful. It was like yoga for the mind.

As I left Alexander's house I was tired, hungry, and satisfied. My mind felt calm and relaxed, like an especially lazy housecat after a fruitful hunt. I wanted to go home and eat a large meal, then go to sleep.

Unfortunately, that wasn't exactly likely to happen.

Chapter Seven

Back home, I baked and ate a frozen pizza, giving some to Snowflake. Then I sat at my small table and made a list of what I would need to summon a familiar. She slept on my feet as I did, twitching occasionally as she dreamed of snatching birds out of flight. It was a simple, entertaining dream, and I was careful not to wake her from it as I stood.

If you have to ask how I knew what she was dreaming about, I quite frankly don't think I can help you. I mean, really. Thanks to the amount of time I spent around her (and probably also her unusual intelligence), I didn't even have to think to share Snowflake's mind. I didn't even have to be in the same room as her. Especially not when the moon was near-full and I'd already been using my magic that day. So I felt it when she woke up, even though I was busy putting things into a backpack. A moment later I heard car door shut outside.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" Aiko asked cheerfully as she walked in. She'd ditched the umbrella look in favor of her more normal—if that word even applies—T-shirt and battered jeans.

"Oh, I don't know. I thought maybe I'd go out into the middle of the woods at midnight and perform magical rituals of dubious coloration. You game?"

"I don't know about that," Aiko said doubtfully. "Sounds kinda boring."

"Hey," I protested. "They might not have all been fun, but I don't think I've *ever* taken you somewhere *boring*."

"True," she said thoughtfully. "I suppose I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, then. Where in the woods were you thinking?"

"Actually," I said, clipping Snowflake's long leather leash to her collar, "I need to pick a few things up first." I patted the empty backpack meaningfully where it hung next to the full one over my shoulder.

"What is this place?" Aiko asked as she parked. Her expression was dubious, and I couldn't really blame her for it. Colorado Springs doesn't have any real ghettos, but the neighborhood we were in was about as close as it came. It was the kind of place that your average person wouldn't willingly go near even in full daylight, and I have to admit I would be a bit nervous myself after dark. I could almost certainly take a couple of human thugs—but almost means not quite, and guns are vastly more dangerous than most mages give them credit for.

I was comfortable there, though. Repeat visits will do that for a person. I walked confidently to a small, particularly run-down looking house. The walls were absolutely covered in layer upon layer of graffiti, so thickly that you couldn't see the bricks—or the elaborate symbols which had been painted

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over them originally, and used to anchor a really impressive set of wards. They predated my ownership of the building, and were quite a bit more subtle and complex than anything I could do.

I opened the outer door, which matched the neighborhood, and swept a low and intentionally ridiculous-looking bow in the kitsune's direction. "Thees ees mein la-bor-a-tor-y," I said in my best hokey accent. Snowflake stayed to watch the car—a Siberian husky might not look like a terribly powerful guard, but Snowflake was intelligent and much more dangerous than she looks. In a straight-up fight between the two of us, if I didn't have Tyrfing to hand, I'd only give myself about fifty-fifty odds.

Aiko walked in like she was considering buying the place, and her offer was dropping with everything she saw. "You have a laboratory?" she asked incredulously.

I followed her in and quickly shut the door behind us—it wasn't the kind of place where a smart person left the door open longer than was really necessary. "Yep," I said, crossing the dark and narrow entryway in a couple of steps to open the door in the opposite wall. "Had it for a few months now. I thought about showing you the place, but 'Come over and look at my magical laboratory' sort of projects more of the creepy, evil wizard vibe than I was comfortable with."

I flicked on the lights to show the main room of my lab, which used to be a kitchen. I'd turned the battered Formica countertop into my workbench, complete with various tools and Bunsen burners. The cabinets held reagents, and I'd replaced the kitchen table with another worktable which was mostly covered in half-finished projects. The wall over the workbench held a big sheet of butcher paper mostly covered in hash marks to record the various assassination attempts I'd withstood. I added a few more lines to it in Sharpie first thing, before I forgot.

Aiko was wandering around looking at things. "Nice stock," she commented, looking in one of the cupboards. "What do we have here," she said, mostly to herself. "These labels accurate?"

"Yep," I said. Some mages, including Alexander, intentionally mislabel their reagents. I believe that the idea is that anyone stupid enough to rob a mage deserves what they get. Personally, I think it's more likely to cause trouble for me than a thief.

"Huh. Silver nitrate...valerian, that's always good...white hellebore? Wouldn't have guessed that. Wolfsbane? Seriously, Winter, who calls it wolfsbane anymore? Ooh, jimsonweed...yew bark? Well, I guess you'd be the one who could get it, right? Poison sumac extract, always a fun one. Let's see...baneberry, belladonna, foxglove, oleander, hemlock, celandine, lupine, bloodroot, lobelia, ground-cherry...you know, Winter, I'm noticing a distinct and somewhat worrying theme here...."

"Maybe that's because you're in the poisons cupboard?" I guessed, pouring a few powdered herbs into Ziploc bags.

"Ah," she said, closing it pointedly. "That might be it. At least you separate them out, I suppose." She eyed me. "You *did* wash your hands before you made that stew, I hope?"

"Relax," I said. "If I were trying to kill you I think you'd have noticed it by now." I paused. "Besides which, as many times as you've drugged my food it seems like you're in a very glassy house."

She ignored that with the ease of long practice, instead looking at what I was packing. "So what's valerian doing mixed in with the poisons?"

I shrugged. "I guess I either put it back in the wrong place, or for some reason I thought it was toxic." I frowned. "It isn't toxic, is it?"

"Don't think so. Silver nitrate?"

I stared at her. "You're kidding, right? *Silver* nitrate? I don't know that it would do anything, but it isn't something I'm terribly eager to find out, either." I shook my head and dropped the bags into the pack before grabbing the next thing I would need.

"Hey," she exclaimed delightedly. "I forgot about that skeleton." She frowned. "I wondered what you did with that thing. I never saw it around your house, so I figured you'd thrown it out."

I finished dismantling the skeleton, which she had made out of the bones of a dozen or so faerie hounds and given to me as a present. "Of course not," I said to her, packing the sections carefully into the bag. "It just fits the ambience here better."

She looked pointedly at the cupboard full of poisons, some of which were quite potent. Between them I had enough material to kill at least a couple dozen people, although I am of course of such a fine moral character that no one would ever, ever think that I would do such a thing. Really. "Yeah, I see what you mean. What else you got here?" Without waiting for me to answer she opened another cupboard. I pulled out my list and checked it over again.

"Wormwood," she said in the background. "Peppermint, what's *that* doing here? I mean, really, doesn't exactly blend in very well, do you think? Hawthorn powder, that's more like it, and willow bark. Cat's claw? That from the plant or the cat?"

"Both, actually," I said absently, checking through the packs. "The actual claw's in the next cabinet over. The one you're looking at is all botanicals."

"Can you call rosemary a botanical?" Aiko said doubtfully. "Rue I can see, I suppose, and goldenseal, but rosemary? Sage? And *thyme*? Come on, that's just a bad joke waiting to happen. Wait a second, wolfberry? *Really*? Couldn't you just call it goji berry like everyone else? I get it that you have a theme and all, but seriously." She moved on to the next cabinet while I grabbed another bag of kosher salt—I probably had enough already, but I'd really hate to run short.

"How many kinds of alcohol do you really need?" Aiko exclaimed. "Come on, Winter, you don't even drink. Why do you have five kinds of brandy in here? And a bottle of *absinthe*?"

"Alcohol forms the base of a lot of potions," I said absently.

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"I didn't realize you made potions."

"I can't, actually. Maybe soon. All I said was that it was useful, not that I can actually use it."

She snorted and moved on to the last cupboard. "Ah, this is more like it. Cat claws, yep. Rock dust, iron filings, modeling wax...is that cement mix? Huh. Powdered bird bones? Wow, Winter, wouldn't have expected that from you. Not with you always rocking the animalistic stuff and all."

"I hate pigeons."

"Ah. They aren't that bad, you know. Not much different from chicken once you pour some gravy on top, although I'll grant that the texture's a bit of an acquired taste...."

I sighed. "Think that's about everything, if you can tear yourself away. I promise I'll show you around more thoroughly another time."

I wasn't too concerned about someone breaking in, even in that neighborhood. The exterior wards were all about concealment and masking, but they were very, very good. Most people never even realize the building's there, and I've never had someone try to come in without me explicitly showing them where to go. Then the actual cabinets were locked and, if you didn't open them with my keys, you'd set off a few *more* wards. Granted they weren't, like, lethal force or anything, but still.

I still locked the doors behind us. The things in there weren't just expensive and difficult to obtain; they were also, as you might imagine from Aiko's reaction to my cupboard of toxic reagents, not something I wanted in anybody else's hands. It's best to be cautious with such things.

Aiko drove quite a ways out along a forest service road, about as far as you were going to get without a four-wheel-drive vehicle. I pointed out that dirt roads and nice sedans aren't a very good mix, but she didn't seem to care particularly. Once we were parked, I got out and started getting my gear together. I put on a sturdy jacket—it was July and I'm *really hard* to freeze to death anyway, but I believe in being paranoid. Also in pockets, of which it had quite a number.

"Which pack you want?" I asked Aiko.

She looked at the almost-empty bag I'd brought from home and then the big, bulging pack I'd filled at the lab. "You're the super-werewolf-freak," she said. "You get the heavy one."

I grinned and shrugged it into place. It looked heavy, but the bones took up a lot of space for relatively little weight, so it only actually weighed about fifty pounds. Not too heavy, for me. Once it was tightened down and I was sure it wouldn't slip, I belted on Tyrfing.

I didn't actually need the sword, but Tyrfing is...clingy, for lack of a better word. I'd been assured by Alexander that I wasn't going to be ridding myself of the thing anytime soon, if ever, and although I hadn't tested it I had no difficulty believing him. This was largely because it had already found its own

way to me several times. The first occasion was when I got back from the hospital and found it sitting on my mantel, when everybody who could have put it there swore they hadn't had anything to do with it.

Since then it had pulled the same trick a number of times. Let me tell you, the first time I was working in the shop and I turned around and tripped over the sheathed sword, it scared five years off my life. Which, given that I appeared to be aging about as much as the average werewolf—which is to say literally not at all—wasn't that big of a deal.

Over time I'd figured out the rules by which the sword functioned. It would let me stay away for approximately eight hours before it came and found me. In a strange location, that tended to be a bit of a high estimate—six hours was closer. On the other hand, sometimes it would stay in my house for ten or even twelve hours at a time without my being present.

I probably would have complained more if it weren't for one more feature of the sword's uncanny transportation system. If I thought about it, concentrated on how I really and truly *needed* Tyrfing, it was there. Instantly. No matter if it were ten feet away or ten miles, whether I'd been gone most of the day or only minutes.

That's a really nice feature in a weapon. Really, *really* nice. Nice enough that I didn't mind it occasionally getting underfoot and causing me trouble. It also, as a convenient side effect, meant I could safely leave it pretty much anywhere, or watch a thief take it right in front of my eyes, and not worry a bit. It would be back before long.

It was irritating occasionally, but I pride myself on being adaptable. I'd learned to adjust to being the owner of a cursed sword. So, even though I had no need of Tyrfing for the spell I was about to pull, I brought it along, because I would probably be gone longer than it would tolerate and it was simpler to carry it from the start than have it show up halfway through. It had nothing to do with my ordinary paranoia; it was just forward planning and simple practicality.

The three knives, pistol, and miscellaneous toys I was carrying, on the other hand, had *everything* to do with my paranoia.

We started off on the road and continued down it for quite a while, moving at a brisk walk. I'd taken Snowflake's leash off as soon as we left the city; she doesn't particularly mind it, mostly because I'm the one holding the other end, but I do. She's an intelligent being perfectly capable of making sound decisions. Most of the time she *doesn't* make sound decisions, having been much too influenced by my bad example in that regard, but she's capable of it. You don't lead a sapient being around on a leash. It's just not okay.

After a while on the road, we split off on a game path leading deeper into the forest. Considering how close they are to Colorado Springs, the woods surrounding Pikes Peak are surprisingly wild places. You don't have to go too far to leave all trace of humanity behind, and by the time we'd been on the game path twenty minutes or so you would have been hard pressed to find any sign of a human presence. Good.

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Somewhat to the annoyance of my traveling companions I insisted that we stop and watch the sunset. Well, to be fair, I didn't insist that *they* stop; I just said that I was, and since I was pretty much the whole reason we were here they elected not to keep going without me.

I sat on a nice little granite outcropping and watched the sun sink below the mountains. It was a beautiful sunset, the sort of thing that doesn't happen nearly as often as it ought to, staining the thin clouds amber and vermillion and carmine, as though some deity had been inspired to go at them with a paintbrush. I sat and watched until the oranges and reds had faded to soft violets and then, finally, to the deep blue tones of the sky at night. I stared up at it for a moment more, feeling almost lost in indigo so pure and perfect it almost hurt to see.

I've never been much for religion. But if there were anything that might convince me, a truly lovely sunset might be it. When I see something so fleeting that is, nevertheless, so perfectly, tragically beautiful, something that's beautiful in part *because* it's so fleeting, well.... I could almost—*almost*—believe.

But I didn't have time to meditate on the nature of beauty tonight. There was work to be done.

Chapter Eight

It might have been dark out after that, according to some people. None of us were that sort of people, though. Even without the nearly-full moon, we probably wouldn't have had a particularly difficult time. I have exceptional night vision, Aiko was...Aiko, and Snowflake was a dog. Nighttime was *not* a problem for us.

The sun had been down for about ten minutes when Aiko struck up a conversation again. "So why are we coming all the way out here again?" she asked me. "Wouldn't a nice, convenient street corner have worked?"

"Not for me," I said. "This is what my magic is about. Wild places, shadows under the trees with the wind in my face. I might live in the city, but it's not really where I belong." I shrugged. "Somebody who's better with people than I am would probably rather do this in a subway tunnel or something."

"So what exactly *are* you doing?"

"Getting a familiar," I said. "The idea is that you summon an entity from the spirit world and bargain with it for its services."

She frowned, which even with my eyes I perceived only as a vague motion in the darkness. "Spirit world? You mean the Otherside?"

"No," I said. "The Otherside is another world, right? It's a whole different place, which just happens to be connected to this reality somehow." She nodded. "Well, the spirit world is more like the opposite surface of *this* world. Like the whole two-sides-of-one-coin metaphor, I guess. It's the opposite, the balance. All about energy and ideas instead of forces and matter. The things that live there are the same way—their bodies, insomuch as they can be said to have them, are composed of ideas. They embody concepts."

"Huh," she said. "I...think I've heard of it. We call it by another name."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "People call it all kinds of things. Probably because, as important things go, it isn't. There aren't any real political factions over there, and beings from that world can't contact us directly."

"So if nothing from there can interact with us, how do we know about it?" She paused. "And what good does summoning something from that world do you?"

I smiled. She was a lot quicker on the uptake than I had been, at first. "I didn't say they couldn't interact with us. You and me think, right?" Snowflake growled gently. "And so do you," I said, rolling my eyes. "The point is that we have ideas of our own. That means that we're constantly interacting with the spirit world on some level. And just because they can't affect the physical world *directly* doesn't make them powerless." I paused. "Demons are spiritual entities."

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Aiko didn't shiver, but there was a long silence on all parts. Not too surprising; all of us had some nasty memories of the demon that had been possessing the werewolf Garrett White. Snowflake—or rather the wolf who shared her body and mind—had suffered the worst of anyone, but none of us made it through without a few new scars.

"What does a demon embody, then?" Aiko asked me after a few minutes.

I was silent for a long moment. "Decay," I said finally. "Destruction. Endings. Entropy, you could say—the collapse of complex things into simple things, the eventual end of everything."

"Nice," she commented. "Why are you doing this again?"

"I'm not looking for a demon, if that's what you're wondering," I said dryly. "Balance is the heart of the spirit world, which means that for every bad thing, there's a good thing to equal it out. Spirits of charity and preservation and such." I shrugged. "And then there's a whole bunch of things that are essentially neutral. Embodiments of thought, for example, or memory—that's the sort of thing I'm angling after here."

She considered that for a moment. Actually, both of them did—it's easy to assume that, just because Snowflake *looks* like a dog, she's the same as an ordinary animal, so easy that I fall into that trap myself much of the time. It doesn't help that she tries to encourage it herself, because it means that people don't pay attention to her. Underneath that, though, she was at least as clever as I was. She understood English perfectly well, she could access much of my mind on top of that, and she was thinking about what I'd said.

If I didn't trust her so much, it would be almost scary.

About that time we walked out into a roughly circular clearing maybe seventy feet across. The grass was tall, almost up to my knees. I glanced around critically, then nodded. "This'll work," I said, dropping my pack carefully to the ground. Aiko dropped hers with a sigh of relief, though I knew for a fact that it was in no way a heavy burden for her. Kitsune aren't strong like werewolves, but they aren't human either. She wasn't especially muscular, but Aiko was quite fit by human standards.

"So how do you go about summoning these things?" Aiko asked curiously.

I grinned. "Watch and learn," I said to her.

She snorted, sat down next to the packs, and turned into a fox. Unlike the werewolves she doesn't contort around when she changes, and rather than larger she gets a *lot* smaller, so she doesn't actually have to take her clothing off to change. It just involves a lot of squirming around to get comfortable when she doesn't.

By the time I'd finished surveying the area, a perfectly ordinary-looking fox had finished nosing the pile of clothing into a comfortable position, and was curled up on it with her tail over her nose. Aiko looked like she was sleeping, but I saw her glittering eyes watching me, and her ears were pricked.

She didn't have to explain why she'd changed, either. She was hardy by any normal standard, but she was still essentially flesh and bone. And, unlike me, she felt the cold about as much as anybody. Now, it might seem like July should be warm, but when the sun's gone down and you aren't moving around—and you're in the mountains, that always helps—it still gets pretty chilly. Things with fur coats tend to not be bothered by it as much.

The really funny thing was that Snowflake was curled up next to her in almost the same position. So I wound up doing my preparations being watched by a husky and a fox, both of them staring at me with disconcerting focus.

The first thing I did was draw Tyrfing and mark out a circle in the ground, about twenty feet across, near the center of the clearing. It wasn't perfectly round, but it didn't really have to be. I could have used a square if I wanted; circles are just easier to envision.

The enchanted sword sliced easily into the dirt, and even the rocks didn't slow it down much. There isn't much that that Tyrfing can't cut. Once that was done I cut all the grass inside the circle down to about ankle height, tossing the cuttings outside the boundaries.

I was very cautious setting my feet during and after that process. Tyrfing is a wonderful sword, the best I'd ever seen, but that doesn't change the fact that it was made to kill and destroy—and that includes its wielder, if it gets half a chance. The entropy curse on the sword did not make exceptions for me, and if I wasn't careful after I'd had the sword out it would be a simple matter for it to harm me.

Once the outermost circle was drawn, I established another circle just inside of it. This one was delineated with small rocks, pinecones, and bits of wood placed on the ground. Most of the markers were hidden by the grass. That didn't much matter either. It was the idea that was important, really. The complicated arrangements were just a concentration aid for the ritual I was about to perform.

Inside the second circle I laid out two smaller ones, each about eight feet across, with a little space between them. The first thing I did was take a knife and trim down the grass to the ground inside the circles. Then I fetched a few bags from my packs and carefully mixed the contents into two different, off-white powders.

The first circle, on the northwest side of the larger circle, was mine. The base of the powder was salt, into which I'd mixed expensive cocoa powder, peppermint, lavender, and lupin. The result was a fine dust which, even without the somewhat toxic lupin, would never, ever be used in cooking. It didn't smell *bad*, exactly, but it sure didn't smell like food.

The things I'd mixed into the salt weren't really important in and of themselves. Magical components almost never are. Oh, sure, there are a few—silver, for example, hurts werewolves simply because the energy associated with it isn't compatible with their magic. But for the most part reagents are important more for what they symbolize and represent than anything. All of the substances I'd used—excepting the salt, which was just a convenient base to work from—were things that I had an affinity for. They were there, in some sense, simply to represent *me*.

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The second circle was similar, but not quite the same. On the southeastern side of the enclosure, the powder I used started with salt as well. To it I had, very carefully, added hemlock, oak sawdust, and monkshood—which, as Aiko had teased me about earlier, I had labeled as wolfsbane.

There's a lot of folklore surrounding werewolves, much of which is flat wrong. Others, which I find even more amusing, are sorta right but for entirely the wrong reasons. One of my favorites is the claim that werewolves can be cured (or killed, which for medieval Europeans often meant the same thing) by eating wolfsbane.

People who read those legends these days don't necessarily realize that wolfsbane is another name for monkshood, which is noted for being poisonous. Like, really poisonous. Like, if-you-take-one-bite-you're-probably-going-to-die poisonous.

So yeah, it'll kill a werewolf all right. So will almost any sufficiently strong poison. The thing to keep in mind is that, although werewolf healing is very impressive, it isn't unbeatable. It can handle minor toxins, things like poison ivy or most kinds of lupin. It can even deal with most drugs, making it possible for a werewolf (or me) to drink the average person under table and then some without it really having much of an effect, or take a tranquilizer dart that would drop an elephant without being incapacitated for more than a minute.

But a really potent toxin can overwhelm that healing, especially in high doses. A werewolf, like a human, will most likely die if they eat a monkshood salad. The same as they will most likely die if they take a sniper round to the head, or are exposed to nerve gas. Maybe wolfsbane is a little more effective than other toxins, I don't know. It hardly matters.

So yeah, I was careful mixing that powder. I'd *really* hate to kill myself in a way *that* dumb.

The circles were really very simple. The idea of a magical circle is one of the simplest ones there is in magic. You're establishing a line, and saying that *this* side of the line isn't like *that* side of the line. That's it. The only thing you're doing is establishing a magical fence. Granted, once it's established you can use it as the basis for more complicated spells—but the circle itself is very simple.

In this case, the outermost circle was just that. All it was there for was to keep outside energies from interfering with what I was doing. There are currents of magic everywhere, gentle eddies and flows of power. What I was doing was delicate enough that I didn't want them getting in the way.

The second circle would form the skeleton of my summoning spell. You don't actually *need* to use a circle as the foundation of a spell, but it makes it a little easier and more efficient. For something this difficult, I wanted every advantage I could lay my hands on.

The third layer of circles weren't really necessary for the summoning. The one around me was there for protection, and the one where I was hoping my familiar would soon be was there for confinement. Spiritual entities might not be able to affect the world directly, but in order to summon them I would necessarily be putting myself in *their* world. I wanted every scrap of protection I could get

before I did that. This was outside my scope, and that meant my ability to protect myself over there was pretty minimal.

Once the outline of the spell was set up I got my props from the bags. The first thing I did was dig a small pit just inside the southern edge of the middle circle. I grabbed some newspapers from my pack, and used them to kindle a fire in the pit. There was plenty of dry firewood around, and within a few minutes the fire was burning merrily.

East was even simpler. I piled gravel and a few larger rocks into a mound about six inches high and a foot across. On top of it I set the same river stone that I'd thrown in the restaurant. That was enough to anchor earth.

Water was trickier. I had to go nearly half a mile to find a stream, where I filled a small vase made out of glass so clear you could hardly see it at all. I brought the water back, being careful not to spill any, and set the vase on the north side of the circle. Done.

Then I pulled out a small, finely tuned set of wind chimes. I set them up on a collapsible metal stand inside the western boundary of the circle, where the gentle wind set them to tinkling. Perfect for symbolizing air.

That, too, was unnecessary. I mean, as anyone who passed even a basic chemistry class knows, the classical view of four elements of nature is pretty much bogus. Everything has an energy associated with it, though, and between air, water, earth, and fire, you have a pretty rounded set. That was what I was really going for.

And, of course, part of it was purely psychological. I could just as easily have, say, replaced earth with iron, fire with a hair plucked from a werewolf's back while they were changing, air with a light show, and water with a set of lenses, and had roughly the same energies and ideas associated. I could have—but it wouldn't have the same dramatic feeling to it, the same panache, and in magic style counts. In this kind of magic, magic counts for a *lot*.

That just left the inner circles. The elemental anchors were at the cardinal points of the compass, so for the other circles I worked in between them. On my circle I put a lock of my hair in one corner, and a drop of my blood in another. Both of them would represent my body. The other points held a bit of black walnut wood I'd idly carved into a pleasing, abstract shape one day, and the wolf's-head pendant which had been crafted by an expert to resemble my mother, and which I'd worn off and on for most of my life. Those were to symbolize my will, my mind, my emotions—the essence of who and what I was. My soul, if you will.

The other circle was trickier. I wasn't choosing items for their energies or affinities at this point; I was selecting them based on their symbolism. Objects have meanings, represent intentions. If you don't believe me think of all the things a ring can symbolize. A knife. A straightjacket. They all carry meaning, all represent ideas. In the spirit world ideas are power, quite literally. A spirit can walk through walls without even thinking about it, but a locked door will stop them cold.

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I chose objects which symbolized restraint, confinement. A closed padlock. The key, placed at the opposite side of the circle, was facing pointedly away from the lock. In between were a short length of chain and a heavy leather collar.

I checked over everything one more time. All of the circles were, if not perfect, close enough. I fed the fire another piece of wood. The wind had died down a little, but there was still enough to make the chimes sing.

Everything was ready. Well, almost everything.

I left the circle and extracted the bones of the faerie hound from the backpack. I reassembled it, being careful not to break anything, and placed the completed skeleton in the circle of entrapment. If everything went right, that skeleton would soon be housing my familiar.

I left the circle and walked back over to where Aiko and Snowflake were watching me. I knelt down near them and took my jacket off, setting it on the ground.

"What I'm about to do is dangerous," I said to them, quietly. I met their eyes in turn. Snowflake's were classic husky blue, pale and icy and disturbingly intense. Aiko's were, as a fox, green-yellow rather than almost-black the way they were as a human. She, too, was watching me intensely.

I removed my magical foci and set them down on the jacket. Two rings, one of bronze and one of steel. One simple leather bracelet. With them I could do wonders with air, with darkness, with predators. None of them would help with what I was doing, and I didn't want the enchantments on them to interfere with what I was doing.

"Whenever you attract the attention of spiritual entities, you run certain risks," I continued. "There is a possibility that they will kill me. There is a possibility that they will possess me, take over my body. I don't think this is very likely, but it is possible."

I swallowed dryly and continued divesting myself of tools and weapons. All three of the knives were set on the jacket, along with the contents of my various pockets. Tyrfing I rested against one of the packs, the strap holding it into the scabbard securely fastened. Then I took my pistol and loaded a magazine into it. I worked the slide to chamber a round and then replaced it in the magazine from one of the small ammo boxes I'd removed from my pockets. I was, in a distant and detached way, surprised that my hands were so steady. I was very, very nervous about what was going to happen, but my motions were rock steady as I prepped the gun. Then I set it down in front of Aiko, making sure it wasn't pointed at anything I valued—including the circle I was going to be working in.

"That's why," I said quietly, "I am telling you this, very seriously. This gun is loaded with charged-silver ammunition. If I seem to have difficulty exiting the circle, if I don't speak to you or speak in a way that doesn't make sense, if *anything* about my behavior seems wrong to you—either of you—I want you to shoot me."

Two sets of canine eyes looked back at me. Snowflake whined, softly, uncomfortably.

"Oh, not until I'm dead or anything," I told her. "Just enough to stop me. Once I'm down, you need to call this number." I wrote Alexander's phone number on a scrap of paper, setting it down next to my cell phone on the jacket. "Someone I trust—mostly—will answer. He might be upset that you called. Tell him who you're calling on behalf of and what's happening. Do what he tells you."

What if he doesn't answer? Snowflake whispered in my head, making me jump a little. Or we can't find service?

"Then I guess you'll have to improvise, won't you?" I said seriously. Then I slipped my boots and socks off. There were a couple of reasons for this. The first was that I've never been fond of having my feet confined, and if I was about to have my mind and spirit eradicated by some beastie from the nether realms I'd rather be comfortable beforehand. The second, of course, was that being barefoot might slow down whatever ate me long enough for Aiko to transform and shoot it until my body was dead as well.

I walked over to my place in the circle and sat down, crossing my legs beneath myself. The cool grass tickled my feet as I did. Even barefoot and wearing a T-shirt I wasn't worried about the cold. It would take more than that to harm me.

I took a few deep breaths, calming myself and slowing my breathing, then gently rested my hands against the grass to either side.

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Chapter Nine

I'd recharged completely since doing my exercises in Alexander's lab, and magic came to my call immediately and easily. It felt calmer than usual, like the surface of a glassy lake, almost as though it knew what I was doing and didn't want to interfere. I turned my face to the moon, took a deep breath, and got started.

Magic is an interesting thing, because it is so incredibly simple. At its heart all magic is a field of energy which, for reasons unknown, responds to people's desires. That's it. That's all. What we refer to as spells and enchantments and such are just ways of getting the magic to do what you want. And, in essence, they are all just expressions of will.

The only thing you really, truly need to do magic is a concentrated desire to change things. That's all that willpower is; you have to be totally, absolutely concentrated on something, you have to believe it so hard that, in your mind, it's already real. Without that there's no way to make the power *agree* that it's real. Although very few people have the aptitude or ability for it, theoretically anyone can do it. Kinda like racing; anybody can drive, but only a handful of people can race a Formula One car successfully. If you're born with the right senses and reflexes, you have a much better shot at winning a race than somebody without. If you train and sharpen those abilities, you can widen that gap even more.

The problem with magic is that people aren't, as a rule, very good at concentrating. In fact, most people are very not good at concentrating. If you don't believe me, here's a little experiment for you. And no, it's not the "Don't think of an elephant" thing. That's easy.

For the next five minutes, only think about one thing. Let's make it simple. Think about ravens. You can even include crows if you want, just to make it easier. Corvids in general are fair game. Don't think about anything else, don't lapse in your concentration. Don't talk or look at a picture, either; that's cheating. Don't worry, I'll be here when you get back.

Finished? Good. Now, and be honest, how well did you actually do? If you're anything like most people, the answer is not very. For most people what you actually think is more like:

Ravens and crows. What am I doing this for? Ravens, crows and ravens. Say, I wonder how Baltimore's doing this year? Shit, focus. Ravens and crows, black things in the sky...and always getting in my garbage too, damn things. Focus! What's for dinner? I haven't eaten in, like, forever. And so on.

What you just did (or not, I don't really care) is a little bit like a spell. There are a few important differences, though. Number one, ravens are *vastly* easier to think about than even a simple piece of magic. Imagine concentrating on the exact way that air flows over the shape of one vane of one tail feather of a single, specific raven instead, and you might start to get an idea of what kind of thinking magic involves. Number two, thoughts about birds are inert. The thought has no nature aside from what you impart to it. When you do magic you're forcing an inherently chaotic force to behave in an ordered,

consistent way. So essentially, the thought you're thinking is thinking back at you, and actively trying to escape from your grasp of it. That makes things harder, and the more energy you're trying to hold the harder it is. That's why most mages can *gather* more power than they can actually *shape*. Number three, you were only at it for five minutes. Complicated spells can take hours or days, and maintaining that degree of focus is harder the longer you have to do it.

Number four, and most important, there aren't any consequences for a lapse in concentration when all you're thinking about is a bird. With magic, it means that all the energy you've gathered and started to direct isn't doing what you want any more. Best case scenario, it dissipates and you have to start from scratch. Worst case, well...the power doesn't just go away, if you get my meaning. It just isn't under your control. The results can be...messy. I'd heard one story growing up about a mage who was about to finish a ritual of some kind—what the ritual was nobody's quite sure. Some say that he was trying to cast a death spell on an enemy. Others, who I think are perhaps being a bit too romantic, think he was trying to summon up Lucifer, or Death himself.

In any case, what is certain is that he was interrupted by a visitor at a critical moment. Energy which had been gathered and sculpted into the correct form over days of constant labor broke free inside his circle and went on a rampage.

Most of the time, when they say you could bury somebody in a matchbox, they mean it figuratively. In his case, they didn't even need a matchbox, because anyone who came close enough to the body to bury it started to weep, scream, or vomit, sometimes all three. Then they ran away, without ever even touching it. Given that this group had included soldiers and numerous people used to burying plague victims, this was saying a bit. What said even more was that one of them had been Bryan Ferguson, an ancient werewolf who had seen lots and lots of death by that point in his life. I'd never, ever known Bryan to react that violently to anything.

When I'd asked him what had been so bad about the body, he'd told me I didn't want to know. I'd considered pressing him, or asking someone else. Then I thought about what it would take to disturb Bryan enough that he ran away, and decided I probably really *didn't* want to know.

Anyway, because this was the Middle Ages and the rules were a bit more lax back then, they decided to just set his house on fire. The story goes that, in the midst of the flames, the mage was heard to scream in agony, moan that someone was after his soul, and eventually to get up, stagger to the door, and collapse again. Personally I consider this to likely be pure fabrication.

What I'm getting at here is that magic is not forgiving of mistakes. Most of the time, if you take the right precautions, it doesn't actually kill you to slip. But in a high-power ritual, or if you're playing with intrinsically dangerous forces, there's always an element of danger. Even if the power does just dissipate, stopping a spell midway can be hazardous. If you're throwing fire in the middle of a fight, for example, suddenly being surrounded by flames that *aren't* under your control is a bad place to be.

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So when I say that the first thing I did was to clear my mind of all emotion, all distraction, everything except my focused intent to summon a spiritual entity of the appropriate description, I'm being very serious.

I started with my emotions. Fear over what was happening, both in the immediate sense and in the wider picture. The slow, dull anger I still felt over the attack at the Full Moon. It wasn't my favorite place, but it was *my* place and someone had dared to attack it. That aroused my territorial instincts, and even if it was a minor event I was still very upset about it. Concern for Snowflake, Enrico, and Kyra, all of whom had been changing lately, and any of whom might take a turn for the worse at any moment. I took each one, examined it, and set it aside for another time.

In the dispassionate calm that remained I did the same thing with my bodily perceptions. I could smell smoke, freshly-turned earth, Aiko and Snowflake, the off-color scent of the powder I'd used in the circle around me, the lovely aroma of the forest at night. Each one was discarded in turn. The grass tickling the bottoms of my bare feet was a minor background sensation, easily blocked. My eyes were already closed, so I didn't need to worry about sight. I could hear the crackling of the fire, the gentle sound of wind chimes, the wind in the branches. I could hear my breathing and heartbeat. All of them faded. With them went the feeling of other minds against mine. Aiko and Snowflake weren't the only things watching me, but none of them mattered.

Perfect calm. Floating in the darkness. All that was left were my magical senses. They were what distinguished mages from normal people. Everybody can feel the power around them on some level, but some people have much more finely-tuned senses than others. Those are the people that can really get to be skilled with magic. Mine were better than most mages, from what Alexander had said.

Those I didn't get rid of. Instead I focused on them. I could feel magic moving around me, magic that was close to my heart. I could feel the light of the moon against my skin and the way the air flowed through the trees. I spent a while there, in the midst of a slow, gentle storm of intangible energy. Once I'd sunk into the magic totally, so much a part of it that my actual body was all but forgotten, I started working.

Drawn by my will, the power stopped whirling and flowing aimlessly, and started focusing on me. It wasn't like a magnet pulling all the magic in; even if I was good enough to do that, which I probably wasn't, I wasn't trying that hard yet. This was the easy part. It was more like a slow-motion whirlpool, in which only slightly more power traveled towards me than away. There was enough of an attraction, though, that I managed to take up about as much magic as I could hold, maybe thrice the amount I normally had available to me. It wasn't all that much, in the greater scheme of things; I'd been improving my skill and focus much more than my actual capacity. It would have to be enough.

The state of mind required for high-level magic is odd, at least for me. It produces a strange feeling of dislocation, as though I were only tangentially connected to myself, as weird as that sounds. It messes with my perception, especially of time. I would estimate that it took me at least half an hour to get that energy together, but I could easily be off by an hour or more.

Way too long to use in an actual fight, or any other time-sensitive situation. That's why most mages—and especially wizards, who excel at complicated and high-energy spells like this—tend to avoid direct confrontation, and do a lot of prep work. Putting in the time to make foci, stored spells, and other toys in advance is what turns a mage from a moderate-level fighter in the supernatural hierarchy to a top-class one. Alexander is a great example. He's terribly dangerous in an immediate sense, but that doesn't begin to compare what he can do with a little preparation. There are so many wards on his house that it would take an army to scratch the surface. We're talking about bolts of lightning, temperatures comparable to molten steel, and blasts of kinetic force on the level of being run over by a tank.

And that's not even mentioning the creepy stuff, like bits of witchcraft designed to just rip your life away or shred your mind so thoroughly it wouldn't ever heal, or the shamanic spell that would make all your nightmares come to life and start eating you. Trying to counter all of those different effects is virtually impossible.

The point is that those wards represent the pinnacle of wizard-style fighting. Tons and tons and tons of work beforehand, all so that you can essentially concentrate hundreds of hours of magical labor into a few very active seconds. What I was doing was based on the same principle, although I wasn't putting nearly as much work into it as Alexander had into his wards.

Once I had as much power as I could reasonably hold, I poured some into each of the circles in turn. Ordinarily I would have preferred to be physically touching them—the further away you are from your target, the more inefficient you are. Some leakage is inevitable, because no spell and no concentration can be entirely perfect, and magic is too wild to be bound perfectly.

In this case I had enough that I wasn't too concerned; energizing a circle is a pretty low-scale expenditure of power, especially next to what I was holding. Each ring went up with an almost tangible *snap*, enclosing me in another layer of magical shielding. I could feel the power around me, burning with a steady light that was nothing like the slow and constant movement that was more natural.

The circles wouldn't stop anything physical. It is possible to make a magic circle that will act like a force field, but it's more complicated and takes a lot more oomph. These were just meant to block magical energy, and not a whole lot of that. A concerted effort would break through them in no time—but against the gentle natural movement of power, they were plenty sturdy.

Then I settled into the actual spell. There were a lot of ways to enter the world of spirit, but I was taking one of the safer ones. The first step, which might seem like a bad idea given what I said about the importance of absolute focus earlier, was to focus on what I was feeling. Not physically, but magically. The circle—the second circle, specifically—acted a bit like a heat reflector, concentrating the energy inside and directing it toward me. Fire and water, earth and wind all converged on my position.

They balanced, naturally enough. The constant, fickle motion of the air met the low solidity of earth. Dangerous, ever-changing power born of fire was matched with water, peaceful and calm and,

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although perfectly receptive to change, somehow always the same underneath. I could feel and smell the magic in a way that had nothing to do with my body.

It is perhaps inevitable that they felt, to me, a bit like predators. The way my mind is organized in terms of magic is such that almost *everything* does. That's just what I am, on a very basic level.

Earth resembled a sleeping bear. There was the same sense of immense power that hasn't yet been stirred to life. It felt stolid, immovable, and not especially interested in moving. Earth was solid, and stable, but it still had the feeling of immense power under a thin leash.

Fire was more like a starving mountain lion. There was power there, too, but it was as active as earth was stable. It was moving, hunting, always hungry, always looking for something to devour. Fire was the most dangerous of the elements, magically speaking. Oh, you can do very impressive things with earth or wind in a fight—but fire, like Tyrfing, *wants* to do impressive things, hungers for the fight and the destruction.

Air, of course, was like a raptor. A hawk, maybe, or a falcon. Constant motion, going one direction and then reversing so fast you never see the moment when it changes. Soaring, floating, then stooping to take a rabbit. Fickle, dancing in the space between two heartbeats. I felt more of an affinity for air and wind than any of the others.

Water probably should have seemed like a fish of some kind, but it didn't. The truth is that I just hadn't spent that much time working with fish. They were hard for me to contact, for the same reasons I'd explained to Kyra. Easier than an insect, of course, but harder than birds or reptiles, and *much* harder than mammals. Their senses and environment are too foreign for me to interpret very well. Water instead reminded me of a werewolf. There was the same light, glittering surface, and underneath it was the same cold, dark depth. Water might seem peaceful, but it's not calm in the same way as earth. Earth is truly like a bear; it takes a lot to stir it, and once it does there's a lot of power there. Think earthquakes and volcanoes. Water, on the other hand, can go from peaceful to raging in an instant, with no provocation. It will drown you almost as quickly and easily as fire burns.

I lost myself in those feelings, and over time slipped from considering the energies to the ideas. Change and constancy, creation and destruction, calm and activity—those were what was important, those were what I needed. The embodiment of the idea was tangential.

The whole time I was using the power I'd gathered to push myself ever further, ever deeper into these observations. Eventually, after an even more timeless interval than before, I realized that something was different. It didn't feel like something changing; it was more like my perception had changed. I couldn't have said when it happened; it might have taken a minute or a year. But I knew what it meant.

I'd successfully crossed over into the spirit world.

I stopped concentrating and opened my eyes. What greeted me was...very strange.

I could, if I concentrated, see the physical world, because this was only the borderland between the world I lived in and the one I was crossing into. Much more important, though, were the energies overlaying it. They showed up as a constantly moving cascade of light and color, billions of shades that I could somehow differentiate, though I knew that in the real world they would be nothing but a mad cacophony to me. I looked at the four points of the compass, and somehow I could see the ideas I had just spent so much time meditating on. Looking at the stones was enough to evoke the feeling of calm solidity, and bring the scent of it to my nostrils. Likewise, when I glanced at the firepit I felt hunger and danger, and I could smell smoke and heated air.

My circles showed up as glittering lines made of silver-and-black light. I don't mean ultraviolet, either; it was literal black light. How that was possible I do not know. At the time I understood, instinctively, that it represented my will, my focused desire to exert control on the world.

That's the really strange thing, see. While I was actually *there* everything made sense.

I looked past the circle at that point, into the world beyond. The trees glowed with low, slow-moving emerald light. They felt like patience and growth, the slow passing of uncounted seasons, my own presence too ephemeral for them to note. When I focused my attention on them I smelled growing things and pine sap. Here and there sharper, less overwhelming sparks of light flitted about, marking the presence of insects, rodents, the occasional nocturnal bird.

Aiko burned with a gold-green light almost too bright to look at directly, which was at the same time scarlet. It wasn't marbled, either; it was just a solid glow that was, somehow, gold and green and red at the same time. No, I don't know what that looks like either. Probably there is no color like that in the real world. I could see a human form, and a fox, and I honestly couldn't say which was the natural one and which an assumed shape.

She felt...odd, somehow conflicted. Her aura was a little like air, and a little like fire, and mostly not like anything else in sight. There was the same fickleness as in air, and something of fire's hunger, but I could also feel playfulness in her, and—maybe because I was sure that it was directed at me, knew it in my bones—I also felt a strange sort of caring. Looking at her I could see, too, how much of her laughter was a mask for the sorrow underneath. She smelled of fox and lilacs, cinnamon and bitter tears shed late at night in a cold, uncaring room. Strange, that I'd never seen that before. Always before I'd thought that Aiko was as light and cheerful and uncaring as she seemed, but now I wondered if that was as much an act as my own persona of the normal, reasonably content human.

Next to her Snowflake was at least as unusual. She burned with a cold white-blue light as steady as the Northern Star. I could see, too, the other entity within her, the wolf that had come to share her mind when she was little more than a puppy. He was a thing of blood and shadow, lurking beneath the surface—but in my current state much was revealed that was normally hidden from sight. I could feel them, two totally different feelings. She was playful and light, gentle and friendly and welcoming. He was darker, grimmer, hunger and need, and a view of the world where everybody was divided into us and them, and if you weren't one of us then he didn't care what happened to you, not at all. I was reminded of a snow-covered mountain. The surface of the snow was bright and forgiving, begging to be

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played upon—but underneath was the cold, dark, suffocating depth, feet and feet of snow just waiting for the chance to become an avalanche.

I describe it now as being sequential, but at the time that wasn't how I perceived it. I still had the same strange sense that my mind was dislocated, not functioning quite normally. Time was strange, stretched and sideways and not pinned down. I saw and thought all of these things in a moment's time, the space between two blinks. I looked away after that; I was worried I would see too much.

It took me a while to orient myself to the spirit world. It was a dizzying, staggering experience, and adapting to it took time.

I hadn't ever been to the spirit world before—unless maybe I had, which is a distinct possibility. There's actually a lot of debate as to whether it's a different world at all, or just a different way of experiencing the same world I'd lived in my whole life. Some people claim that it's the same reality, and that level of perception is just one we don't normally use. Others say that it *was* a different world, and the reason it seemed so familiar is because that's where we go when we dream. The rituals and magics were just a way of getting there and retaining your awareness and volition. I don't know which, if either, is true. Maybe both are.

Once I was reasonably comfortable with my surroundings, I stood up and walked out of the circles. They weren't an obstacle, here; that wasn't what they were meant to do. I glanced back briefly, and saw myself sitting there, utterly still. That tracked; this wasn't the physical world. *I* was up and moving, but that was the me that consisted of who I was, rather than any physical object. My body was still sitting there; there just wasn't anyone home at the moment. It was a sobering realization. The automatic systems would keep it alive for a while, but if I didn't get back within a day or so it would die.

That happens to mages, every now and then. They go into the spirit world and never come back. What happens to them when their bodies die, nobody really knows. No one's ever managed to make contact with one of them, afterward.

Looking at myself, I could feel a little of my own magic. Not much—the real me, the me that counts, wasn't there, after all. But I could smell the familiar aroma of my power. It seemed like the blood and wolf were a little stronger now, a little more overpowering of the notes of ice and grass. I could see that the interior of the innermost circle was blanketed with frost, crawling up over my feet and covering the grass in delicate feathers of ice. That had happened, occasionally, when I used my magic. Only since January; I had no idea what had changed, or why the ice formed. I hadn't taken the time to figure it out yet. I was scared that I didn't want to know.

From my current vantage, I could see that I was, on some level, the same as the frost. It was an extension of myself, even though it was also something different. In terms of energy and idea, I blended into it so smoothly that I could hardly see the join, although it had a distinct energy and I had another and they really weren't all that similar. Something else to consider later.

For now, I finally started on the work that all of this had been for. I closed my eyes again, concentrated, and started chanting.

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Chapter Ten

Words and magic have an interesting relationship. It's been described in a lot of ways over the years, most of them total bogus. The medieval Europeans, for example, apparently thought you had to ask the Devil for help any time you wanted to do magic. If so, he's apparently decided to help me for free, because I'd never met him and I'd been doing magic most of my life.

You don't need to invoke demons or strange deities to do magic. You don't need to chant in ancient languages. I know a lot of people who are sorta disappointed to learn that there actually isn't a mysterious language of magic, the words of which are somehow tied to reality itself and will make whatever you say happen, because magic says so. The truth is that there *are* no magic words.

Magic is all about ideas. The important thing is to have those ideas absolutely firm in your mind. Words are also about ideas, and can therefore provide a valuable concentration aid. Imagine how much easier that exercise with the ravens would have been if you'd had a stupid little rhyme about them to recite to yourself so that your mind didn't wander.

On the spirit side of things, ideas have an even more immediate and potent strength. I mean, ideas are what the spirit world is *made* of. What I was doing was basically focusing on a single idea so strongly that it became, for that brief moment, the essence of what I was in a spiritual sense. That would, in turn, provide a sort of beacon by which the things I was looking for could find me.

So what I was chanting might come as a bit of a disappointment to you. It was in normal English, and it sounded depressingly mundane. I mean, you've probably read classified ads more amusing than my chant. What I was saying was:

"Human mage interested in procuring the services of a familiar. Must have knowledge of the physical world and be accustomed to working with mages. Spirit of thought or memory preferred. Will provide a body, shelter, and fill other reasonable requests. Require willingness to assist in research. Offer valid for a limited time only."

I mean, really. Throw in a contact number and, these days, an email address, and that could *be* a classified ad. Admittedly only really weird newspapers would run it, but that's not the point.

While I chanted, I focused on the ideas I was conveying. I concentrated, sending the concepts out as broadly as I could. Another length of time, interminable and indefinable, passed.

Eventually I became aware of another presence nearby. Like me it existed only on the spiritual level. It didn't travel; the spirit world is only loosely related to concepts like space or geography. It simply *was* directly in front of me, with no transition between that and the moment before, during which it had been absent.

It appeared to me as a cloud of...something. It didn't have a physical analogue that I knew of. It looked a little bit like smoke, except that instead of dissipating it hung around, cohering to itself. There were wisps around it, like I would expect from fog, but the core was solid and consistent even if it did move and change and expose gaps. It was also jet black in color. There were, within the cloud, lights. They looked a little bit like fireflies and a little bit like the sparks off a campfire. Tiny sparks of light in amethyst, emerald, and aquamarine, they flickered in an almost hypnotic way.

When I saw it, I was assaulted by the feeling of it. It smelled of death and decay, and felt like a forest fire. It was dark and dangerous and not something I was comfortable with. It was also, unfortunately, familiar.

"What are *you* doing here?" I asked the demon, displeasure putting an edge on my voice. I could, in what might be the creepiest thing yet, *see* the intention of my own words, leaving my mouth in a sharp-edged ray of black and green light.

The demon swirled, *shifted* in a way that made no sense in either world and hurt my eyes, and then solidified again. Now it had eyes, two big angular lights of pale, intense blue. "I told you," the demon which had once possessed Garrett White said. "If you needed a favor, all you had to do was call." Its voice was a lot like I remembered it, strangely toned and reminiscent of a big snake slithering on a stone floor.

"I wasn't asking a favor," I said coldly. "I was looking for a familiar, and you're interrupting."

Watching it, I felt the equivalent of an eye-roll. "I know what you were looking for," it said. "Why did you think I was here?"

"Are you even *capable* of being a familiar? I have certain requirements..."

"Yes, I know, and yes, I am. Did you think the werewolf was my first time in your world? It was not. I have worked with human mages before, in an arrangement not unlike that which you describe."

I rolled my own eyes. "Yeah, and I'm sure that worked out just great for them."

"It did," the demon said seriously—and, I could feel, sincerely. "Only one of them was not the better for my assistance. And, if a mage chooses to ignore the familiar's advice, who is to blame?"

I frowned and, for the first time, considered its offer. I knew, with a certainty that belied explanation but which I did not doubt, that it wasn't lying. I would have known it if it had been—communication in the spiritual realm, as it turned out, was not conducive to deception. It had served other mages, and it genuinely thought they had benefited from it. Now, that didn't mean that taking the deal would be a good idea, and it didn't mean that I would *agree* with it about how its previous employers had been affected—but it did mean that I couldn't dismiss it out of hand.

I mean...this thing wouldn't have been my first choice, but it *was* the only spiritual being I knew. And, for whatever reason, it really did seem to think it owed me for giving it a chance to kill Garrett. It

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wasn't a *good* entity, by any means, but...I'd known when I was first considering this venture that I wasn't exactly a pure soul myself.

I realized then, for the first time, how much of my perception of it before had been because of Garrett himself. Before I had thought that it smelled evil, downright evil to an extent unlike anything else I'd encountered. Now it was...different. It still smelled like decay, but there was less of rotten meat, and more of old leaves. That made sense, I supposed; much of the evil, much of the darkness, had been in the werewolf. It was him, not the demon, that had tortured and killed half a dozen wolves, that had gone on a remarkably enthusiastic killing spree, that had tried to spark a major supernatural war.

And in that moment I really grasped, as I hadn't before, what demons embodied—or this demon, at any rate. It wasn't destruction, and it wasn't violence, and it wasn't entropy, and it definitely wasn't evil. It was nothing that simple, nothing I could encapsulate in a single word. But, in that moment, I *understood* it. Maybe it was because we were in the spirit world, and every time I saw or heard or thought of it I felt the concepts that made it what it was. Maybe it was just that, in a weird sort of way, we weren't that different.

Think of a forest—a really big, really wild forest. There's all kinds of life going on in a big forest. You've got more going on than anybody, even someone like me who understood it on a lot more levels than most people, can really hope to know entirely. There's birth and growth and riotous, joyous *life*, a thousand kinds of life going on all at once.

But, in order for that life to exist, you need darker things too. The soil that a seed sprouts from is made up primarily of dead plant matter, decaying leaves and manure. It grows because other plants died to provide it something to grow in. It has a place to exist because another tree, that had once lived there, doesn't live any longer.

It has been shown time and again that the natural world doesn't work very well if everything is sweetness and light. Take Yellowstone, for example. When they reintroduced wolves to the park, things became better. Before there had been too many elk, destroying the trees. The absence of wolves had let the prey animals proliferate too much, and the forest as a whole had suffered for it.

That was what the demon was. It was the predator that thinned the herd, ensuring that those who live are the best and strongest. It was the wildfire that, in killing so many trees, made room for smaller plants and was, in fact, necessary for certain kinds of seeds to sprout. It was the breakdown of old things to be recycled into new things.

It was, to put it simply, the other half of the cycle. Not the nice half, maybe—but if you want life and beauty, it was necessary. And, if you know how to look, there is beauty to be found there as well.

I broke out of my reverie and looked at the demon again. "First thing," I said. "What's your name?"

I got the impression of a smile. "You cannot seriously think I am going to tell you that."

I grunted. "Take your name seriously, do you?"

"Most intelligent things do."

"Okay, I can live with that. But if you're going to work for me I need something to call you besides 'demon' and 'hey, you.' Suggestions?"

Indifference. "Choose a label if you need one so badly as that."

I came up blank for a moment, then grinned. "In that case," I said, "I dub thee Legion."

There was a brief pause. Then, in an amused voice, it said, "I presume you mean that in the sense of 'My name is Legion, for we are many?' Gospel of Mark, I believe?" There was another, shorter pause. "There is a certain amount of irony to that, you know. And I suppose it is appropriate enough, in a sense."

"I know," I said.

"Although if you think I am going to start referring to myself in the plural, you might be disappointed."

"Quite frankly I would be disturbed if you did. Besides, English doesn't have a distinct form for referring to someone in the second-person plural. Do you have a preference of gender?"

Legion looked at me in a way which suggested that I was rather disappointing. "You are aware, I hope, that the notion of gender is entirely inapplicable to me?"

"Yep," I agreed. "But, again, this is more for my convenience than yours. It gets tiring thinking of a person as an it."

I got the sense that it didn't especially care, either about gender or my difficulty with an entity who truly did not have it. "Again, it makes no difference to me."

"Cool. Male it is."

"Why male?"

I shrugged. "I'm male. You're my familiar. Makes sense to me."

"I see," Legion said in the tone of someone who doesn't see and doesn't object to blindness. "Before you get too comfortable with this thought, I think we need to get specific on the details. Exactly what are you offering?"

"Well," I said, "for starters, a body in the physical world." I gestured vaguely at the skeleton in the circle.

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There was a long pause, and I suddenly had the realization that to Legion, the physical world must be as foreign as this place was to me. Eventually, he said, "A...skeleton? You offer me a skeleton? Of a *dog*?"

"Hey," I said. "That's not a dog, it's a barghest. Or, more accurately, the pieces of around a dozen barghests. I understand there was a bit of difficulty with finding intact bones after we got finished with them...."

"Even worse," the demon said in a disgusted tone. "You offer me the dead body of something from the Otherside. Your bargaining ability lacks a certain something, do you know? Why not the *actual* dog over there?"

"Absolutely not," I said firmly. "She has too many things in her head already." I paused. "However...."

"Yes?"

"Nobody said that you had to exist in the same vessel all the time, did they?" It didn't move or speak at all, but nevertheless expressed negation perfectly. "In that case I might be able to arrange something. Consensual short-term possession, with a few rules. They would have to specifically give you permission—including their being aware of what you are, and what they're agreeing to. You would be along for a sensory ride only—no influencing the host—and you'd have to leave as soon as they ask you to. Are those terms agreeable?"

"I don't know," he said. "That's a pretty weak offer, especially given that you only *might* be able to arrange something."

"Let's say a six-month trial period, then. If you don't like the arrangement, you can renegotiate then or just leave." I would be fine with either option; six months isn't long, especially to immortal beings like Legion, but I could get a lot of benefit out of it.

"That's acceptable, I suppose. What else?"

"I'm willing to provide for other reasonable needs. You don't require food, correct?"

"Not unless I possess a mortal host. In a skeleton, no."

"Right, then. I can provide reasonable entertainment and a location to live in. Is there anything else?"

"That depends. What are you really looking for, here?"

"Research assistance and information," I said. "That's about it, really. If you *want* to get in on some violence I can practically guarantee the opportunity will arise, but I'm not trying to hire a thug."

"I suppose your terms are acceptable, then, Winter Wolf," he said quietly. "Bargain struck."

And that was that. From what I'd learned from Alexander, spirits—even the demonic variety—are bound by their contracts and oaths. The same way as the fae work, really; they might screw you over in a million inventive ways, but they can't or won't outright break their word.

Which, given that I'd gotten screwed every single time I'd made a bargain with a supernatural being, wasn't exactly a comforting thought.

There wasn't any backing out now, though. I reached out and found the power which, in the real world, I still had available to me. It hadn't carried over but, in some sense, it was still attached to me. That was what separated me from the true spirits, even when I was in their world. I was connected to the physical realm.

I dragged that magic over into this world, pulling it into myself. It was hard, but not undoable. Once I had it I sent it back, using it to sort of drill a channel—not to myself, but into the skeleton. The moment it was complete, Legion flowed down it, not so much moving as simply transitioning from one state to another.

My work done, I went back and settled onto my body, and closed my eyes. And, with a relaxation that felt like letting go of something you've been holding onto for so long you forgot it was even there, I returned to my natural environment, leaving the spiritual world behind.

And, frankly, good riddance.

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Chapter Eleven

Back in the real world I blinked a few times, trying to get used to having an actual body again. It felt strange, limiting and comforting at the same time. I couldn't tell, just by looking, whether a given tree was doing well or poorly, couldn't smell the emotions a person felt from a mile away. I'd lost a ton of sensory input—and felt marvelous for it.

I stretched gently. Judging by how stiff I was, I must have sat there for at least three hours—long enough that the moon was low in the sky, and the frost produced by my magic had melted in the warm night air.

"I'm okay," I said—or, more accurately, rasped. I hadn't actually, physically been chanting, but my throat was still dry. I swallowed and, in a more normal voice, called out "I'm okay. It worked."

Nobody shot me, so I must have sounded reasonably convincing. I reached out and found the power in the circles, taking it back into myself. I broke the circle around myself physically as well, picking up the bit of wood and the amulet, then walked over to examine the skeleton.

It looked the same as before, unless you knew exactly what to look for. Given that I did, I could see the thin layer of dark fog around some of the bones, almost too subtle to see. Without the energy of the circle blocking it I could smell, too, the distinct aroma of decaying leaves. Legion had successfully possessed the dead bones. I picked up the key and unlocked the padlock, holding all my power ready. If, against my expectations, the demon attacked me, this would be the time.

It didn't, and I picked up the other anchors. I carried them back to where Aiko, still a fox, and Snowflake waited for me near the packs. Behind me Legion heaved his new body upright and followed, making no sound at all.

"Hey," I said. "How'd it go?"

Aiko, who was watching me closely, made a noncommittal sound. Snowflake, who was looking over my shoulder, said and did nothing.

Until, a moment later, she came to her feet with a snarl. I could feel her anger, her sudden and violent hate, and shivered. A moment later I realized that what I was feeling came from the wolf inside her, and Snowflake herself was almost as confused as I was.

Oh, shit. I looked back and saw that yes, it was Legion he/she was staring at. The demon made no noise and hadn't shifted his position at all, but somehow it was obvious that while he felt no particular animosity to the dog, he wasn't backing down either.

I thought, idly, that if this was his normal means of expression we might have some issues in the near future. It was fine when I was a spirit, but now that I was back in my normal frame of mind I preferred more...explicit communication.

"Stop it," I told Snowflake. "*Stop*. He means no harm."

She didn't look away, but I heard the wolf speak within my mind. *No harm? How can you say that after what he did to me?*

Then I jumped as I heard Legion the same way. *Technically speaking I did nothing to you. Was I not bound, much as you were? And, after the werewolf died, did I not specifically leave you unharmed? Did I not maintain that host long enough for you to remove yourself?*

Huh. I'd always thought that I had done that.

The wolf felt unconvinced. "Look," I said. "You don't have to like each other, but you do have to tolerate each other long enough to get out of here. Once we're home I promise you don't have to see him again."

The wolf continued to stare at the demon for another moment. Then, abruptly, it retreated, almost palpably, from the forefront of Snowflake's mind. The dog, in control once again, rubbed against my knees and whined softly, looking for comfort. She was upset, and I understood why; while she'd always known that the wolf was there, in her, and they had fit together well, this was the first time it had really made itself known, taken control away from her.

Aiko looked amused by the whole thing. When I looked at her, though, I could see the concern and almost-fear beneath the surface, and wow. The leftovers of my sojourn in the spirit world were clearly going to be more of an issue than I'd thought.

I got to work cleaning up. I put the fire out, then piled the dirt back in over the pit until it looked almost the same as it had before I'd been there. The water I dumped out, and the pile of gravel distributed. The vase, stone, and chimes all went back in the bags. Then I scattered the markers for the second circle, and swept the salt mixtures up and placed them in a trash bag. I could have just left them, but it wouldn't have been good for the grass—somehow, most plants don't seem to *like* salt very much.

Once that was done, I put my various tools and toys back into their pockets and slipped my jacket back on. The pistol, unloaded, was returned to its holster. Tyrting I left where it was, because I was absolutely not concerned about what would happen to it. Tyrting was the kind of sword that happens to other people.

"I need to think for a few minutes," I said once everything was picked up. I directed my attention to Legion. "You will remain in this location until I return. You will take no action nor attempt to communicate with anyone."

He conveyed agreement, with faint undertones of amusement. I sighed and walked away.

I stopped on a short rise about fifteen minutes' walk away. There was a little hill with some boulders on top of it, and when I'd climbed to the top of the rocks I was about level with the tops of the

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trees on the ground below. I lay back, the cool granite a comforting presence against my back, and watched the moon for a few minutes.

Mostly what I was doing was just getting my head back together again. The bizarre senses I'd had in the other world were, mercifully, not coming back, but that didn't mean I was quite right, mentally. My magical senses were working overtime, whether I wanted them to or not, and it took me almost ten minutes to get them back to normal.

About the same time I did I heard quiet footsteps behind me. It wasn't the kind of quiet you get when somebody's being furtive; it was more like the near-silence people seem to adopt in holy places, regardless of whether they share the faith in question.

I smelled fox, even though Aiko was in human shape, and lilacs. Under that was a tone of spice, nutmeg predominating, which I knew originated in magic rather than any physical trait. Her power isn't spectacularly strong, but it is distinctive, and she uses it well.

"Hey," I said quietly as she sat next to me. I didn't look away from the moon.

"Hey. How'd it go?"

I shrugged wearily. "Not bad. I don't know. It worked, I guess."

"You don't sound very happy about it."

"No," I said wryly, "I guess not." I glanced at her, half-seen in the moonlight, then looked away again. "I...understand why most mages don't go to the spirit world very often, now."

She nodded, looking unsurprised. "Was it bad?"

"Not as bad as it could have been, I suppose. I...saw some things, that maybe I would rather not have seen."

She winced. "Ah. You want to talk about it?"

I thought for a moment, and found to my surprise that I did. Most of the time I'm not exactly the sort that likes to talk about a problem, but this time I actually thought it might help. It might make me feel better, if nothing else. "Maybe," I said. "But...some of the things I saw were about you." I looked away again, feeling oddly ashamed.

She went totally, utterly still in a way that humans generally don't. "What kind of things?"

"The scars behind the mask," I said quietly. "A smile worn to hide the blood. Crying in an empty room, with the scent of cherry blossoms underneath."

She relaxed and stared at her hands for a moment. "Oh," she said. "That kind of things."

"I'm sorry. For intruding. I wouldn't have looked, if I'd had a chance."

She looked at me squarely and I realized that she was as uncomfortable as I was. "Winter. I...care about you. That's not something I'm in a position to say often. It's not intruding for you to want to know who I am."

I watched the moon for a moment. "Maybe not, but it was still...." I frowned, struggling to explain what I'd felt. "I saw too much. We aren't supposed to see that much." I thought about what Alexander had said, about how important certain mental blocks could be, and suddenly understood what he'd meant a lot better. I might not have gone on a vision quest, but I still felt like my vision had been too clear in those moments for comfort.

She was silent for the space of a deep breath. "I'm glad you did, though," she said quietly. "It's the sort of thing you should know about. Should have known a while ago, probably, but I have...a hard time talking about myself, you know?"

"Yeah. I do too." I grinned weakly. "Maybe we should take turns. Clear the air a little. Ask some questions that have been bugging us for a while. You go first." I felt like I was standing on the edge of a precipice. I knew, with a chilly certainty, that whatever she asked, in that moment I would tell her. It was a very scary feeling.

"You never talk about your family," the kitsune said eventually. "Why not?"

"I guess I never really did the family thing. You already know about my parents."

"Sure," she said, "but that's not all there is to the story. I know you mentioned being raised by an aunt, for example."

"Yeah, but...we were never really comfortable, you know? When I was born, she was trying to put herself through college. She hadn't even thought of children, and then suddenly she gets saddled with me. Not her kid, not even human. Then her sister, who practically raised her, up and kills herself. I think she blamed me for that, on some level. She was never abusive, but there was always this undercurrent there."

I sighed. "Then I came into my power, and it got worse. She knew practically nothing about our world. My mother never told her. And then I started spending all my time daydreaming, sort of. I'd spend my time in something else's mind, and it had some...very serious effects on me."

"What kind of effects?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "Nothing too bad, at first. I was tired all the time, because I didn't sleep well—every time I slept the magic was there, just waiting for me. Then I learned to control it, learned to make it happen when I wanted. That was worse. It was...."

I frowned and met Aiko's eyes. "I was so weak," I said quietly. "Not even a werewolf then. Just a normal human, physically, except that I didn't freeze quite so easy. But I didn't *feel* human. By the time I was twelve I'd felt a lot of things that humans aren't supposed to. I knew what it was like for the cat

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when it catches the mouse and eats it raw in the ditch, heart still pounding with the excitement of the chase. I knew how the coyote feels when it's running, under the moon, so happy. I knew how it feels to *fly*, Aiko."

"And with all of that," she said softly, "who wants to go back to being human?"

I smiled bitterly. "Sounds like you've heard this story before."

She looked away again. "It happens that way sometimes, to kitsune. Every generation there are a few who...they turn into the fox and never come back. Never communicate, not even to the ones they loved. They're just...gone." Her own smile twisted a little. "They thought I might be one of them, when I was young. And that's with just *one* other body to get lost in."

I grunted vaguely. "Well. That was what happened to me, I guess. There wasn't anyone to teach me, anyone to explain to me how to control the power or why I would want to. And there's only so long you can spend in another mind before it starts to change you. Did you know that? I spent too long. I started getting territorial urges. Some kid stole my lunchbox and I just went at him, tried to gouge his eyes out."

I sighed. "After that I had to drop out of school. I was too dangerous to be around other kids. By that time I'd been diagnosed with severe depression and schizophrenia, and some kind of personality disorder, I don't remember the name. They prescribed a bunch of drugs, which didn't work. They made things worse, actually, because I spent more and more time outside my body to get away from the side effects. I lost weight, stopped eating, because I'd already eaten, just not in my own body. And everything tasted worse if I actually ate it, like cardboard and ashes."

"I'm glad you made it back," she said seriously.

I smiled wryly. "Mostly. Anyway, the next time I saw her it was almost worse. I'd been gone for years, and I think we didn't quite know what to make of each other. She was married to someone I'd never met, and the two of them had a daughter. And I wasn't even trying to be human at that point. I think I scared them all a little. The kid with the weird eyes who never talked about where he'd been or what he'd done since the last time she saw me. The conversation was always...awkward. They'd ask me how I was paying for college, for example. And what was I supposed to tell them? That I was being bankrolled by the Khan?" I shrugged. "So yeah, I never really got back in touch with them. I've got a few cousins now, but I've hardly talked to any of them."

"You know," she said thoughtfully, "I think that's what I like about you. Whenever I think that my life is a single enormous montage of bad decisions and worse results, all I have to do is look at you, and think about what *that* must be like, and what do you know, I feel better."

"Glad to be of service," I said dryly. "What about you? You've mentioned your mother a few times, but practically nothing else. What was it like growing up as a kitsune?"

"Lonely," she said after a moment's thought. "There was a lot to it, of course, but mostly I would say it was lonely. I never got on with my mother too well. She's very, very traditional, and I mostly only think of traditions in terms of how I can break them most entertainingly. She hardly even leaves the Otherside anymore, and if she does she's in Japan."

I frowned. "I thought you said you were born in Chicago."

"My father," she explained. "He's a lot more like me. He took her on a trip, then arranged for them to be stranded long enough that I was born on foreign soil. Just as a prank." She sighed. "I loved him, still do, but he wasn't much better than she was. He was always...unreliable. I remember he would vanish, for hours or days or weeks at a time. I never knew where he had gone, or when he would come back."

"Leaving you to be raised by your mother."

"Exactly. She kept trying to mold me into someone like her, and the harder she tried the harder I fought. Eventually, when I was about fifteen, she just gave up on me. She's barely spoken to me since." She smiled weakly. "That's what you saw. She has her own domain on the Otherside, where I spent most of my life growing up. I remember it always smelled like flowers, all the time. My room was empty because, when I was younger, she would take away anything that didn't fit with her image of who I should be. By the time she stopped it was a sort of rebellion—she took away anything that didn't fit, so I got back at her by having nothing at all. For a while I didn't even have a bed, and I slept on the floor."

I envisioned that, and shivered. My life might not always have been kind, but there'd always been someone there for me. My aunt, Edward, Conn and his family. I imagined what it might be like to spend your days sitting in an empty room, knowing that the only person who cared about you at all was too unreliable to ever count on.

I thought maybe I could understand why Aiko was the way she was. Not that there had ever been much doubt that she was messed up. I'd always been well aware that the reason we got along so well was that we were both broken in our own ways. I might not be happy about my psychological issues, but that doesn't make me blind to them.

I didn't particularly want to spend more time thinking about them, though, and I could tell that Aiko was starting to feel depressed by the conversation. I was feeling recovered, anyway, so I figured it was about time to move on.

"What a pair we make," I said, laughing. "Maybe we should go on Jerry Springer or something."

"I don't know about that," Aiko said doubtfully. "I've never seen the appeal of that show."

"Me neither, but I think you can make the bucks doing it."

"Ah," she said, "now *that* I can see the appeal of."

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"Likewise," I said, glancing at the sky. I wasn't very good at telling time by the moon or stars, but I was pretty sure it was edging into tomorrow. "I think that's about all the soul-sharing I can handle in one sitting."

"Thank the vaguely godlike beings," she said with a dramatic shudder. "I was afraid I'd have to resort to knock-knock jokes to get you to say that."

I chuckled. "Reckon it's about time to be heading back?"

"No, actually. That would have been about four hours ago. But this is a reasonable second choice."

Chapter Twelve

Aiko and I weren't exactly holding hands on the walk back, because that wasn't something we did, as a rule. But there was enough of a sense of closeness that Snowflake smirked when she saw us—and believe me, there are few things which are simultaneously more amusing and more disturbing than a husky smirking.

She also, of course, shared her thoughts on the subject with me more directly. And explicitly. It was sorta impressive, actually, in terms of ingenuity and sheer creativity. I made special note of several of the filthier jokes, which I would have to remember to tell Aiko. The kitsune had always claimed a total inability to hear Snowflake's mental communications—although her inability to keep her lips from twitching occasionally on the walk back suggested that this statement was, if not a lie, also not entirely true.

Legion was completely silent and, I have to admit, really freaking creepy. Logically I knew that he was *my* familiar and most certainly wouldn't be trying to kill me. That did very little to alleviate the feeling you get when you glance around and see a huge, doglike skeleton up and walking around next to you. It didn't help that there was still a trace of black mist around the bones which shifted and slid across the surface, or that I could see tiny sparks of aquamarine light in his eye sockets.

By the time we made it back to the car it was almost dawn. There was a certain amount of tension when both Snowflake and Legion had to cram into the back seat, but not as much as I'd expected.

Back in town we dropped by the lab long enough for me to put the various things I'd used back into their proper places. I also stuck Legion in the main room, with strict and specific orders not to leave the confines of the lab under any circumstances, for any reason, until instructed otherwise. By that point I was pretty much wiped out, and when we got to my house I went straight in and passed out for a few hours.

I really wanted to get right to business, but I require sleep as much as the average human. One of the things I've learned, and which was hard to accept at first, is that trying to work beyond my limits just isn't that great an idea. Oh, staying up all night working *sounds* all right when you're dealing with a matter of life and death. But tired people are inefficient people. If I were to try and quiz Legion in that frame of mind, it was entirely likely that I would miss some crucial detail or something. Besides which, it would only make the eventual crash worse. Better to take a few hours to rest now, approach the next step in a reasonably sound state of mind, and hope to not do anything stupid as a result.

Granted, considering my normal ratio of intelligent to stupid actions, that was a sorta anemic hope. But the theory is still sound.

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I woke up around noon feeling reasonably good considering that either Snowflake or Aiko had drooled on me in her sleep. Aiko was gone, but she'd left a note apologizing for using all the milk, if you can call a note that smug an apology. I got up, got dressed, and ate dry cereal for a late breakfast. Then I proceeded to completely ditch work in favor of doing creepy things with magic.

That's the nice part of running your own small-scale business. You don't have to call in. If you don't go in to work, not only can nobody tell you off for it, there isn't even anyone there to answer the phone. You don't have to account for it or provide an excuse, either, except to the customers.

Of course, the downside is that there isn't anybody to pass the buck to either. If I didn't go to work, the store didn't open. If the store didn't open, I risked offending customers. If customers got offended, I had no business. Without business I receive no money. The resulting cause-and-effect chain had the potential to be a real pain in the stomach if I kept it up for long.

On the other hand, there were hyperviolent mages running around town killing things and challenging the werewolves. To make matters worse I had now had two run-ins with them, which meant that they were quite likely to take a shot at me next. I'm annoying enough that I've motivated a few such attacks in the past, when there were bad guys doing their thing near me. So I decided that was more important and went in to the lab.

It was a bit of a long walk, but I'm more or less used to that. Besides which, even if I had a car or rode my bike in the city, I wouldn't want to leave it parked in that neighborhood for long. Snowflake came along. On the way a thug tried to hold us up with the kind of cheaply-made knife you find advertisements for in certain magazines.

That didn't work out so great for him. I held his attention long enough for her to sneak around behind him. Then she lunged and bit his leg with what I suspected was *not* the normal amount of strength for a dog to exert. I mean, maybe a mastiff or a violent St. Bernard could snap both bones in a man's lower leg in one bite, but that's not the kind of thing you expect from a husky.

He collapsed and dropped the knife. I picked it up and examined it for a moment. It turned out to be just as much a piece of crap as I had suspected. It was not particularly difficult to smash it against the wall. I smiled at the downed man, showing lots and lots of teeth, and then dropped the pieces before we went on her way.

Things were real uneventful after that. You don't have to be from the supernatural side of things to size every stranger up as predator or prey, and we had just removed any doubt that we weren't on the prey side of the equation. After our little demonstration, the local predators had decided we were too tough to be worth tangling with, and the prey were too scared of us to let us see them, let alone start trouble.

I walked into the lab and turned on the fluorescent lights in the former kitchen. Snowflake, in what might have been vigilance, boredom, or a subtle statement of her opinions, settled down to wait in the entryway.

"Wake up, Legion," I said cheerfully as I sat down. "First day on the new job."

The skeleton, positioned in the exact center of the room, was unresponsive for a moment. Then thick black fog seemed to boil out of it until all the bones were coated with it, and there was even a suggestion of muscle and skin between them. It was full of the same flickering sparks I'd seen before, a variety of gem tones that was even stranger and more beautiful to watch here than as a spirit. Then, finally, bright blue pinpoints of light flamed to life in the skull.

"I live only to therve, Mathter," he lisped. In a perfect mimic of Igor's voice from the movie. Great. In case there weren't enough jokers around me already.

"Cool," I said. "I have some questions I want answered. First off, why do you look like that?"

Piercingly blue eyelights stared at me. "You do recall giving me this body, I hope?"

"Well, sure," I said. "But your manifestation. The fog, the lights. Why do you look the same as what I saw in the spirit world? Given that that was my subconscious interpreting unfamiliar signals in an intelligible way, there isn't any reason you should look the way I thought you did."

"I'm your familiar," he said as though that made perfect sense. "You're the one that brought me here, the one that anchors me here. What else would I look like?"

So my subconscious influenced the demon? That was interesting. Made sense, too. Spiritual beings like demons can't live in the material world without a vessel of some kind, and some kind of magic to form a path for them. It made a weird sort of sense that an entity made out of ideas would take its form based on the ideas of the person that had provided that bridge.

"Okay," I said once I'd thought that through. "How much do you know about vampires?"

"Enough," he said, his tone somehow suggesting a shrug.

"Know how to kill a vampire without being injured or leaving any kind of mark on the body? Nothing at all detectable by advanced human instruments?"

"Technically," he said, "vampires are already dead. No mortal instrument detects that, either."

"The fact that they get up and walk around suggests that 'dead' isn't the end of the story," I said dryly.

"Well," he hedged, "not exactly. You do blood magic, right? I saw you use it the last time."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Well, yes. But I haven't touched it since then." I'd come close enough to killing myself through overuse to scare me off it for a long while. Plus, once I'd started learning

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serious magic from Alexander, I came to realize that it wasn't nearly as awesome as I'd thought. Most of the time your ability to maintain absolute focus and concentration was more of a limiting factor than raw magical power anyway. Given that blood magic didn't improve that concentration any, it didn't really let you use more power than normal magic. It just let you use it *faster*, which (although still sometimes very valuable) wasn't usually good enough to justify the costs.

"Whatever," he said. "You know how it works, right?"

I shrugged. "Sure. You take a piece of your life energy and sort of burn it as fuel for magic."

"Crude," Legion said disapprovingly. "But I suppose accurate enough in an elementary sense. You could use someone else's life for that purpose, though, correct?"

"Yeah, but only if you're a freaky insane black sorcerer or something. It isn't kosher."

"Well, neither are vampires," he said dryly. "They do essentially the same thing, except that they don't use the energy as fuel, as you so cleverly phrased it. They just keep it."

I nodded slowly. "That's why they seem alive even though technically they're dead. They still have life—it just doesn't belong to them."

"Imprecisely phrased, but essentially correct."

I frowned. "So the blood is just a conduit?"

"Of course it is," Legion said, managing to make the skull smirk somehow. "You didn't think they literally consumed it, did you? Blood is a reasonably nutritious food, but not enough to survive on. All they truly need is the energy it carries."

"Um. I was under the impression that using blood magic is dangerous. Like, really dangerous. Losing your life energy has some fairly bad consequences, last I heard. Like, lethally bad."

"Yep," he said cheerfully. "Neat, isn't it? But actually you can lose quite a bit of energy without dying. You make more. That's what separates you from vampires."

I swallowed. Legion was technically correct; you *can* lose a lot of life without actually stopping the whole "living" thing. But that doesn't make it good for you. Losing even a little of that power could leave you with a migraine for days on end, or put you into a coma if you take too much. It's *bad* for you, especially if you're just a normal human.

"What happens to the people they feed on?"

"Depends on a lot of factors," he said brightly. I was suddenly, bizarrely reminded of a med student I knew in college. He would talk about diseases in detail that made even *me* want to vomit with the same cheerful, fascinated tone. "But mostly it depends on the vampire. They generally break down into two groups."

I got out a pencil and paper. "What's the difference?"

"Well, one does things predator-style. They move around a lot—weekly, if not more often. When they get hungry they pick somebody easy and get 'em alone. Suck out all their energy at once and walk away. There's never anything to connect them to the vic, so it blends in to the background crimes."

I shivered. "And they just keep doing it like that? Kill somebody every week?"

"Sure. Works real good."

"Okay, that is officially freaky. What's the other group do?"

"They approach it in more of a sedentary way. Settle down in one location for the long haul—centuries, sometimes. They pick the best looking prospects and feed on 'em consistently. Sorta like domesticating cattle for milk."

"What happens to the...what do you call the people getting eaten?"

"A stable. And it depends on how much the vampire takes. Vamps burn life a little more than three times as fast as a human produces it, for the most part. So unless there are at least four people in the stable they wear down pretty quick. Otherwise they can last for years. Decades, sometimes."

I frowned. "It can't be good for them, though."

"Well, no. It tends to have side effects. They go from feeling awesome to feeling terrible all the time. Tend to be rather vulnerable to disease. It wears out the body. Mostly they either die young or vamp out unless it's an exceptionally large stable."

"You know," I said thoughtfully, "I always knew I didn't like vampires. I just didn't know *why* until now."

Legion laughed, a hollow thing that sounded like it came from the bottom of a mine shaft, and which would probably make dogs howl and children cry.

"So," I said, "they rely on stolen life force. Can they *do* anything with it?"

"Of course they can," Legion said dismissively. "Essentially the same as blood magic. They can take that reserve and use it."

"What all can they use it *for*?" I said, irritated. I know the whole literal-answer thing is sort of a demon's shtick, but it gets old *fast*.

"Essentially anything you can do with magic," he told me. "Especially the mental stuff. It drains them, though. Most vampires won't use it unless they absolutely have to. Especially not the young ones. They don't have enough skill to hold much of a reserve, so any expenditure is more dangerous for them."

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"How much can the old ones hold?"

"No idea," he said cheerily. "It depends on what you mean by 'old,' in any case. One about ten years old could hold maybe enough to sustain itself three weeks. I don't know how old the *really* old ones are, but there isn't much point to saying what their upper limit might be, because they would have to work very, very hard to reach it. But it's safe to say at least enough to sustain their life for a couple years."

Two years of life for a vampire equaled a little more than six years of production by a human being equaled a holy shitload of power. Like, enough to absolutely dwarf everything I could do. What was worse was that, based on my understanding of blood magic, they could use it *all at once*.

It might be hard to understand how big of a deal that is, until you compare it to normal human magic. If I want to win (or even survive) any given fight, I have to prepare ahead of time. Creating wards, building magical foci and stored spells, and laying useful enchantments on gear were all ways to concentrate a lot of effort in a little time. Blood magic works in the opposite way. You build up the energy slowly, taking weeks or months to recover from serious exertion, then spend it all at once.

If you can game the system and remove the long recovery period, it would be...very scary. I mean, that's the whole reason *why* stealing other people's life is so frowned on.

"What happens when the vampire starts to run low?"

"They can't do as many vampirey things. At some point they're pretty much driven to hunt."

"And if they can't? Like if they're imprisoned or something?"

"They go nuts. Then they break their body into itty-bitty pieces trying to get to the nearest source of life. Then they die."

Maybe that explained things. If that vampire had run out of juice, it would presumably have dropped in its tracks, without necessarily showing any reason for it. But that didn't explain everything. For example, why wouldn't there be some physical damage from either a fight serious enough that it required the use of all of the vampire's power, or from self-inflicted injuries as it slowly starved to death?

And *why* had I smelled vampiric power at the hotel?

For an instant I almost had it, on pure intuition. Then the moment passed and I was confused again.

"Okay," I said. "Next topic. What do you know about the Fenris Wolf?"

Legion shifted uncomfortably. "Now that," he said, "is not my department."

"Oh, come on. You have to know *something*."

"Maybe so," he said very seriously. "But I am not discussing that one. Light these bones on fire if you wish, and throw the ashes in the river. You will not move me on this." There was something in Legion's tone which was almost...frightened?

Okay, *that* wasn't creepy at all. I mean, I knew that Fenris scared people, a lot—but Legion was a *demon*. A being made out of ideas. Granted he had a sense of self, but he was still nigh indestructible. There wasn't a lot that could affect him, and even if you did it would only be destroying his form in this world, which wasn't exactly critical to him. Couple that with the power I had seen him display when we'd been on opposite sides and the cavalier way he talked about vampires with the power to wipe a small city off the map, and I got the impression of a being not easily impressed with danger.

What's it mean when somebody like that is too afraid to talk about someone—too afraid to even say their name?

I was pretty sure that it meant somebody like me was in over my head. So far under I not only couldn't see the surface, I didn't even know where it was. Oh, I'd known that before, but there's a difference between knowing something in your head and feeling it in your stomach. One's a whole lot more uncomfortable than the other.

"Okay," I said. "Let me think a minute."

"Sure, sure. Which word will you do, boss? I guess you might fit two into a minute if they're short..."

"Oh shut up," I said, exasperated. Why is it that *everyone* I deal with thinks they're just terribly funny?

Legion was obediently silent as I considered the situation. It seemed to me that it was time I actually *thought* about what was going on instead of just reacting and asking other people.

The first thing I realized was that I'd been too focused on *how* this stuff had happened at the expense of *why* someone would do it, an error I am unfortunately prone to. I mean, both what Legion had said and what I'd already known said that killing a vampire was the kind of thing even mages don't do casually. They're dangerous, powerful, and tough as hell. You have to have a good reason to pick a fight with something like that. That's not even taking into consideration the reaction other vampires would have to such a thing. They aren't as organized as werewolves, but there *is* a higher organization there and it isn't something that anyone wants to tangle with.

Why he had killed the vampire was a question I couldn't answer. There were just too many possible reasons for it. It could have been revenge, for example, or the mage might just have a major hate on for vampires, or any of a dozen other motives—and that was just the ones I could think of off the top of my head.

But as I thought, I saw that there were really two questions. There was the question of why the mage had killed the vampire, which I couldn't answer with anything resembling surety. Then there was

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the entirely different question of why, having killed a vampire, a mage would go to the effort of placing it in a hotel room. There was no logical reason he couldn't have just incinerated the corpse or dumped it down an abandoned mine shaft or something, which meant he must have had a reason to do what he did instead.

And I was pretty sure I knew what it was. It felt like a challenge. The whole thing practically screamed *Look at what I can do. I killed him and there was nothing he could do about it. I'm so good you can't catch me even though I went out of my way to be obvious. I'm so powerful I can go to the effort of playing with somebody's mind just to make this statement. Fear me.* It was effective, too; just the thought of tangling with the guy willing to drop a challenge like that was enough to make me uneasy.

It left me with two lingering questions, though. First, who had he been sending that message to? Other vampires seemed like the most probable bet, but I couldn't be sure.

And, second, did I even want to stop this guy? I mean, I hadn't met any vampires, but every single thing I learned about them made me like them less. If he was willing to take the fight to them, deliver unto their undead asses all the terror and pain and death they had been visiting on people for millennia, I wasn't sure I wanted to do anything other than stand on the sidelines, shout encouragements, and maybe sell hot drinks to other spectators.

Granted there had been that attack at the restaurant, but I wasn't confident that had been related. It was hard to envision a person or group powerful and insanely confident enough to deal with vampires like that doing something as ridiculous and pathetic as those two mages had tried to pull. My instincts still said there was a connection there, but I didn't know what it was.

Man, I was regretting agreeing to give Kyra a hand with this situation.

Chapter Thirteen

After that, working on the depressingly plausible assumption that I would need it, I made a stored spell. I had two others, but neither of them had really been intended for violence. I had, rather optimistically, thought that it wouldn't be worth that much work to produce something which could only be used as a weapon and would only work once. Past experience suggested, however, that once I got into a mess like this one violence was almost inevitable, and a few hours of work is an excellent trade for continued survival. So my third stored spell was the kind of thing which was very specifically meant for violence. I didn't really expect it to do much against players on this scale, but it beat nothing.

Legion was a surprising amount of help with the process of creating it. I had assumed that most of his talk about knowing magic and working well with mages was just padding his résumé. As it turned out, though, if anything he'd understated his understanding of the technical aspects of magic. With his advice on power flows and storage mechanisms, it was *much* easier than I would have expected.

Granted, his techniques weren't \ my normal fare. It was fluid, rather than the more typical static format, energy constantly moving and shifting and sliding from one form to another. That was to be expected; Legion was an entity of change, not stability. For some purposes, like a long-term enchantment, it would have been ineffective. Given that a stored spell was designed to release power very quickly, though, it was in some ways *more* suited to Legion's approach than what I had learned from Alexander.

It was still hard work, though, especially because I was trying something that wasn't natural for me. Every mage has things they do easily and well, and others that are, well, not so much. You can still *do* them, especially in the unrushed conditions I was working under. But it's a lot more difficult, and it takes longer. Given that I was also learning a whole new way to create a stored spell, it was even trickier. By the time I'd finished that and gotten the lab back into order it was nearly dark.

I *did* finish it, though, in one sitting, and I felt a certain justifiable pride as I slipped it into a pocket, checking that I could grab it quickly and easily. The small, transparent glass marble felt hot against my skin, even through my pants. Not painful, exactly, but very noticeable. That was Legion's influence, I expect; the energy wasn't just sitting there, it was active even without being released. Over a long period I thought that either the power invested in it would bleed off or the structure of the spell would decay to uselessness, but since I was betting I'd need it within the next few days I wasn't too concerned. I'd be *thrilled* if things went so well that I had to worry about that.

I grabbed a few other things, including my other stored spells, and then went to leave. Snowflake, still lying near the door, looked uneasy, but since she didn't convey anything specific to me I decided to ignore it for the moment. I locked up behind me and walked out.

I made it about three steps before a woman on the street, leaning against the wall and smoking, asked, "Are you Winter Wolf?"

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I looked at her and frowned. Up close she didn't look like the sort of person you find in places like that. She looked to be about sixteen, and she was lean and somewhat hungry looking, but she didn't have the confident swagger of a prostitute or the drawn look of a junkie. Her clothing was about ten cuts too high, too, nicer than mine—which, granted, doesn't take much, but still. You don't expect to see name-brand shirts or jackets in a neighborhood like that unless you're at the fence's place.

Oh yeah, and she knew my name. Which I hadn't shared with anyone in that area—in fact, I tried not to talk to them at all.

"Depends," I said cautiously. "Who's asking?"

"My mistress," she said as though she'd expected the question.

About that time I finally realized what had been bothering me about the woman's scent. It was hard to get a clear grip over the cigarette, but I could get a fair amount. For example, I could smell that she was human. And I could also smell a bit of something *other* about her magic.

If I hadn't just encountered it I wouldn't have recognized the touch of vampire in otherwise human power. It was inexpressibly different from the aura I'd detected at the hotel; the vampire smelled like a part of her magic, rather than something external to it.

I stared for a moment, and then it clicked. "Let me guess," I said. "Your mistress is a vampire."

The girl went tense and her eyes flickered to the nearby windows. I chuckled. "Relax," I drawled easily. "Even if somebody heard us, which they didn't, and they took it seriously, which they wouldn't, ain't nobody gonna believe 'em if they decide to talk."

The vampire's minion relaxed a moment later. "Fine," she said, not sounding nearly as venomous as I would have expected. "Yes, she is. Now are you or are you not Mr. Wolf?"

"I've been called that," I said. "Although I prefer Winter from friends, enemies, and most people in between. Was there anything else?"

"She would like a meeting with you," she said, ignoring my rather pitiful attempt at levity. "Midnight tonight, at Pryce's bar."

"Right," I said, dragging it out. "And I should believe her...why, exactly? I mean, don't take this the wrong way or anything, but her kind doesn't have the best reputation for fair dealing, do they? I'm not real excited about the prospect of an ambush, here."

"She offers you her word of safe conduct," the girl said. "And, as a sign of good faith, she offers you my life as collateral. Should you find her behavior less than courteous, it is yours to do with as you wish." Her chin lifted slightly, and the defiant look in her eyes almost covered up the fear.

I sighed. "Of course she does," I muttered. I would attend the meeting—I didn't see much way around that, and I might learn something—but I couldn't just let the girl go. I doubted that the vampiress

had much fondness for her, but she was still the only bargaining chip I had. Besides which, her boss might view it as an insult if I let her offer go without at least pretending.

On the other hand, I didn't exactly have facilities here to put her in. Even if I were willing to tolerate her in my lab, which I wasn't, I couldn't have kept her from walking out. The wards were designed to keep things out, not in.

I thought for a few minutes, and then nodded. "Do you have a car?"

"No."

I nodded again. "Right." Then I pulled out my phone and made a call.

Kyra pulled up about twenty minutes later. Not the fastest service, but beggars can't be choosers and her wheels were cheaper than calling a cab. I was just surprised she'd come to pick us up herself; now that she was the boss, I had sorta expected her to detail the grunt work to one of her grunts.

I'd made small talk with the girl in the meantime. It was awkward, because I'm not very good at small talk, but I'd managed to get a little information out of her as we talked. Her name was Olivia, she was actually nineteen, and she'd been with the vampire less than a year. I couldn't get anything on the vampire herself, though. Olivia became unresponsive when the topic came up, and I figured pressing would be a little ruder than was wise.

Olivia got in the back without prompting, Snowflake slipping in beside her, and I took the passenger seat next to Kyra. I wasn't concerned about being stabbed in the back, not with the dog there. The werewolf looked curiously at the girl, but all she said was, "Where to?"

"Your place," I said, rubbing my forehead. That never really does anything for a headache in my experience, but somehow I try it every time. "I'm supposed to keep track of her for a while, and I was hoping your people could keep an eye on her for me. Maybe put her in a quiet room downstairs."

Kyra paused slightly. She knew as well as I did that I'd been referring to the pack's safe room, and she was clearly curious what I was doing bringing a prisoner in. "How long we talking?" she asked, pulling her old and increasingly beat-up car out into the nonexistent traffic. I'm not quite sure why Kyra keeps driving the same vehicle, when she could have appropriated one of the newer, better-maintained pack vehicles for herself. It wasn't like she'd had any trouble moving into the last Alpha's giant house in the south end.

"I don't know," I said. "One o'clock tonight, maybe?" I shrugged.

It was late enough that there were very few cars on the roads. We made it to Kyra's house, which mostly belonged to the pack, in about fifteen minutes. Long enough that the absence of conversation became a palpable presence in the air, but not long enough to drive any of us to fill it.

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When we got there, Kyra invited me in a tone that made it clear that this wasn't the kind of invitation you decline. I sighed, but Snowflake and I followed her in; I couldn't exactly say that she was being unreasonable in wanting more info than I'd given her so far.

Olivia sat uncomfortably on the edge of one of the couches downstairs. I wasn't concerned about her doing a runner. Not with two other werewolves, one in fur and one out, in the same room. The man in human form was engrossed in his book and the wolf looked to be asleep, but I knew for a fact that if she started to leave they would turn out to be paying much more attention than was apparent.

And no, Kyra hadn't told them not to let her leave. She didn't have to. All she had to do was carry herself in a certain way, look at Olivia with the right combination of hostility and resignation, for them to know more or less what her role was here. They wouldn't let her go.

Here's a piece of advice for you, in case you're ever in that situation: Don't run from werewolves. Especially not on their home turf. I don't care if you're an Olympic sprinter; you're not getting away. If they don't have you within a minute, it's only because they're enjoying the chase too much to want it to end so soon.

Snowflake, lucky dog, got to lie down and wait near the door while Kyra and I went upstairs. Technically the whole house belongs to her, but in practice most of it's more like communal property. Almost the whole first floor, for example, is taken up by the huge lounge area where we'd left the vampire's envoy. There are also guest rooms, a kitchen, and such that are open to the pack any time of day or night.

The top floor isn't. That's where she makes her real home, in a handful of well-furnished rooms. That house was the heart of the pack, and her study was the heart of the house. It still looked pretty similar to what it had been when Christopher ruled the pack from it, but you could see the little touches Kyra had added. I thought it was particularly telling that she'd stuck a bumper sticker onto the huge, antique mahogany desk. It read, in white letters against a black background, "DOG IS MY COPILOT."

"Okay," she said, dropping into the comfy-looking office chair. She leveled one finger at me accusingly. "What are you getting me into now?"

"Nothing," I said with my best air of wounded innocence. "Probably. Most likely. Well, not very much at any rate. And I think you might have actually gotten me into it, so I'm not totally sure that counts."

She sighed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," I said, "apparently a vampire wants to chat tonight and she sent the girl with an invitation. And as collateral. I'm just guessing, but I think it might have something to do with that, ah, *situation* at the hotel you brought me in on."

"Wonderful," she muttered darkly. "Just great. You want us to watch the girl in case she tries to pull something?"

"Can't be too careful," I replied. "And I couldn't think of anyone else I know with a cell in their basement."

Her lips twitched. "I don't think that'll be necessary. Anybody who can get away from this place isn't going to be slowed down by being in the safe room."

"True," I said. "And thank you. I'll call you after I finish talking to the vampire and tell you to let her go, if that's all right."

"Bit optimistic there, aren't you? You don't think this is a setup?"

I grimaced. "Could be. I kinda doubt it, though. If nothing else, you'd be insane to arrange something like that at Pryce's. Break the truce there and they'd take you apart."

"Yeah," Kyra said, something a little bit uncomfortable in her voice. Given that she'd worked there for years, only quitting when she got the job of Alpha, she'd probably seen it happen a few times. If so I definitely wasn't asking what it had looked like. Most of the people who frequent his bar are, like me, the strays and fringes of magical society, not spectacularly powerful—but there are lots of us, and some of his customers have a nasty sense of humor. I know I wouldn't want to break the unspoken rules that govern his place.

"Oh," I said, "speaking of. I think I'm making some progress on that issue. We'll see if I can get any more information tonight, but I've got some idea what's going on."

She sighed. "Thank God *something's* gone right, then. If you don't mind I'll just leave that one to you. Call if you need some thugs—my lunatics could use something to occupy their time anyway."

"How are you holding up?" I asked. I hadn't seen Kyra much since January, and I was a little concerned for her. She sounded so...overwhelmed when she talked about her new position.

"Not too bad," she said. "Although, in retrospect, Christopher was a lot more of an asshole than I thought at the time."

"Something else he didn't tell you about?" I said sympathetically. We'd discovered, after his death, that he'd been concealing a lot of info from her. That was, technically, within the rights of an Alpha—but considering her position as his second it was deeply sketchy.

"Of course," she said. "I think my favorite was when Jack—that's my chief minion, you don't know him—had to come up and explain that the crime boss the pack does business with was on the phone." She snorted. "I didn't even know he had a deal set up with gangsters. Figures."

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"What kind of deal?" I asked, curious. Plenty of werewolves engage in activities of questionable legality, but I wouldn't have figured Christopher for one of them. He'd always projected the upright, law-abiding air so hard you'd almost forget he wasn't human.

"More or less the same as we have with the police," she said. "He puts some influence in our favor as far as public opinion goes, and if he has a problem with my people he comes to me instead of dealing with it directly. We fix problems for him on the supernatural side of things." She shrugged. "Works out pretty well."

"Wait a second," I said. "A problem with your people? You mean he's *here*?" Logically I know Colorado Springs is a pretty big city these days, over half a million people, but...wow. It somehow never occurred to me that there would be an organized crime presence here.

"Denver, mostly," she said. "Not my turf, but he's been moving in here too. I understand he saw which way the wind was blowing and moved west about fifteen years ago. Got in before there was much competition and these days he's big-time." Her lips quirked. "I could arrange an introduction if you'd like."

"No thanks," I said. "I don't think I need another bad influence right now. I should probably be going. I'll let you know if I learn anything."

"Please do. Oh, and don't forget to call after your meeting so we know the vampire kept her word. Otherwise, well." Her teeth showed in a smile thin and brittle and sharp as broken glass. "Who knows what might happen."

"Will do," I told her, and then I left.

Chapter Fourteen

I had enough time to stop at home before the meeting, so I did. I wasn't sure quite what the circumstances of this meeting were going to be, but I was pretty much certain I needed to change my outfit.

A first meeting between supernatural beings is always a touchy matter. Think of it as being like two gunslingers who don't know each other running into one another in the local saloon. Now, they might not be enemies and they might not be about to fight each other in the street, but that doesn't mean they aren't ready for it to happen. So, inevitably, they're going to be sizing each other up. Checking how well maintained the other guy's gun is and so forth.

Ideally I wanted to present myself as confident, casual, and ready for trouble. The problem is that there is a thin line between presenting yourself as ready for trouble, and broadcasting the attitude that you're *looking* for trouble. Imagine walking into that Wild West saloon with an AK-47, a rocket launcher, two belts of ammo, and a dozen grenades instead of just a pistol. On the other end, though, you have the people who aren't carrying a weapon at all. Nobody respects those people in a place like that. And, as Machiavelli and even normal businessmen know, it's never good to bargain with someone who holds you in contempt. It's even worse with a supernatural predator like a vampire. Present yourself as a weakling and they don't see you as something to make deals with. They see you as food.

So it was a little tricky deciding how heavily armed I wanted to be. The first thing I did, of course, was change clothing. A T-shirt and cargo pants is fine for working in the lab, but not exactly a good first impression. Fortunately I still had the black pseudo-silk shirt and grey slacks I'd bought for that ill-fated party at Ryujin's palace. I'd added a number of pockets to the slacks, of course, and there were even a couple small ones carefully hidden in the shirt.

I put all three of my stored spells into pockets—a piece of rock crystal in my left-hand hip pocket, an iron sphere the size of my pinkie nail in an inside pocket, and the most recent glass marble tucked into one sleeve. My rope of shadows went into my right-side pocket, and I slipped a pair of small folding knives into their respective positions as well. I slipped my pendant on over my head as well, and put on a pair of rings.

I debated taking either a gun or Tyrfing, but decided that it would be that little bit too much. Plus they weren't nearly as easy to conceal as my other gear, most of which could be mistaken for a simple fashion accessory.

I also, over her protests, left Snowflake at home. I wasn't really expecting this to turn into a fight, and I did *not* want to bring her onto anybody's radar.

Pryce's looked exactly the same as usual, an island of stability in the madness that my world had become. It was kind of comforting, in a weird way; it was like, so long as it was there, my life could still go back to normal. But that was an illusion, and I knew it. I couldn't go back.

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Like it or not, this *was* the new normal for me.

I walked down the short flight of steps to the floor, inhaling the rich aroma of the bar. It was a lot like any other such place; dozens of kinds of wood blending together into a single tone that formed the base for a complicated scent made up of food and old beer and dozens of other things that had been there so many years it had sunk into the walls. Familiar. Comforting.

It was late, already eleven thirty, but there were still plenty of people there. A few werewolves, a few geezers playing chess in the corner, a handful of folks at the bar drinking. A young woman I was acquainted with was at her usual station at the pool table, playing a vaguely biker-looking fellow. He was winning and she was wearing an uncomfortable expression I was very familiar with, and which made me grin. Rachel was a pool shark of the first order, all the more effective because her slight build and innocent face made her look about as home there as a penguin in a palm tree. If she was losing it was because the money hadn't come out yet. There were a few other people I knew, and a handful I didn't, like the table of three college-age kids with the slightly nervous air of people who really don't belong where they've found themselves.

All of that was normal. Several of them turned to look at the door as I opened it, which was normal enough as well; people at Pryce's tend to be very aware of what's going on around them. Pryce himself was, as always, behind the bar directing the ebb and flow of the place like a master orchestra conductor. He was a big man, six foot five and muscled like a weightlifter. With Conn's words in mind I studied him a bit more closely than usual, but I still couldn't even guess what he might be. He looked the same as he had since I started going there, showing not even the slightest change despite the years that had passed since then. His bright red hair and beard showed the same proportion of grey as always.

When he saw me he beckoned shortly and went back to serving drinks. He didn't say anything, or watch to be sure I was coming. He didn't need to. In Pryce's bar you do what he says, because otherwise bad things happen. It is his own tiny kingdom, and his power there is absolute.

"What's up?" I said as I approached the walnut bar. As always I was impressed by the skill, the pure artistry that had gone into it. I've made some pretty things, but nothing like that.

"Meeting," he said brusquely. "In back." Pryce is not much given to conversation, and he particularly detests pleasantries and trivialities.

"In back?"

He nodded. "Private room." Pryce didn't make any obvious signal, but suddenly one of the waitresses appeared next to him. She led me through several back hallways to a small, unmarked oak door I hadn't seen before. On the other side was, apparently, Pryce's private dining room. I guess I must have known he had one, but it hadn't ever really occurred to me before.

It was nice. Lots of oak and mahogany in the furniture, all of which was handmade and looked very, very expensive. A long conference-room style table, with a dozen or so fancy chairs along it. Oak paneling. Thick carpet, in jet black that I knew must be absolute hell to keep so clean and perfect-

looking. A stone fireplace that could roast a whole ox, and which was currently burning merrily despite the warmth of the night. The high vaulted ceiling was more oak. There were maybe a dozen long pennants hanging down from the rafters, the colors vivid and bright beneath the dust. They gave the place a strangely medieval feel, like the great hall of some ancient castle, although nowhere near as large.

They weren't the flags of human nations. I didn't recognize most of them, but there was one I knew quite well. It was soft silver-grey, tapering to a single point, with a single black design on it. I thought it looked like a wolf's face, but it was so stylized and ornate it could easily have been a lion, or a coyote. It could be anything, really. I couldn't see it from here, but I knew that up close I would see elaborate patterns of filigree and knots in the border around the design.

It was the seal of the Pack, seldom used except on official documents and the like. Which, in turn, indicated that the others were probably emblems of other supernatural nations.

I was early, but—of course—the vampire was there before me. She was leaning against the wall near the fireplace. I'd never encountered a living vamp before, and I was somewhat surprised at how easy it was to tell her apart from a human. Physically it was hard to tell, except for a slightly odd odor, but magically she didn't resemble a human even a little bit. Her power was strong, strong enough to overwhelm any other scents in the room, and stank of blood and spice. It was a little different than the other vampiric magic I'd smelled, more cumin and less cayenne. That was to be expected; there's always a little variation, even between identical human twins.

I will admit that I been a bit stereotypical in my expectations. I had, subconsciously, anticipated someone tall and hungry-looking. She would have black hair and skin that hadn't seen the sun for decades, and be correspondingly pasty. I expected her to be holding a glass of fresh blood, which Pryce quite likely kept on hand for events such as this one, or at least of wine meant to look like blood. Maybe even an opera cloak, for maximum melodrama.

Well, I was right about the tall, and about exactly nothing else. Her hair was ash-blond over blue eyes. She was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved black T-shirt. Oh, and she was drinking Coke out of a glass bottle.

"I hope you don't mind that I reserved a room," she said as I looked around. "But I'd rather not have this overheard."

"Not a problem with me," I said easily. "I hope you don't mind if we get right down to business, though. I'd like to get some sleep tonight."

"Not at all," she said, sitting down at the table. Unlike the rest of Pryce's bar, here the furniture all matched. "How much do you know about me?"

"Virtually nothing," I said. "Other than that you're a vampire and you wanted to chat."

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Her lips twitched into a frown momentarily. "I see. I suppose you convinced Olivia to tell you what I am."

It would have been simpler to let her assume that, but I didn't want to get the girl in trouble. "Nah," I said lazily. "Didn't need to. She smelled like you. Just a little bit." I shrugged. "Wasn't all that hard to put the pieces together. Speaking of, what's with the Coke? I thought you lot preferred something a little...warmer."

She shrugged, the motion fluid and unconcerned. "We require blood. That does not make us incapable of consuming other things. It doesn't have nutritive value for us, but that's not what food's for most of the time, is it?"

"I suppose not." After all, you could get by on water, bread, and maybe some beans every now and then. Doesn't mean anybody *wants* to.

She waited a moment, then raised an eyebrow. "Are you planning to sit down?" she asked me.

"Well, you see, there's a few things I'm not quite sure about here. For example, you're a vampire, and that's not something I'm real comfortable with. I mean, no offense, but you don't have a stainless reputation, do you?"

"Do werewolves?"

"No," I allowed. "And granted, a lot of the stories I've heard are biased, I'm sure. But still."

"Justifiable," she admitted. "There are many of my kind with whom that kind of caution would be very wise, even laudable." She paused briefly. "You have my word, if that means anything. I intend no harm to you or yours."

I considered a moment longer, then shrugged. I'd already come, after all, and I'd rather be hanged for a sheep. "Good enough," I said, dropping into a chair across the table from her. "So what did you want?"

"You're involved in my business," she said simply. "I would like to know why."

I thought for a moment, then it clicked. "The vampire," I said. "The one found in the hotel room. He was one of yours?"

Her expression was remote. "Indeed. He was my child. And he was left there as a challenge to me."

"Well," I said, "that puts me into an interesting position. See, I'm not so sure I want to get in this guy's way. I mean, who knows? Maybe I even want to give him a hand."

"Are you threatening me?" The vampiress sounded more curious than anything.

"Not exactly," I said. "But honestly?" I shrugged. "If I could kill you right now, without breaking my word or putting people in danger, I probably would. If he wants to, I don't know that I have anything against him doing it."

"You have some grievance against me, then?" she asked. "I wasn't aware that I had done anything to harm you. If I have, please tell me and I would be glad to make reparations."

"Not to me. See, this isn't really about something you've done. It's more that I have a problem with what you are."

"And what is that?"

"A parasite," I said evenly and without rancor. "You eat people. You kill them and eat them. Now, I won't say my hands are clean, and I know as well as anyone that werewolves aren't always the nicest folks around. But they don't have to kill to survive, and you do. So, and I mean no offense by this, if by killing you I could prevent you from doing that to a bunch more people, that seems like a pretty good deal to me."

"I see," she said coldly. "Very dramatic of you. I particularly liked the delivery. Very cool, very casual." She laughed, the sound low and nasty. "You think that's what I am? You think I wait in the shadows for some poor fool to walk by and pounce, is that it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. That or you take him home and keep him there. Kill him by inches instead of all at once. Not sure which one's worse."

She looked at me, and I saw something change in her expression. A softening, of sorts. "That's really what you believe, isn't it?" She shook her head slowly. "Many do such things, I suppose. But I am not one of them. I do not imprison anyone, nor do I stalk my food and kill it. They stay with me because they choose to do so."

"Is that because they're too addicted to you to do anything else?"

"No," she said simply. "It's because I help them. Two of my stable were heroin addicts. I rescued them from the gutters and nurtured them to health. Another had severe schizophrenia. She is healthy, now. For the rest I do other things. We're...a family, of sorts." She smiled, showing very human-looking teeth. "A dysfunctional family, to be sure. But still family."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "Let's say I believe you. What do you want?"

"I know you were there," she said calmly. "Afterward. From your words I know that you have some idea who my adversary is."

Oops. In retrospect, I guess I kinda did give it away.

"And you want me to help you deal with him?"

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She shrugged. "If you'd like. Honestly, though, what I'm really here to do is deliver a warning. If you don't get out of this, it'll probably be bad for you. From your reputation I'm pretty sure you won't listen, but I figured it was the least I could do to warn you."

"You're right," I said after a moment. "I won't listen."

She smiled, the expression a little warmer than the others she'd given me. "In that case, I'd reward you for any information you can get me." She dropped a card on the table. It was, like a number of others I had, a simple white business card unmarked by anything except a single telephone number.

I looked at it and didn't make a move. "We'll see," I said. "I still haven't decided whose side to throw in on here."

"That's fine. I'm confident you'll pick the right side." She stood up to leave. "Would you like some dinner? On me, of course."

"I never say no to free food."

"A wise policy," she said. "I'll send someone in. Good evening, Wolf." She walked out, tossing the empty bottle over her shoulder as she left. She didn't look back to watch it land neatly in the bin fifteen feet away.

I stayed and ate, slowly and thoughtfully. Then I got up and left. I took the card with me.

Never say no to free food, and never burn a bridge if there's still a chance you might use it.

Chapter Fifteen

When I left the bar I didn't have many plans for the rest of the night. In fact, it pretty much boiled down to "go home and get some sleep." I might even fit in a shower if I could work up the ambition.

Unfortunately for me someone disagreed with that plan. It might have been God, in which case he has a bit of a malicious streak and seems to enjoy watching me squirm. It might have been one of the powerful, nigh-godly entities out there running around and making trouble. I'd attracted the attention of at least a couple of them, and I knew from experience how much of an irritant they could be. Or it might have been simple bad luck.

It might have been any of those. But, at least in the immediate sense, it probably had more to do with the gang that stopped me about three blocks from Pryce's. I turned a corner coming out of an alley and practically ran into them.

"Gang" might be overstating things a little. There were maybe a dozen people there, standing in a V formation with the point nearest me. They were all about college age; the youngest was a girl who looked about eighteen, while the oldest might have been as old as twenty-five. The one nearest me, the apparent leader of the bunch, was somewhere in the middle. Their expressions ranged from moderately fearful to belligerent, but none of them looked happy. And all of them were looking at me.

And they were mages. All of them. The smell of their magic made it quite clear that they were human mages, but every one of them was doing some kind of magic just in case I might have missed seeing what they are otherwise. I didn't really get a look at most of them, but the man in front was really showing off, lambent flames dripping slowly down his forearms and running off his fingers in droplets that vanished before they hit the ground.

I sniffed again, focusing more on the magical spectrum this time, but it only confirmed what I already knew. He wasn't moving anything like enough power that the fire was a leakage effect. Which meant that he was doing it deliberately. That, in turn, meant that either he was a total idiot, or he thought I was. I wasn't entirely sure which would be more insulting.

"Look, kid," I said, only to be interrupted by the woman next to him. She, too, was showing off, her hands lit from within with a gentle white radiance.

Her voice did not match that gentle light very well. She all but snarled as she said, "You will show respect when speaking to Inferno."

I turned to her, irritably. "And you," I said, "will kindly remain silent unless and until you have something intelligent to say." I looked back at the leader—even in my head I couldn't refer to him as Inferno. It was ridiculous. "Two pieces of advice for you. One, you might as well stop that." I nodded at

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the fire. "Anyone worth impressing can tell the difference between the overspill from serious magic and a cheap special-effects parlor trick. Only one of those things is scary."

All of them looked a little uncertain now. A couple, in the back, were exchanging glances surreptitiously. The spokesman, who still hadn't spoken, had his mouth open but was clearly unsure what to say. They'd had a certain set of expectations coming in, and I obviously wasn't conforming to them at all.

"Two," I continued, before any of them could get their bearings. "Inferno? Come on, man. That's ridiculous. *Nobody* uses freaking X-Men names. Most of the serious players go by things like...oh, I don't know, normal names. Bryan Ferguson, Samuel Black, and Alexander Hoffman come to mind. And, believe me, any of those people could wipe the floor with your whole gang in about ten seconds flat. The *only* reason you might go by Inferno would be if that was, by unfortunate coincidence, your actual name. In which case you should explain it and people will be happy to let you use a pseudonym."

"Inferno" finally found his voice. "I take it," he said, his voice dry and surprisingly deep, "that you're Wolf."

I grinned. "That's right. You got something to say to me?"

"Yes. You are a monster. That is what we say to you."

My thoughts raced at that. Low-power, inexperienced mages. Ridiculous melodrama. Speeches about monsters. I might not like math—in fact I definitely don't like math—but I can add two and two as well as anybody.

I was willing to bet that a few days ago, before that attack at the Full Moon, this little group had been two people bigger.

"Yep," I agreed. "I'm a monster. But let me ask you something," I said, grinning like a lunatic. "You sure you're any better?"

The same woman as before spoke up again. "Yes," she said scornfully. "Because you're a monster, and we fight monsters."

I pointed at her. "I thought I told you to keep your mouth shut. Last warning. Speak up again and I'll shut you up myself. Capisce? Good."

"Now," I said to "Inferno." "There's a few ways this can go. I would prefer if we all just went our separate ways. Everybody walks."

"Oh, please," she started.

There aren't very many things that can really tick me off. Interruptions and impoliteness will do it, though. And I was up past my bedtime, which always makes me cranky. I'd even warned her. Twice.

All of which meant that I maybe overreacted a little when she started up for round number three. I reached into one pocket, pulled out my rope of shadows, and threw it in her direction.

It did not look terribly impressive. It was dark out, meaning that you could barely even see the thing. Plus it was thin, more like heavy twine than climbing rope, and it weighed less than a happy thought.

But the whole reason I made it was that I'm pretty good at manipulating shadows and darkness. And I'd crafted that rope specifically to be more reactive to my power than ordinary shadow, in addition to making it stable and coherent.

So, while it looked like a fairly weak throw, the end of the rope crossed the distance between us as though launched from a crossbow. Directed by my will more than any physical force, the end wrapped twice around her throat and then—my favorite part about the rope—the tip dove into the coil around her throat, melding into it seamlessly. She reached up to remove it, and her face went white as her fingers slipped through it without meeting any resistance, even though she could feel the slight pressure against her throat.

Shadows are insubstantial unless properly prepared. I'd designed this one to only react physically to my touch and my magic. I could coalesce it into something physical enough to climb on, but unless I did there was no way she was going to pry it off without magic.

"I warned you," I said calmly. "Next time you open your mouth it will cut off your air. I'm not interested in listening to you posture. So, what'll it be? You willing to let me be for tonight?"

The leader of this little gang looked uncomfortable, but—give him some credit, at least—he never once looked away from my face. "What if we don't?"

I grinned again, a little wider, a little madder. I reached behind myself and focused my thoughts, concentrating. A moment later, I felt the reassuring presence of Tyrfing's hilt in my hand. I brought the sheathed sword around in front of myself, where all the kids could see it, and see that I had just drawn it from thin air.

Posturing is *everything* when it comes to avoiding a fight. I'm not fond of it, but I damn well know how to do it.

"If not," I said, light and cheery, "then I shove this sword so far down your throat that it comes out your asshole. I'm not looking for a fight, mate, but if you want one I'm ready to go." I smiled as I said it, and I was sure to make eye contact with "Inferno" the whole time. I'm pretty good at reading people, especially in terms of dominance relationships—the relic of a quasi-werewolf upbringing. It was clear that what he said would go, at least for tonight.

He opened his mouth. Hesitated, and I could practically *see* the gears turning in his head. He glanced at the rope around the impolite woman's neck, at the sword in my hand. Tyrfing's magic is practically undetectable so long as it's sheathed, but it still has an aura about it. People seem to

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instinctively find it fascinating, the same way the venomous snakes seem to hold the eye more than the harmless ones. And, like any good snake, it wordlessly communicates danger and a powerful hunger to do violence. It communicates them quite well.

The mageling hesitated. When he eventually did speak, his voice held an impressive quantity of venom. "Fine," he spat. "Go."

I nodded slightly, acknowledging what had just occurred. Then I carelessly tossed Tyrfinn aside. It pained me—I was raised to treat weapons with respect, even if they were invulnerable—but it was extremely important that I set the right tone. I snapped my fingers, purely for effect, and brought the rope flying to my fingers, where I coiled it back into a shapeless mass and stuffed it into one pocket. I walked straight through the crowd, and they pulled back, ever so slightly, as I passed. I wasn't good at mental magic involving humans, but it didn't take a mage to feel them consider taking a shot at my back—and reject the notion, at least for right now. I made it through them and around the corner without incident.

Mission accomplished.

There were no further interruptions between me and bed. I slept with a knife, a gun, and most of the gear from my pockets nearby. Fortunately I was pretty comfortable like that. I've been sleeping that way most of my life.

I knew that I hadn't really made peace with the gang of monster-hating mages. All I'd done was buy an armistice, a little bit of time. The good news was that that was exactly what I'd needed. A great deal of my bravado had been just that. A bluff, essentially, even if I wouldn't ever admit that to anyone.

Here's the thing. I could have taken any one of them, individually. I was confident of that. They'd all projected the same unsure air of people who, in spite of their front, haven't ever really done violence. Magic isn't a match for experience and skill, and it wasn't as though I lacked magic myself. One-on-one I'd have eaten them alive. Against the lot of them, though, I wouldn't have stood all that great of a chance.

The thing is that, in combat terms, you can pretty much divide people into solo fighters and those who work better in a group. Think of it as being like the Celts versus the Roman Legions. A traditional Celtic warrior was the kind of fighter who worked alone. They were more dangerous in a group, sure, but not by much. The Legions were the exact opposite. Individually, they might not be all that—but get a bunch of them together and you have a pretty potent force. Twenty of them might be thirty or forty times as dangerous as just one.

The same thing goes for players on the supernatural scene. I belong mostly to the first group. I can work in a team and do it reasonably well, but it's not exactly mandatory. My skills and personality are pretty well suited for working solo. I'm good at sneaking around, and I fight dirty. My preferred strategy, on the rare occasions I get the chance to employ it, is to take the enemy down before they ever know I'm there. Unless the other members of the group are people I've worked with frequently, I'd

almost be better off alone. There are plenty of other things like that, too. Vampires are the most common example. To quote one of Dolph's favorite sayings, "Two vampires are half as scary as one."

Mages belong firmly in the other category. Individually, most mages are pretty powerful, but in a group they're flat terrifying. It comes down to specialization.

I'm a good example. I'm passable with air magic, I excel at mental stuff with animals, and I can manipulate shadows pretty well. In a fight, that means that most of the time I'm restricted to air, and sometimes doing something fun with shadows. That's not bad, but it means there are a few gaps in my coverage. Defense, in particular, is hard. I can deflect an arrow or a thrown knife with a gust of wind, but not a bullet. It's about all I can do to prevent a single strong man from walking right through the best shields I can put up. That means that most of the time, I'm limited to offense and distractions. Not a bad skill set to have, but definitely limiting. Any fight I have a chance of winning will probably be over very, very quickly.

Now imagine how much more deadly it would be if there were another mage there. Let's say somebody who can whip up a strong kinetic barrier. That's a game-changer. Now they can cover the shielding aspects, while I focus on taking out the enemy. If there's a third person who, say, plays well with fire, it's even better. Now we have one mage focused on defense, one going aggro and throwing fire all over the place, and I can focus just on distracting, confusing, and debilitating people. That trio could reasonably hope to take on a force significantly larger than itself.

I'm sure you can imagine more roles to fill, too. Maybe add in a healer, for example. Throw in another person on defense, or someone mentally attacking the enemy, and so forth.

A dozen mages—even a dozen half-trained, inexperienced, relatively weak mages—is a sizable force. With that many people, even if you don't *try* to pick a well-rounded team, you probably have at least a couple people each playing offense and defense, and few more in various support roles. Next to that I'm not all that powerful. Oh, I'm good enough on the attack that I could probably have taken out one or two. Maybe even three if I got lucky, and their reactions were even slower than I expected. But that still left plenty to pancake me.

Fortunately for me, *they* hadn't realized that. That was the really nice part of inexperienced enemies. People with more savvy would have seen through my act, but they had been unsure enough already that I'd been able to bluff them.

It's a pretty basic predator instinct, really. Now, humans don't have that kind of ingrained psychology, the way werewolves do. But under the right circumstances—such as when hunting someone—they will generally behave the same way. A predator is almost always relying on the prey to react in a certain way. Fear, generally. Running away. Wolves will chase prey that runs, but if you stand your ground they don't quite know how to react.

Last night I'd taken advantage of, essentially, the same reaction. They'd come at me with overwhelming force, and they knew it. They outnumbered me twelve to one, and they expected me to

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react with the appropriate terror. Instead, I'd been casual. Insouciant, even. (I love that word. Maybe, when I get around to making up a motto, that'll be in it. I mean, *insouciant*. It even *sounds* awesome). I'd mocked them and acted totally unconcerned, even though they had me dead to rights.

Which, in turn, was guaranteed to make them wonder whether maybe, just maybe, I knew something they didn't. I mean, who makes light of staring down the barrel of a gun—unless they already arranged for it to be unloaded?

There are times when understanding predator psychology as well as I do is a great benefit.

Chapter Sixteen

It was a Saturday, so I didn't bother going to work. I had other things to think about, things which would likely be of far greater importance to me than my shop. I woke up a little late, about nine, which irritated me. I *hate* being thrown off my schedule.

I'd finished about half my bowl of cereal when a UPS truck delivered a large box to my door. It was ordinary, anonymous cardboard, and had no return address. I debated whether it might be a bomb, but eventually decided that anyone trying to kill me had more effective ways available to them than this. I mean, if they really wanted to deliver a letter bomb, they could certainly come up with a less suspicious delivery. It was just too obvious to be serious.

Unless, of course, they were counting on my saying that. Maybe they were so devious that they'd expected and relied upon my dismissive attitude and it really *was* an attack.

That's what I hate most about the paranoia routine, sometimes. It's easy to fall into Princess Bride territory. I mean, it was possible that they knew that I knew that they knew that this was too obvious to succeed, in which case I obviously couldn't trust the box in front of me. But then I had to consider whether they knew that I knew that they knew that I knew that they knew, in which case—actually, that's where it falls apart, because there *was* no box in front of them. But if that was the case they would be counting on me to treat this box as a threat, in which case I shouldn't.

In the end I went with my usual answer. I went back and finished eating, because life is too short to waste food. Especially because, these days, I had enough money that I didn't even have to buy generic.

Luxury is an interesting thing, because there is quite literally nothing so mundane that *somebody* isn't grateful to have it.

Less than ten minutes later, Aiko walked in my door. "Sweet," she said. "Package got here."

"Oh," I said, "that's yours? Why'd you send it here then?"

"Where else would it go?" she said reasonably. Then she hefted it easily, though I knew it weighed better than sixty pounds, and walked over to hand it to me. "Happy birthday," she said happily.

I eyed it. "Aiko. It's July."

"I was aware of that, thank you."

"My birthday's in September."

She waited and, when it became clear that I had nothing else to say, rolled her eyes. "And?"

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"Maybe you didn't realize this, but it's customary to present people with birthday gifts on their birthday. Rather than, you know, some random day two months in advance."

"Granted," she admitted. "But I think you're a special case. I mean, if I wait until your birthday, you'll probably be dead. And imagine how terrible I'd feel if you died before I gave you your present. Plus there'd be all that work wasted. So I figured I'd better give it to you now."

I think the worst thing about spending so much time around a sanity-challenged kitsune is that sometimes, when she really gets going, it takes me a while to realize that not only has she lapsed into her own idiosyncratic logic process, I'm still nodding along because *it actually makes sense*. I mean, if *that* isn't a sign you ought to get your head checked I don't know what is.

"If nothing else," Aiko added, "think of it as a preventative measure. I figure you're a little less likely to die with it than without, so...."

Well, that clinched it. I wasn't too proud to take every advantage that came my way. I grabbed a knife and, carefully, sliced open the box to reveal...another box, just inside. This one was wrapped, as I discovered when I pulled it out. Somehow I was pretty sure that whoever had wrapped it was not quite normal either. Normal people don't generally wrap gifts in black paper covered in skeletons playing ice hockey, and using their skulls as pucks.

It was wrapped *badly*, too. Badly enough to make me think of someone who hadn't ever wrapped a gift before, and had only heard it described by a secondhand source. There were at least five pieces of paper, large sections of which hung slack, and gaps where I could clearly see the cardboard underneath. The sheet of paper stapled to the top read, simply, "From: Me. To: You."

I looked curiously at Aiko, who just smiled cryptically. (Incidentally, have you ever actually *tried* to smile cryptically? It's hard. Most of the time when I try I just look like I ate a live snake and it's currently contesting the victory.)

It did not take me long to finish opening the thing. It was full of Styrofoam peanuts, which inevitably spilled all across the floor. I just *knew* I was going to be finding the things for months. In a very short time more, the contents of the box were resting on the floor and gleaming. I didn't have to guess what they were, either.

Armor. Serious armor, not the improv stuff I used. It was the same kind of armor I'd seen Aiko wear, actually, scale and plate in the style of feudal Japan. There was a breastplate with sleeves, armored gloves, greaves and tassets and pauldrons and everything.

It looked very different from hers, though. Her armor was all in shades of crimson and gold, trimmed with black. In comparison mine was plain, even stark. Ebony and white, flat and sharply delineated. The trim and details were in cold shades, azure and violet and viridian, all so deep as to look black at first glance. Pretty, sure, but not *friendly* looking. Especially not with the studded gloves and ridged pauldrons. Spiked armor looks impressive, but not in a good-guy kind of way.

And, last but most definitely not least, where the face of her helmet was sculpted into a fairly generic-looking demonic visage, mine was very obviously that of a snarling wolf.

I stared for a while. "You shouldn't have," I said eventually. "This must have cost a fortune."

"Actually," she said, "my cousin made it. And since he's filthy rich and he likes me, it was free." Her lips twitched. "Fortunately, I know your size."

"Ah," I said, flushing slightly. "Yes. Well. Um. What's it made of? It feels lighter than I'd expect."

She shrugged. "Beats me. It's some alloy he developed. Has enough of a steel content to piss off any faeries that try and eat you." She reached out and flipped over one of the greaves to reveal an interior lined with thick, soft-looking black fabric. "Kevlar liner," she explained smugly. "Stop anything short of military-grade rounds, even without the armor over it. *And* you get free repairs for life."

I grinned appreciatively. "Nice." Armor was great and all, but the truth is that even in my crowd, guns are a wee bit more efficient than swords, Tyrfing excepted. "Thank you, Aiko."

She shrugged carelessly. "Don't mention it."

"I won't," I promised. "Also, did the helmet *have* to be a wolf?"

"You have a theme," she explained. "I wouldn't want to mess with your style."

I sighed. Of course. Why is it that I can never seem to get people to believe that the only reason I *have* a wolf motif is a series of unfortunate coincidences?

"Any new developments in the psycho-killer scene?" she asked after a moment.

"Maybe," I said, and then proceeded to explain everything that had happened the previous day. She laughed her head off at the guy who called himself Inferno.

"So how'd they find you?" she asked when I'd finished.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they were looking for you specifically. And they sure as hell didn't pick a random street and wait for you to show up."

"Oh, that. I'm pretty sure I saw at least a couple of them in Pryce's bar. They saw me come in."

"How'd they know you were coming?"

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I shrugged. "Who knows? For that matter, coulda been coincidence. They were already there for other reasons, I walked in, they recognized me. Once they did all they would have needed to do is figure out where I'm going—not hard to do—and set up an ambush."

"Huh. Not bad for amateur work." She grinned. "Beat you at your own game, didn't they?"

"Yeah, guess so." I frowned, though. Something about that phrase....

That's when it finally all fell into place. Beat me at my own game. Yeah, they had...but what if I wasn't the only one?

"What is it, Winter?"

"Beat at my own game," I almost-snarled. "Damn. Why didn't I see that sooner?"

"See *what*?" Aiko was starting to get irritated.

I forced myself to calm down a little. "Look," I said. "Vampires are dead, but they maintain a semblance of life using other people's life energy. Right? So, basically, they steal power from other people."

"Yeah. So?"

"So," I said, "what if they aren't the only ones? What if, say, a mage could learn to duplicate the same trick. Learn to eat other people's magic. What if he could, for example, take all the power a vampire had accumulated and make it his own?"

"Thus killing the vampire," she said, comprehension dawning on her face. "And making himself stronger at the same time."

"Exactly," I said absently, my mind racing down new paths of thought. "And it would account for the slight touch of vampire in his magic that I smelled. If he'd just eaten that vamp. That kind of thing might leave a residue—or, hell, maybe he just wasn't finished digesting yet. Either way."

"Is that possible?"

"I have no idea," I told her. "But I'm starting to think I should maybe find out."

I should probably have gone to Legion with that question. I mean, that was the whole reason I'd *gotten* a familiar, right?

And I knew, knew instinctively and with perfect confidence, that he would know. I mean, it was right up his alley, right? He was all about things dying and being reborn, changing from one thing into

another, one person dying to become the food for another. This kind of magic was just the sort of thing he would excel at. He would, I knew, tell me everything I wanted to know about this, without question.

That was exactly what I was afraid of. I mean....

Look. You can't make it in the supernatural world by lying to yourself. There is no room for self-deception when you're a mage, or a werewolf for that matter. I was aware of what I was. And I wasn't a saint. I wasn't even close.

I'd once told the Son of Wolves, one of the most powerful faeries out there, that I had no desire for more power than I already held. And I'd been telling the truth. But I'd also heard plenty of stories growing up, stories that weren't fictional in the slightest. Many of the Dark Lords and dreaded monsters in them had been mages. People, in other words, who weren't all that unlike myself. And, over time, I'd figured out some commonalities there.

Nobody's born evil. Even the worst monsters don't start out that way. They start out as people. Just people. People who live and love and hate and fear just like other people. None of them starts out as a power-hungry monster, out to enslave the world. For the most part, they have good reasons to want power to begin with. They come up with excuses for needing more, excuses which are in some cases totally valid. And then they need to do something they'd rather not, but they're already in too deep, and while they wouldn't normally condone that sort of behavior there's a really good reason to allow it just this once.

And, before they know it, the power that they took up for entirely rational, even laudable reasons isn't being turned to good ends anymore.

Like I said. I'm no saint. But, being aware of that, I try not to be a monster. Part of that was in recognizing how much power I could handle responsibly.

I don't want any more power. I don't even want the *opportunity* for more power. I might not remember to say no in time.

So, long story short, I didn't want to know the details of how to rip somebody's magic right out of them and steal it for your own. So I didn't ask Legion. Instead I called Alexander, because I knew he was no happier about the idea of me with that kind of knowledge than I was.

"You want to know what?" Alexander sounded very, very calm, and enunciated each syllable with precision. I'd heard him sound like that before, when he was considering incinerating me.

"I'm not looking to do it," I said hurriedly. "I just need to know if it's possible. I think somebody might have tried it on a vampire recently."

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There was a shocked pause. Then, "That would be very bad." Alexander sounded a little shaken, which was saying something. I had seldom heard

"So it can be done."

"Yes, but...it is a very bad idea, Winter. It is a very dangerous, very foolish thing to do. Not to mention forbidden. There are rules, and that breaks several of them."

"Wait a second," I said. "Forbidden? Rules? What's this? You never told me about there being rules about what you do with magic."

"That," he said, "is because you're not enough of an idiot that you needed to hear it. Suffice to say that so long as you maintain a reasonable degree of sanity in your researches, you need never deal with those groups. Now, how sure are you of this?"

"As sure as I can be," I told him. "Given that I didn't actually see anything." I told him, in terse, blunt sentences, about what had happened and what conclusions I'd drawn.

Alexander muttered something under his breath in a language I didn't recognize. It didn't take a genius to recognize swearwords, though. "Bad. This is very bad. If you get a chance, I recommend you kill this person."

"It's that bad?"

"Worse," he said grimly. "There are...people who get upset about things like this. Very, very upset. You don't want them involved here. Failing that, if they do find out, you want to have definitive proof that you weren't working with him. Not to mention that someone who would do such a thing...." There was a brief, meaningful pause. "He needs to die. Some rules exist for a reason."

"Hang on," I said. "Who are these people you're so concerned about?"

"The clans don't take kindly to research on topics like this," he said. "When they find out about it, they *will* send people to investigate. Watchers, certainly. Guards might get involved as well, if he's harvesting from vampires."

That hadn't clarified much, but I didn't get the impression that Alexander was going to tell me any more, and I'd learned that pressing him for information wasn't that likely to get me anywhere. Besides, this was hardly the time for it.

"One question. The power he got from the vampire...will it go away? Or does he get to keep it, somehow?"

"Ah," he said, and I could practically hear him smile. "That's a good question. Some of both. The actual energy will dissipate as he uses it, the same as any other power. But I believe that it will, to some extent, expand his capacity."

"Huh," I said. "So...in terms of trying to fight him...that's bad?"

"Your grasp of the situation is, as always, astounding."

"And he'll just get stronger as time goes by," I said, ignoring his sarcasm as usual. "If he keeps doing it...is there, like, an upper boundary for this kind of thing?"

"If so," he said, sounding grim once again, "it hasn't been reached in recorded history."

Okay then. So if I took Alexander at his word, taking this mage down had just jumped to Priority One. The longer it took to kill him, the more opportunity he would have to get stronger. Plus, assuming that he'd eaten more than just the one vampire, it would also be very, very difficult. I mean, I wasn't a match for a *normal* mage. If he'd made himself much stronger than that, I wouldn't have a chance.

If you ever find yourself in such a situation and realize that it makes you feel comfortable, I strongly recommend you find professional help. I know I would have, except that the best I could hope for would be that they would think I was a total loony. Worst case, they might even believe me.

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Chapter Seventeen

"Hey," I said. "I think I might be needing those thugs you mentioned soon."

Kyra grinned, though she didn't look up from the letter she was reading. "Just say the word and they're yours. You found him?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I think I'm making progress. I'm pretty sure we're dealing with a mage who figured out a way to steal magic from people. I've been informed that killing him would be a good idea."

"Nasty," she said, scribbling a quick reply to the letter. And yes, I do mean scribbling. "Think you can take him?"

"Almost certainly not," I said cheerily. "I'm only half-trained, at best. My odds in a one-on-one with a full mage are pretty slim. Given that I have no idea how many people he's eaten, I'd say that in a fight he'd take me down pretty fast."

She looked up at me for the first time since I walked in. "You think my goons will be enough backup?" she asked seriously.

"I honestly have no idea," I said. "I don't even know if I'll be bringing them. I mean, if we fail...."

"Then you're just the delivery service," she said, nodding. "For some nutritious and delicious werewolf magic."

"Exactly," I said glumly. "If this doesn't work...I think you'd better skip straight to the big guns."

"Conn?"

"Yeah. And tell him to bring the family, at least." Dolph, I knew, was a skilled warrior and experienced strategist. Erin was an assassin who, while not exactly peerless, also didn't have any superiors that I knew of. And Bryan...well, I'd never seen Bryan really go at it, but I felt it safe to assume that he wasn't any less of a force to be reckoned with than the others. If nothing else, some of the bizarre abilities I'd seen him display were, properly applied, likely to be terrifyingly effective in a fight. And you don't survive God only knows how long without picking up some dirty tricks and useful skills. Between the four of them they could project at least as much power as the average entire *pack* of werewolves, in a much smaller package.

Of course, what would happen if the mage managed to consume their power too was not worth considering. I was pretty sure that was the kind of situation that merited a strategic nuclear strike.

I was turning to leave when the assassin attacked.

The door to the study flew open. It didn't open; something simply plowed into it with enough force to shatter the latch and rip it halfway off its hinges. I, being appropriately paranoid and having very, very fast reflexes by now, was already diving into the corner nearest the door. I got a brief image as I moved, of a tall, humanoid figure in a voluminous dark cloak. It was obviously not human, though; its over-long arms ended not in hands but in three long, sharp claws. They were just a little too shiny to be steel. A silvered edge, most likely; it was common knowledge that silver was harmful to werewolves, although very few people knew *why*.

I hit the ground at about the same time it turned to face me. I probably could have gotten a good look at it at that time but, being at least vaguely sane, I had more important things on my mind. Tyrfing, for example, which was leaning against the corner formed by the bookcase and the wall and which my fingers had found almost before I stopped moving. I reached for my magic as well, pushing power through the focus of my leather bracelet and conjuring a brief but powerful breeze at ankle level to trip it up.

It didn't work. I scrambled up, undoing the clasp holding Tyrfing into its sheath as I did. I might—*might*—be able to get the sword out before it closed with me. Even if I did, though, I didn't much like my chances.

Fortunately, both of us had forgotten that Kyra was in the room.

All of this had taken place in less than a second. In the next instant the werewolf was over the desk, moving swiftly and with a terrible grace. The creature was so focused on me that it never turned. Consequentially, before it was ever in reach of me, she had one of its arms in a nasty shoulder lock and the other one pinned to its body, silver claws held well away from herself. It must have had anatomy somewhat like a human's, because it stopped moving immediately.

"Not bad," I said, shoving myself to my feet and sliding Tyrfing back home. I had to work to let go of it, but it was a familiar effort and didn't slow me down. I didn't strap it back into the scabbard, though. Just in case.

"You got any idea what it is?" she grunted, twisting its arm a little higher and bringing it up onto its toes.

"Not yet," I said, coming close enough to see it.

Underneath the hood it didn't look like a person at all. Its face was flat and devoid of any emotion or humanity. There were two yellow eyes, with slit pupils like a snake's, and a large circular mouth. It was lined with teeth like a leech's, as I discovered when it tried to bite me. Other than that its face was featureless, and entirely hairless. Its skin was white, not pale, but *white* like a sheet of paper.

There was a low aura of magic around it, too, strong enough to be easily noticeable. Human magic, I was sure, which was strange when you considered how utterly inhuman it was otherwise.

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"I think it's a construct," I said after a moment's examination. "Something built by a mage. The one I just told you about, probably."

She blinked. "You can do that?"

"I can't. But the matter of the Otherside is responsive to energy. If you're skilled, powerful, and willing to cross over, you can use it to make things." I frowned. "Alexander mentioned people making whole armies of constructs, back in the day. He didn't seem to think it was a worthwhile investment of time."

"I can see why," she grunted. "Thing's not *that* strong."

I hate irony. I particularly hate irony when it's trying to kill me. That is why I considered it particularly offensive when the thing chose exactly that moment to dislocate its *own* shoulder, snap its elbow back into Kyra's face hard enough to break her grip, and come after me again.

I parried the first swing with Tyrfing, still in its sheath. I managed to duck aside from the second as well, though those claws nicked the back of my neck as I did. They burned painfully, confirming my suspicion that they were made of silver. Enhanced silver, too, and more highly charged with magic than any I'd made. Not a threat in a cut that small, but if it landed a solid blow I was a dead man. It was just too hard to heal a wound made with silver. I'd be restricted to human-level healing, at least for a while, and that usually wasn't good enough.

I dove away from it. It started to follow. Kyra ripped off its head from behind.

And no, I'm not speaking figuratively. There was no blood, but it was still going to be featuring in my nightmares for a while.

Apparently that was more damage than it could take. The headless body collapsed immediately, and didn't move again. The cloak settled, slowly, down onto the floor as the body....rot wasn't the right word. It was more like it *dissolved*, over the course of maybe five or six seconds.

That was the nature of the Otherside, you see. It worked differently than the world I was accustomed to. Here, there was a division between the physical and the spiritual. They could influence each other, even overlap sometimes, as was the case with Legion, but they were different.

In the Otherside they weren't. Matter and energy were basically the same thing, over there. Or, if you prefer, the flesh and the spirit weren't easily divisible. You can't have one without the other, on the Otherside. When you were actually *in* that world it wasn't usually a problem. The environment was so saturated with magic that literally everything held a certain amount of power. Once you're in the real world, though, you have to provide such things with an alternative power source. Otherwise they lose their structural integrity, collapse into a thin gel, and then either evaporate or return to the Otherside. Nobody's quite sure which.

A well-made construct, generally, can provide its own power. All you have to do is build in a low-level tap and it can access enough magic to keep itself intact. Once Kyra had killed it, though—if you can be said to have killed something which was never alive—that ceased to function. Without a source of magic it vanished within a few minutes. All that was left were the cloak and the claws. They must have been made by normal means and then tacked on later.

"Well," I said, staring down at them. "Shit. Sorry to bring *that* here."

"No biggie," she said easily. "I'm always happy to save your ass."

"Appreciate it," I told her seriously. I bent down and bundled the silver up into the dark cloak. It would be deeply rude to leave such things lying around, especially in a house full of werewolves.

"Don't forget to call," she said, her eyes bright. "If you need any help."

And that was that.

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Chapter Eighteen

There was someone waiting for me when I got home. I hate how often that happens.

He was standing facing the front door, making tapping motions with one hand. I got the impression that he was examining my wards—not looking to take them down, I thought, just seeing how they worked. He turned to face me when I got closer.

It took me a moment to recognize "Inferno." It probably didn't help that most of my attention had, last night, been focused on the threat he represented to me. Without the fire running down his arms, he wasn't nearly as distinctive. He was about my height, making him a little shorter than average, with reddish blond hair and dark blue eyes.

I crossed my arms over my chest and regarded him evenly. "What do you want?" I said, not even trying to sound polite. One-on-one, I was confident I could take him. I might get burned a little, but that was the cost of doing business.

"I wanted to apologize," he said, shocking me a little. "And maybe to talk with you."

"Wow," I said. "People never apologize to me. What's the con?"

"You don't trust me."

I snorted. "Well, duh. I mean, let's face it, so far you haven't exactly given me much reason to, have you? And I gotta admit there's a few things here that bother me. Like, how the hell do you know where I live?"

"Our master told us," he said. "The same as we were told where to find you last night. He wants us to kill you. Although that's not why I'm here," he added hastily.

I thought for a moment, then shrugged and started the process of dropping my wards. "Fine," I said. "Might as well talk inside. Be more comfortable."

And also be on terrain I was familiar with, surrounded by my weapons, with Snowflake near at hand. But that was a total coincidence, of course.

I built a fire in my woodstove, more for psychological comfort and to give myself time to think than out of any desire for heat. As I did I filled Snowflake in on what was going on, which the kid didn't seem to notice. She remained right where she was, seemingly asleep on the other side of the room. I knew, though, that if he started something she would be on him in an instant, from behind and without warning. I didn't like his odds if that happened.

I sat on my couch, while he squatted near the fire. It was, I noticed idly, almost the same position Fenris had adopted. I saw that the flames were moving in a way that was not quite natural, twisting toward him as though pulled by a magnet. I didn't think it was a purposeful thing; it felt more like the kind of instinctive sharing I experience when I pet a cat. Every mage has a trick that comes naturally, and it wasn't hard to guess that his had to do with fire.

He turned to face me, with an expression so uncomfortable I felt a bit sorry for him. "First off," he said. "I want to apologize. Last night wasn't...." He shook his head. "I'm handling this badly. We were stupid, and we're lucky you were as polite about it as you were. I'm sorry."

"Not a problem," I told him. "Although you ought to have a chat with that lady about politeness."

He smiled, somewhat sheepishly. "She knows. Erica's really sorry about that, by the way. She was a little on edge. She doesn't really like violence."

"Erica, huh. So—and meaning no offense—but how does somebody who doesn't like violence fall in with a crowd of self-proclaimed vigilantes?"

He shrugged. "She's got her reasons. And, if you don't mind, we aren't vigilantes. We fight monsters."

"Monster hunters, is it? Funny thing about that. You ever read any Nietzsche?"

"A bit."

"Well, he had a few interesting things to say. My favorite was something about how, when you fight monsters, there's always a risk that you're going to become a monster yourself."

"You think we're going to become corrupt."

"That's part of it," I agreed. "But not the most important part. It's more a matter of....Look, let's use vampires as an example. They're some of the worst monsters out there, right? They feed on people, kill them by inches. You might think that killing a vampire is making the world a better place."

"Of course it is," he interrupted. "They're evil. The world is a better place without their ilk."

"Yeah, and people say the same thing about me. Look...what's your name, anyway?"

He hesitated, then shrugged. "Luke Laufson. Call me Luke."

"Okay, Luke. This isn't going to work if you keep interrupting me. Let me finish what I'm saying, and *then* you can tell me how wrong I am. Okay?"

"Sure."

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"Great. Where was I? Oh yeah. Vampires. You might think that killing a vampire is a service to the world. Honestly, in principle I'm inclined to agree with you. If I could kill every vampire in the world right now, it would be pretty tempting. But vampires don't tend to agree with that point of view."

Luke opened his mouth, then remembered our agreement and closed it again. I smiled and continued. "So first you face the problem of killing one vampire. That's not undoable—you and your gang could probably handle a low-level vamp right now. Let's say you manage it. Now you have to deal with the *other* vampires who decide to take you out as a result. With me?"

"Just because something isn't easy," he said, "doesn't mean that it isn't right."

"True," I agreed. "Let's say you come by enough power to kill all of them, too. We'll even ignore the price that kind of power would require—and believe me, it wouldn't come cheap. Once you've done that, you're a threat. You have the strength to challenge even a very powerful vampire, and you've shown the inclination to do so. Now, vampires don't take well to governance or hierarchy, but they need some kind of organization just to survive these days. Thus, the Council."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

I stared at him. "You really don't know?" I shook my head. "Wow. Don't take this the wrong way or anything, but if you're trying to fight monsters and you haven't even heard of the Council...somebody is doing their job horribly wrong. Okay. The Council. I guess technically it's called the Vampires' Council, which is irritating because vampires aren't actually the only ones on it, or even the strongest anymore. These days I believe the most powerful groups are the succubi, the rakshasas, and the vampires."

"What I'm getting at," I continued, "is that the vampires aren't without allies. So now that you're a threat, they're going to start taking you seriously. They go to the Council. Now, instead of just one vampire, you have a bunch of them. And, because you're on an anti-monster campaign and you have the power to make it serious, they aren't alone. There are plenty of other monsters around that would be happy to take a preemptive shot at you. The vampires have good relations with the Midnight Court, for example, and that's one of the strongest forces there *is* on the Otherside. So, if you want to win—or even survive—what do you think you'll have to do?"

He thought for a moment. "Find some allies of our own?" he guessed.

I nodded. "Exactly. So you talk to certain powerful mages. You talk to the Pack—because, believe me, whatever you might think about werewolves, they're a lot nicer than most supernatural nasties, and they hate the vampires more than you do." I paused. "Of course, that brings us to the next problem. Namely, they're monsters too, at least from some perspectives. So there's inevitably going to be a split between those who want to join you in taking a shot at the vamps, and those who want to kill you before you decide to include them in your crusade, a conflict of interests that's likely to be shared by a lot of different groups."

"Thus starting a civil war," Luke said, surprising me with his perceptiveness.

"Yeah. And there's no war uglier than a civil war. Not to mention that war is what you're looking at now, not a safari. Your enemies are numerous, powerful, dangerous, and organized. Plus, with as many hooks both sides have set into mundane authorities, humans are going to be brought into it. The resulting conflict might make the World Wars seem mild. Which would be bad."

"I don't know about that. That's a pretty tenuous chain of coincidences, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but what I'm getting at here is that you need to consider the consequences of your actions. Otherwise you're more likely to make things worse than better."

He thought about that for a minute, watching the fire again. "Okay," he said eventually. "I get what you're saying."

"Just think about it," I said. "That's all I'm asking." There was a short pause. "So how'd you get into this business?"

"I don't know if you could call it a business," he said. "We were just getting started."

"But you must have decided to do it for a reason," I pressed.

"I guess so," he said. "We were all...we just started finding out about this shit, you know? All these *things* out there, killing people just because they can and...and nobody *does* anything about it. They just stand and watch it happen. So we decided that if no one else was willing to act, we would."

I wasn't sure whether that was worthy of respect, or I should be laughing at how stupid they'd been about it. "How'd you find out about it in the first place?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "We were all born with magic. I don't know all the details about how everybody got into it—we all found our own ways until recently, you see. We met each other a couple of years ago, and we all started learning things. Brick helped a lot; he's been doing this longer than the others. Mike shared some too, especially about monsters. He's a shaman; I don't know if you noticed him last night. He's a police officer, too, so he has access to some information that the rest of us don't."

I nodded. "So what about this master you mentioned?"

"He found us about a year ago. We were practicing before that, but we weren't making much progress. Nobody's real eager to talk about this sort of thing."

"Not surprising," I said. "Most people in the community have an entirely rational fear of strangers. If you didn't have references, I don't blame them for not wanting anything to do with you."

"Yeah, well. Maybe so. In any case, Jon found us and he was willing to talk. He started teaching us. He knows things."

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"He taught you magic?"

"Yeah, some. Some of it we'd figured out for ourselves. It wasn't too hard."

I grunted. "Yeah, I did that too. Didn't work out so well. How often do you see him?"

"About once a week. Sometimes more."

"Could you describe him for me? Physically, I mean."

He shrugged. "Sure. He looks about thirty. Dark hair, brown eyes, a little on the pale side. Thinnish. Tends to dress in black."

Well, well, well. It might be a coincidence—I thought not, but I had to admit that it wasn't impossible—but Jon sounded like a perfect match for the mage I'd seen in the fox's memories. I started piecing things together, and I thought I had a pretty good idea of what was happening.

"You know him," Luke said, his tone making it more of a statement than a question.

"Maybe," I said. "Here's a hypothetical situation for you. Let's say, hypothetically, that you're a powerful mage with a grudge. You decide to do something about it, but—like I just said—you know you're going to make enemies doing so. It seems to me that you'd be smart to find some thugs. Maybe some kids with a reasonable amount of magic who don't really know anything much about how it works. Turn them into your own little gang of enforcers. Then, when you're finished, you can always blame them for what you've done. Perfect scapegoat, and they don't know enough to stop you."

His lips tightened. "You think he's using us."

"I think that a person that skilled really ought to know about the Council and the Pack and all the other big players in the modern world. But he wouldn't want to *tell* his enforcers, when it's so much easier to oversimplify things. Then all you have to do is tell them, 'Look, a monster,' and they'll be on it like fleas on a werewolf. Even if they maybe aren't all that monstrous."

"Like you," he said. "You think he's using us to assassinate you."

I shrugged. "If he is who I think he is, I've sure given him plenty of reason. What convinced you not to, anyway?"

"Your attitude," he said simply. "It wasn't right for a bloodthirsty killer. I was a little suspicious before that, and after the way you reacted...something wasn't right there. So I asked around, and couldn't find anybody willing to say you deserved to die. People said you were scary, sure, but not evil. Plus a few guys knew the names you mentioned, and they told me not to mess with them. Gives you a certain amount of credibility."

Clever of him to take that avenue. I started to get an idea of why Luke was the boss of that little coterie. "Listen," I said. "I think I know who Jon is. If so, he's a monster worse than me. He's using you as a tool, and he needs to get taken out."

"Not that much credibility," he said dryly.

I had to laugh at that. "Okay. What if I can prove it?"

He pursed his lips. "Then we'd be upset. Probably enough to do something about it."

I took a deep breath, the beginning of a plan running through my head. It would require me to betray Luke and his people, but that honestly didn't slow me down much. "When do you see him next?"

"Jon? I don't know. But he has an apprentice—a real apprentice, not like us. I'm supposed to meet with her tonight to work on principles of heat movement."

"Tonight?" I grinned, my plan taking a sudden turn. This had the potential to be even better than finding the mage directly. "Where?"

He told me, naming a hotel on the north side. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

I grinned wider. "Well, let's just say I'm looking for proof. Oh," I said as an afterthought. "You might not want to go to this particular meeting after all."

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Chapter Nineteen

I eventually decided to wear the armor. This was more for the intimidation factor than anything. I didn't really think it would protect me from an enemy mage of any skill, but it *did* look freaking terrifying, and I wanted every advantage I could get in the psychological arena. It wasn't as impressive without the helmet, but it was better than nothing. For the same reason I buckled on Tyrfinn, which looked a lot better against the backdrop of the armor than it did over my usual worn clothing. Maybe I could star in some kind of mixed-period medieval reenactment on the way.

It was surprisingly comfortable. Aiko hadn't been exaggerating when she said she knew my size, either; it felt as though it had been tailored. Fit like a glove, really. Especially the gauntlets. Ha, ha.

Just in case it did go to physical conflict, though, I also had my various foci, stored spells, and such with me. Because the armor made it hard to get to my normal pockets, mostly they were secreted in the trench coat I put on over it. I also, embracing the best parts of the modern world, had my 9mm pistol with me, along with a fair amount of ammo. I would have taken the shotgun, except that it was a wee bit more obvious than was suitable for this occasion.

"Not today," I told Snowflake. She was sitting about two inches from the door and staring at it. "Tell you what, when we go for the main event you can come along. Promise."

Ice-blue eyes looked back at me, and I could feel her disappointment and worry. Then she sighed, physically and mentally both, and walked over to sleep near the dying fire. *Fine. Don't die or I'll make sure you regret it.*

"You realize," I said, "that that threat is absolutely meaningless. I mean, you're good, but I don't think there's much even you can do to a dead man." She pointedly looked away from me and said nothing.

I laughed and walked out the door.

I took a cab to the north part of town. That wasn't something I would normally do, but it was farther than I wanted to walk. And, while there were a number of people who would have been willing to give me a ride, they would have wanted to help when we got there, and I thought this particular encounter would go better if I went alone.

The trench coat covered my gear, but it wasn't exactly inconspicuous itself. And, unless you're very skilled with it, wearing armor and a sword affects how you move. I knew I didn't look like a normal person. The cabbie, of course, didn't comment. It's hard to really faze a cabbie. Even if you're not in New York, they've still seen it all before. He dropped me off about three blocks from the hotel—I didn't want

to go there directly, because my appearance was distinctive enough that he might remember me. If there was a ruckus there later, I didn't want him to think of me. I'd had him pick me up several blocks from anywhere I normally go, too, just in case. And I was wearing sunglasses, despite the late hour, to conceal my unusual eye coloration.

Paranoia and thinking ahead. These are the strengths which, more than any magic, keep a person alive in dangerous circumstances.

Luke had given me the exact room number, of course, and told me what time to show up. I walked into the hotel fifteen minutes early. It was, in a piece of probably deliberate irony that made me chuckle morbidly, the same chain as the vampire had been dumped in.

I kinda felt sorry for them, actually. After tonight I expected that their reputation would be even worse than before.

I could see the clerk consider stopping me. I looked *very* suspicious, after all. I smiled, nodded to her politely, and kept going confidently. In that moment, you could practically read her mind writ large across her face. I saw her weigh my appearance against my demeanor, saw her own despite of her job, and saw it tip the scales in favor of staying put.

If you act confident, move with purpose, and look like you know what's going on, people will very rarely question you. It's amazing the places that'll get you. Dolph had been the one to teach me that trick, along with a whole bunch of others. It's a bit of a sad reflection on humanity, really. It shouldn't be that easy.

I took the stairs rather than the elevator as a matter of course. I'm not comfortable in elevators. My instincts tell me that there's nowhere to run and I'm a sitting duck, which makes me twitchy. I moved up the stairwell quickly, but not quite quickly enough to draw attention, and stepped out on the seventh floor.

I walked quickly down the hallway, which had the anonymous, slightly hostile feel I always associate with hotels. The carpet was clean, of course, but it looked slightly tired. There was no one else up and moving. I located the right door and walked right past it, not even glancing at it, scanning the area with my magical senses as I did.

Overkill, probably. I mean, there wasn't all *that* much risk of being detected. But I've never had any particular aversion to overkill. And I'm pretty sure that, when you're dealing with mages (or other supernatural beings, but mages were the daily special), definitions of overkill are a lot more fluid. Artillery strikes, for example, don't really qualify.

I'm not especially good at detecting humans, but I'm adequate when I put my mind to it. It helped that there was a whole lot of nothing to find. I didn't know whether that was coincidence, the hit this company's reputation had just taken, or my target had taken active steps to empty the place. In any

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case, as far as I could tell I was the only person on the floor. I did not, of course, examine the mage's room; there was too high a possibility of detection.

Now that I knew there was nobody else around, and was feeling somewhat more comfortable as a result, I went back and found the door I was looking for. I examined the lock briefly, and discovered pretty much nothing I didn't know already. I could have bypassed it easily enough—another of the strange, random skills I'd learned growing up—but why take the hard way? I knocked instead, not saying anything.

"It's unlocked," a woman's voice called from within. She sounded unsurprised, which was good.

I opened the door, which was indeed unlocked, and walked in. No booby traps went off, which I took to be a good sign. The room was pretty much hotel standard. A double bed, TV, a couple of uncomfortable-looking chairs, a small desk. To my left another door opened on the bathroom.

The woman was lying on the bed reading, but she looked up as I walked in. I was pretty sure it was staged. She was arranged just a bit too tidily to be real. I think she was trying to look sultry, but a lot of the effect was lost on me. When you've seen the Sidhe dance, it's hard for mere mortals to make an impression. "Mr. Wolf," she said, a little too airily. Damn, she was bad at this. "I've been expecting you."

A great many things became clear when she spoke. I hadn't been able to pin it down before that, but the mage's apprentice was none other than Olivia the vampire's servant.

I have no doubt that she was expecting my shocked reaction. Counting on it, even. Because the moment after she spoke, she attacked.

It didn't look impressive. There are things you can do with magic in a fight that look dramatic as hell—fireballs, for example. But there are also subtler things, quieter, although not necessarily any less dangerous. There have been very serious magical duels fought which looked, from the outside, like two people standing still and staring at each other for twenty minutes while nothing happens and nobody moves. Then one of them pitches over dead for no apparent reason.

Olivia hit me with one of those.

I recognized the touch of another mind on mine immediately. It was a familiar sensation, although this differed in several important respects from my norm. First off, it was human, whereas I almost exclusively communicate with animals and near-animals. It was also a contact initiated by another, which (aside from Snowflake's communications) I had never before experienced. And, most importantly, it was done with violence in mind.

Mental combat isn't terribly complicated, something people seem to have a hard time understanding. They get it into their heads that it consists of both sides imagining elaborate forms of violence and counters. Which, technically, *can* happen, but most of the time it takes more choreography than a wrestling match.

The thing to remember is that imagination doesn't hurt anyone. Even with magic you have to invest a thought with energy to really *do* anything, and that means that most of the time simple thoughts are better than complicated ones. It's like the problem with assassination I mentioned earlier. Sure, you can arrange a Rube Goldberg machine to fire a cannon at their door, but that doesn't make it an efficient way to solve the problem.

The same principle applies. Yeah, I could imagine soldiers swarming the metaphorical fortress of your mind, and you could imagine a tank mowing them down as defense, but that doesn't mean that these are practical ways to go about it. Generally speaking the most effective way to attack another person's mind is to simply focus all your thoughts and your will on your desire to crush them like a bug, and project it into their head. Likewise, on defense you're focusing on how confident you are that they will fail, how perfectly impenetrable your mind is. You might imagine a wall, or even a simple fortress, as a sort of mental aid. But once you get more complicated than that, unless you're a true expert, you might as well give up. You can't think about that in a coherent, concentrated way.

So Olivia hit me hard, in the first instant of the fight. I felt her will, her aggression, slamming into me like a tangible force. She was trying to get in before I could raise defenses, and to a certain extent she succeeded. By the time I got it together to protect myself, she'd already penetrated the surface portions of my mind.

Imagine your mind as being like an onion. No individual layer is all that important, but taken together it's substantial. The outermost layer—the skin of the onion—consists of your immediate emotional reactions. The anger you feel when you stub your toe, for example. She'd punctured that before I even realized what had happened. It wasn't a big problem. None of that was critical, and she could rip it all away without hurting me.

Below that you have surface thoughts, the sort of thing you think consciously. There were a bunch of layers like that, ranging from the ridiculously trivial to deep reflections on the nature of reality. Olivia had access to the outermost portion of that as well, which would be of little use to her.

Beneath even that are the important things, which I'd managed to stop her from reaching immediately. Abiding emotions are down there, things like love or friendship or hate or grief. Memories, philosophies, acquired knowledge...all of those things live in that part of the mind.

Then, at the very center, you have the core of what and who you are. It was the part of me that loved to watch the sunset and look at ice on trees. I could lose everything else and, eventually, somewhat, recover from it. But if that was destroyed, I was done. I might go on living, but it wouldn't be *me* anymore. Just an empty shell of a body.

I wasn't in danger of that yet. There was still plenty of me left, and I'd managed to stop Olivia in her tracks. Still, it didn't look good. She had her hooks in, and she was pressing the advantage ruthlessly. She used the parts of my mind that she'd already taken against me, creating waves of baseless emotion

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and flooding me with mental chatter. I'd kept my concentration so far, but there was only so long I could withstand it.

In spite of that, I was grinning. It was, I knew, a feral and unfriendly expression.

Some people have weird ideas about tactics. I blame comic books and bad video games, myself. In the real world, attacking the enemy at their strongest point isn't really a very good idea. Imagine challenging Andre the Giant to a weightlifting contest and you might see what I mean. Unless you're a world-class strongman yourself, you don't have a chance. Trying to take somebody in their strongest suit is seldom wise.

Now, I don't do coercion, and I don't attack minds. Part of that's politeness, and part's pure common sense. There's no need to go alienating your allies, after all.

But the fact remains that I'm good at mental magic. It's my most natural talent and I do it well. I knew the theory of this kind of battle, even if I hadn't ever done the real thing before.

Of course, Olivia probably had more than just an abstract understanding of how this sort of fight went. If all she took into account were our respective skills with magic, I could see why she would think I was vulnerable. She might even be right.

Unfortunately for her, there were some things she hadn't thought through fully.

I concentrated on my image of a wall, a high granite edifice with crenellations and watchtowers. I blocked out everything else but the wall and my fierce, savage desire to throw her back. Nothing else existed—not the room, not the fight, not the phantoms she threw at me, not even me or her. Nothing but the wall and my will that it hold.

I couldn't say how long that lasted. Mental magic, even more than most, interferes with my sense of time. In the moment my focus was so absolute that neither past nor future registered. I felt her commit fully to the attack, once my defenses were in place and it was clear she couldn't simply sweep them away. And, as this went on, I felt a slowly building pressure on my side of the metaphorical wall.

It was emotion—not the superficial, meaningless things she had taken over. The deep ones, the important ones. Anger, absolute wrath at what she had done, at her involvement with my enemy and—worse by far—her invasion of my mind. *My mind*. Under that was sheer stubbornness, and my own carefully controlled hunger for bloodshed. And then there was something else, something the werewolves refer to as dominance. It was more a personality trait than anything, composed of stubborn refusal to give in, possessiveness, and unwillingness to let anyone control me.

I'm a bit of an oddity among werewolves. I feel no great need to exert dominance over other people, but I don't take kindly to people doing it to me either. That kind of personality is hard to fit into the pack. They call the rare werewolves like me loners, and tend to regard them with a certain amount of distrust. We have a tendency to go feral, so I guess they have reason to.

The point here is that I was not a normal human being. There was a wolf inside my skin, and it did not take kindly to someone trying to control it. Not at all. So when Olivia started trying to rip my psyche to shreds, the wolf reacted the same way it did whenever someone tried to tame it. And I held on to that wrath, that instant and furious rejection.

And then, when she was well and truly committed to the attempt, I let it all out at once.

The wolf was inhuman in the truest sense of the word, in that moment, cold and cruel as an arctic storm, with just as much pity in it. Its assault was savage and relentless in a way that human emotions, civilized and tamed by millennia of relative peace, just can't match.

To someone who was human, and thought like a human, and was accustomed to doing her magic on humans, and expected me to fight like a human, I imagine that it came as a nasty shock. If nothing else, the shift from passive resistance to that sort of overwhelming aggression was sudden enough to throw anyone a serious curveball.

Thus, it was neither surprising nor insulting that Olivia's spell shattered in a heartbeat under the force of that emotional surge, and she was thrown out of my head in the same moment. A moment later I crashed back into reality, opening my eyes and staggering.

She had stood up and was now reeling, her eyes crossed. The recoil when I'd broken her spell had backlashed into her own mind and dazed her.

I wasn't much better off myself. The sudden shifts in perspective were playing hell with my head, and I was just now starting to feel the impacts of the emotional maelstrom she'd put me through. I'd brought the wolf further to the forefront of my mind than I had in a long time, too, and once called up that wasn't the kind of force that could be easily put back down. So yeah, I was staggering a bit, and I couldn't focus all that well.

But, for all of that, I did have one serious advantage. Namely, I'd known what to expect. Thus, I had a few, critical seconds in which to act before Olivia could realize what had just happened and pulverize me.

Any faint reluctance I'd once felt toward hitting women had been trained out of me from a young age. I didn't even hesitate to deck this one.

Chapter Twenty

It took Olivia almost an hour to wake up. I wasn't too surprised by this. I'd still been riding the wave of anger at her intrusion when I punched her, and as a result I'd hit her maybe a wee bit harder than necessary. Like, harder than most any human other than an exceptionally strong martial artist would be capable of. Between that and the armored gauntlet, I'd been a bit concerned as to whether she would wake up at all.

An hour is a lot of time. I'd used it to, first off, recover my composure and settle back into my normal, mostly sane frame of mind. Then I'd tied the unconscious mage into a chair with my rope of shadows. Then, because she still hadn't woken up and I am a great believer in redundancy, I duct taped her into place as well. The end result was that she was tied and taped in place at waist, ankles, knees, elbows, wrists, shoulders, and forehead. Her wrists were handcuffed to the chair arms, too. There was no way she was moving more than her eyelids, and the door was both locked and barricaded.

Like I said. Redundancy is good, and there is no such thing as overkill.

I was sitting in the other chair, watching her and drinking a can of root beer I'd bought from the vending machine. I don't normally drink soda, but I'd felt a great desire for *something* and it wasn't like they had any decent tea.

Olivia woke up slowly. She stirred abortively, blinked a couple times, then suddenly seemed to remember where she was and what had happened. She struggled, for a minute or so, trying to get loose. I smiled and drank root beer until she gave up.

"Good morning," I said once she'd stopped moving. "How are you feeling?"

The mage tried, instinctively, to turn her head to face me. She failed; I'd taped her head into place too thoroughly to allow that much motion. She was restricted to looking at me in the periphery.

I was still wearing the armor, and the weapons. The only thing that had changed was that my pistol was sitting on the bed next to me, pointed directly at her. She noticed, visibly, and flinched as much as was possible. Good.

"I think we both know the drill," I said, not waiting for her to answer my question. "You tell me what I want to know. Otherwise I kill you. Got it?"

She laughed dryly—more because her throat was dry than any deliberate inflection. "No, you won't. You don't have the balls."

The hubris of some people always astounds me. It didn't even seem to occur to her that I'd *already* shown myself willing to fight her, magically and physically, or that the method of rendering her helpless I'd chosen had carried fairly serious risks itself.

The question was how to convince her that I meant business. Torture sprang immediately to mind—few things communicate a willingness to do violence better—but I wanted to avoid that if at all possible. I don't like pain, not my own and not other people's.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I like a good fight as much as the next guy, and probably more. More than I should, really. But that's more a matter of adrenaline, coupled with the thrill of testing myself against someone else and the joy of doing something I'm good at. And, I will admit, there is also a certain ugly pleasure in seeing my enemies fall before me. But simply inflicting pain just makes me feel sick to my stomach.

It's kind of comforting, actually. If I ever stop feeling like that, I will know that I am well and truly screwed up.

I thought for a moment. Then I set the can of soda down on the table with a *click*. I reached behind myself and grabbed Tyrfing. Still not speaking, I drew Tyrfing. The cursed sword whispered against the scabbard, a sound that promised blood and death in the near future.

It reeked. The magic imbued in the sword was incredible, powerful and complex practically beyond my imagination. Oh, don't get me wrong; I'm getting pretty good at making and examining magical items. But Tyrfing was in a whole other realm. It might have been one of the top hundred or so magic items in the whole freaking world. There were so many different layers and levels of magic embedded in the structure of the metal that I couldn't hope to pick a single one, even an obvious surface layer, out of the crowd without some serious work.

Dozens and dozens of enchantments blended into a single aroma like fresh blood and broken stone. Somehow—again, I have no idea how the dwarves who created the sword managed it—you can only detect the blade's magic when it's drawn from the sheath. Most of the time it seems, even to me, just like another sword.

Now that it was drawn, though...well, it didn't seem normal anymore, if you know what I mean. It changed the whole feeling of the room. Olivia shuddered slightly, though her movement was too restricted to really shiver.

I could *feel* the sword's magic, too, probably as a result of long-term, low-level exposure. It beat against my senses, and I could feel it trying to do me harm. It hated me, I knew. Oh, not specifically; it didn't despise its wielder, or anything like that. It just hated everyone. It wanted me dead, but no more than everyone else it came into contact with.

Such as, say, Olivia.

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"You can feel it, can't you?" I said, turning the blade to catch the light. For such a horrid thing, Tyrfing is really quite lovely, the black runes running down the mirrored blade perfectly shaped and clean. "You can feel it trying to get you."

"What is that thing?" she said, sounding truly frightened for the first time.

"It's my sword," I said. "Its name is Tyrfing. Have you heard of it?" She shook her head, which wasn't surprising. Most people haven't heard of Tyrfing. I'm not sure why. Excalibur is plenty famous, and the two swords are hanging around on the same general level. Maybe it's just that more of the people who encounter Excalibur survive long enough to tell stories about it.

"It's quite powerful, as I'm sure you've noticed," I continued. "Not terribly friendly, though. It's trying to kill you right now. That's what you're feeling. Spend too much time around this sword and bad things happen. It starts small, but after a few minutes it can build to some quite ridiculous stretches of coincidence."

If anything, I was understating the danger involved. Tyrfing came closer to killing both me and Snowflake than most fights I've been in when I was just trying to *make a grilled cheese*. I've sometimes wondered whether, in a fight, the best way to use it might be just to throw it at the enemy and let their own bad luck rip them apart.

I rested the sword on my lap and took a drink of soda. Tyrfing doesn't like me to let go of it unless I've killed at least one thing since I drew it, but it doesn't actively fight me unless I'm putting it back in the scabbard. Olivia looked scared, and small, and like she was about to cry. It wasn't pleasant to see. I've felt like that, and my memories of those times aren't something I like to dwell on.

But as far as she knew, my veins were filled with ice water and my heart was made of stone.

"I really don't know how many people this sword has killed," I said casually. "It's had a few thousand years to work on it, and this isn't the kind of sword that sits idle, if you take my meaning. I mean, I've only had the thing for six months, and I've already racked up, oh, it must be close to twenty."

Olivia shivered.

"And that's just with the sword," I continued. I was feeling a little sick, but I kept my tone light. "Before that, oh, it goes back a ways. I killed a family back when I was just a kid. Mother, father, daughter, son, I killed them all. Ripped them to pieces and ate them. I set my first girlfriend up to die for the sake of a lie I didn't even tell. Last year I shot one werewolf in the face and slit another's throat just because they had the bad luck to fall in with a nasty crowd, and I was in a hurry."

Olivia was staring at me with a horrified fascination. I guess she wasn't used to people talking about this sort of thing so openly.

I took another sip of soda. "So," I said. My voice had lost all of its bantering tone, now. "If you're seriously banking on me not having the guts to stick this sword through your chest, I would strongly recommend that you reconsider your position. I've been doing this for a long time. I've killed a lot of people that I liked better than you, mostly for a lot less reason than you've given me. And I'm a little pressed for time right now, so you should probably not take your time thinking it over."

"If I tell you," she said weakly, capitulating. "Will you let me go?" I nodded. "Promise me."

I looked at her seriously. "If you tell me what I want to know," I said, "I will set you free. I swear this by the moon and stars. May the Wild Hunt take me if I fulfill not my word." Which was, admittedly, a pretty antiquated sort of oath, but what the hell. If you're playing for melodrama, you might as well go for broke with it.

She relaxed a little, with reason. Oaths are serious business in the supernatural world, and they're pretty much the major currency. If anybody finds out that you've broken your word—and someone *will* find out, that's inevitable, it's practically a law of nature that somebody *always* finds out—then your reputation's shot. Nobody over here wants to deal with an oathbreaker. Besides which, I've heard rumors that broken promises can have more...direct effects on people, sometimes. Nothing solid, but enough to give a person pause. That goes double for promises which, like mine, invoke a specific entity as reprisal. You break that kind of oath and there's a very good chance that they'll actually *do* it, just so nobody starts to question their rep.

Of course, a promise is only as good as the person that makes it. And, as always, caveat emptor is the order of the day.

She really should have known better.

"Fine," she said, almost spitting the word at me. "Put that *thing* away."

I didn't pretend not to understand her. "That's not how this works," I said. "The sword stays where it is until we're done here." I smiled sharply. "Think of it as motivation. The faster you talk, the sooner you get away from it, and the less likely it is to hurt you."

"Hurry up then," she said.

"You're Jon's apprentice," I said. "Or whatever his name is, I don't care. How long?"

"Four years."

"Before you met the vampire, then," I noted.

"Yes."

"He told you to offer yourself up to her?"

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"Yes. I've been giving him information about her movements and activities."

Interesting. I wondered how long he'd been planning this. It had all the signs of a careful, long-term stalk, rather than an attack of opportunity.

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really," I said, packing as much skepticism into the word as possible.

"I don't! I've never met him in the same place twice. He doesn't tell me where until the day before."

Interesting. If she was telling the truth—which I thought she probably was—he was paranoid enough to make me look like an amateur. That, in turn, meant that there was likely at least one person chasing him. Either that or he expected someone to start soon.

"What's he planning?"

"I don't know!" she cried desperately. "Oh God, I swear I don't know! He wanted me to tell him everything Katrin did. That's all I know."

I looked at her. Saw—and smelled—how afraid she was, how she was finally realizing her own mortality. "You really don't," I muttered, disgusted. "You're no different from Luke's people, are you? Just a tool."

"Please," she said, some pride returning to her voice. "I'm nothing like them. He's taught me things. *Powerful* things."

"And yet," I said dryly, "you remain as short-sighted and idiotic as before." I shook my head. "You know," I said thoughtfully, "I think that's what makes me angry about all this, more than anything else. Kinda weird, considering all the horrible things you've done." I considered it for a moment. "I guess that's what it really is, though. I could almost forgive the rest of it.. Murder, strange rituals, even sending constructs to kill me... that's more or less your job description, isn't it? Mad scientists and evil sorcerers both. In a weird sort of way that's what you're for."

"I don't understand."

I ignored her. "But what he's done to them, well, *that's* something else. I mean, you're one thing. You went into it looking for power, I'm guessing for a fairly petty reason. You would've wound up here yourself at some point. But Luke? He and his were trying to do some good. Trying to make a difference in a cruel world. What happened to them was so far beyond unfair I don't even know what to call it. I don't know that I can forgive that."

"I've told you everything I know," she said, something of her haughty attitude present once more. "You promised."

"I did, didn't I?" I said. I wasn't consciously trying to sound creepy or anything, but she flinched anyway. "Well, let's get this over with."

I walked behind her. Olivia went tense, then relaxed again. She was confident that I was cutting her loose, and she would be going free shortly afterward.

She was completely unprepared for me to stab her.

Tyrfing was, of course, more than sharp enough for the task. Driven by preternatural strength, it went straight through the back of the chair, punched through her chest, and stood out a good two feet on the other side, steel stained brilliant crimson with blood, though even as I watched the color faded, seemingly absorbed into the sword.

She gasped, a small, shocked sound in the sudden silence. She didn't die instantly, though of course I got her heart. It isn't hard to hit when you're standing behind an immobile, unsuspecting person. You can actually survive almost anything for at least an instant or two. Even decapitation can take a couple seconds to be lethal.

"Two pieces of advice," I said to her. "On the off chance that reincarnation is for real. Number one, nobody fucks with my head and gets away with it. Not nobody, not no how. Which is pretty specific as advice goes, but it might do you some good. Two, when somebody's already threatened to kill you twice in a given conversation, be a lot more specific in what you make them promise."

I twisted the knife—sword, really, but that doesn't sound nearly as dramatic—and ripped it back out, bringing with it another gout of blood. Olivia slumped against her bonds. "Thus," I said quietly, "do I free you from the bonds of your flesh. Rest in peace."

So died a young woman who may or may not have been named Olivia, who had betrayed everyone she ever served but was still, in the greater scheme of things, nothing but a victim. I didn't want to kill her, but I saw no other way.

I sheathed Tyrfing and waited a few minutes for the effect of the sword's curse to fade a bit. It's dangerous, of course, to me most of all, but the magic dissipates quickly. If you're careful for that time and you don't spend an excessive amount of time near the unsheathed sword, there isn't too much that it can do to you.

Usually.

While I waited I made sure that no trace of my presence remained in the room. I emptied the can of soda, then crushed it and dropped it into my pocket. Tyrfing never retained blood, not even a little, and I'd been careful and adroit enough to avoid getting any on myself. I took the rope back, and

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the handcuffs, and dropped them back into the right pockets. The duct tape I left. It would explain why she hadn't struggled, and it was utterly anonymous. I had, of course, not taken off my gloves at any point. There would be no fingerprints, nor any hair that could be used to identify me.

I'd been quite sure of that, but I still double checked everything. A murder is a tricky thing, after all. You can't be too careful.

Okay, done here. Time to bug out. That, in itself, represented a few problems.

I hadn't been seen by anyone except Olivia and the clerk at the front desk. I wanted to keep it that way. In fact, if everything went right, I would just disappear without a trace.

I threw all the windows open wide first thing. The view from the seventh floor was...very impressive. I spent a moment appreciating it, then I dove out. Above me the curtains snapped in the breeze as I plummeted.

Chapter Twenty-one

The wind rushed over my face as I fell, blew back my hair and my coat and roared in my ears. I was falling headfirst, straight toward the ground.

It was terrifying and gut-wrenching and, more than anything else, *exhilarating*. There is a reason people go skydiving, after all. It was an incredibly glorious sensation, feeling the air whip past me, seeing the lit windows of the hotel behind me blurring by in the night.

Of course, if I didn't get my act together it would rapidly turn into a lethal sensation as well. I reached out, caught the wind streaming past me, and began to weave it into the right forms. As I fell I turned so that I was parallel to the ground, spread-eagled.

Flying is hard. Even with magic it's a ridiculously hard thing to pull off. To really fly you have to direct the wind into pushing you in exactly the right direction, and with enough force to move your body weight against gravity. That's a lot of force to overcome with air alone. On top of that, it means that once you get moving, you move *fast*. You have to, or else you start to fall. It's hard to control, too, hard to change directions without breaking yourself or going out of control and hitting something.

All things considered, there aren't very many people in the whole world who can fly with magic. I'm not one of them.

On the other hand, anybody can fall out of a window. That makes things easier. You don't have to build up forces at that point; gravity does it for you. Granted, if you mess up it builds up enough force to turn you into an exceptionally messy pancake, but that's the trade-off you make.

As I fell, I grabbed the wind and used it. First I nudged myself off course, pushing away from the building and slightly to one side so that I would land in a shadowed, quiet area away from prying eyes. As I did that I reached to the air underneath myself, thickening it and churning it into a wind that pushed up against me from below with significant force. It was a parachute, basically. I wasn't trying to fly. I was just falling more slowly, in a graceful and controlled manner.

I didn't drift to the ground like a feather. I didn't hit like a sack of potatoes thrown out of an airplane either, though, so I was counting it as a victory. I struck the ground hard, about as hard as if I'd fallen from the second floor instead of the seventh (don't ask how I know that, either) and rolled to disperse the momentum and keep from breaking my knees.

As far as I could tell, nobody had seen my exit. If they had (and for some reason told the truth to the police) they would immediately be dismissed as jokers or madmen. That had been part of why I'd done it the way I had, after all; everybody knows that a man doesn't jump out of a seventh-story window and walk away unharmed. It was, in a somewhat lunatic way, much safer than climbing down.

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Don't you just love that? It was safer to *jump out of the freaking window* than take the elevator. God, I hate my life some days.

I walked away, quickly, in a random direction. I went about a mile, dropping my sunglasses in a trash can on the way. I'd gotten them on the cheap anyway. Tyrfin I leaned against the corner of a building in the alleyway. It would find its own way back. It always did.

Without those items I was significantly less conspicuous. Still a little strange looking, of course, but I'm used to that.

I stopped at a chain restaurant and had breakfast. I was polite and tipped well—I always do—but otherwise unremarkable. I didn't think anyone would remember that I had been there. Then I walked about another mile in a different direction before calling another cab. It was, thankfully, not the same driver as before. That might have been awkward.

"How'd the armor work last night?"

"I have no idea," I said. "I didn't need it, remember?"

Aiko sniffed. "That's pathetic. You didn't use it even *once*? What kind of a fight is that?"

"The kind I won," I said reasonably, scratching Snowflake's ears idly. She was sleeping in her favorite place, which is to say on top of my feet.

"You won too easily. I expected better."

"*Too* easily? Is that even *possible*?"

"Of course," she scolded me. "What could be more boring than an easy fight? I mean, you have to let them hit you at least *once*. It's more exciting that way. Also, nobody bets against an obvious winner, so it's hard to make a buck unless you at least make it *look* like a close fight. Unless you throw it, I suppose...."

I snorted. "What about that troll you killed when we were hitting Black's compound? You didn't even let the thing get *close* to you, never mind actually *hitting* you."

"Entirely different," she said airily. "That was graceful, elegant, and aesthetically pleasing. There are professional dancers that can't look that good while beating someone up. Even if you gave them a sword. You're a cheap thug by comparison."

"You're insane," I told her. "You realize that, right? You are a menace to yourself and others. A certifiable lunatic. Also, possibly sociopathic. I never did get clear on quite what that means, but I think random violence to strangers has something to do with it."

"Don't forget vandal," she said helpfully. "Or kleptomaniac, that one always sounds good."

The worst part is that we weren't entirely, or even mostly, joking. She really *is* all those things, excepting possibly the kleptomaniac. It's not just drugging my food—that's harmless, I know her, and she doesn't do it when there's weird shit going on anyway. No, my favorite was the time somebody cut her off in traffic, some jerk with an expensive new car who almost caused a wreck. You've probably had the same thing happen to you.

What you probably *didn't* do was follow them home, slash their tires, wreck their engine, and generally ensure that their car would never run again. Luckily I'd talked her out of planting drugs in their house and then tipping off the cops. That goes a bit too far, in my opinion.

"So what will you do now?" she asked a few minutes later.

"Not sure," I said. "I kinda doubt I can live and let live with this guy at this point. I don't see much in the way of a peaceful resolution for this situation." I sighed. "Unfortunately, I also don't see how I can get at him. Dude's freaking invisible. I guess I have to come up with some kind of plan to deal with him."

"Funny you mention it," she said in that too-innocent tone that is never safe, no matter who's using it. "I actually have a plan already."

I eyed her dubiously. "I don't want to hear it, do I?"

"Almost certainly not."

I sighed. "Tell me anyway."

She did. It took a while, mostly because I kept interrupting with incredulous and caustic comments.

"You are a shitty planner," I told her. "I have literally heard better plans than that proposed by a dog."

"Got a better idea?"

"I hate it when you revert to logic," I muttered. "And no."

She grinned. It wasn't a *hostile* expression, exactly, but it wasn't comfortable to have aimed in my direction, either. Think Cheshire Cat.

"Fine. Let's get to it."

Aiko's plan was particularly hard for me, because psychologically speaking, I'm a lone wolf. And no, I don't mean any kind of pun by that. The plain truth is that I don't run with a pack for a reason, and much of that reason is who I am.

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Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not a people-hater, nor do I turn away assistance when it's offered (obviously). It's more a matter of first reactions. When I find out about a situation, my impulse isn't to ask for help or look for someone to tell me what to do. It's to just go, figure out what to do about the problem, and get it done. Even when I do have help, I'm used to relying on myself. I'm not much good at team tactics.

This particular plan called for me to rely totally on others. Barring extraordinary luck and possibly divine intervention I couldn't pull it off solo. If my allies decided to leave me out to dry, I was absolutely and utterly screwed. The target would probably be killed shortly afterward, but that wouldn't be much comfort to me.

But I didn't have a better idea. And Aiko's logic, though not a chain that I would ever have conceived of, nevertheless seemed reasonably sound. In this situation, being idiosyncratic to the point of nigh-insanity was probably actually a benefit. There is something to the claim that lunatics are more dangerous than sane people, because they're so hard to predict.

It was byzantine beyond rationality, but the essence was really very simple. Step one was to call Enrico. I had no way of contacting Luke, who was my only lead on finding Jon. However, he had let slip that one of his cohorts was a policeman named Mike, who had been the source of much of their information before they met Jon.

Now, I was sure there must be plenty of Mikes in an organization the size of the police force. But Mike had been getting information about supernatural monsters through the police force, and as far as I knew Enrico was the only cop in the city that could have provided that information. Enrico wouldn't have talked to a stranger about that kind of thing, so I was pretty sure he would know which person I should ask.

As it turned out, he did. He asked what I wanted it for, of course, but I put him off.

I've done that a lot to him. I actually feel kinda guilty about it.

He was willing to let me get away with it, on the condition that I tell him if things got dangerous. I agreed, which was *technically* not a lie, because things were already dangerous. He gave me another number, which I promptly called. It rang seven times before a deep, unfriendly voice answered.

"Who is this?"

"You Mike Adams?"

"Yeah. Who are you?"

"My name's Winter," I said, grinning. "I hear you know Luke."

There was a brief pause. Then, he said, "Ah. So that's what this is about." His voice, although not overtly hostile as it had been when he answered, was still guarded, untrusting.

"Yep. I think we need to talk."

"Maybe," he said guardedly. "Where?"

"The Full Moon Grill," I told him.

What? The irony amused me.

"Fine. Half an hour."

"Meet you there. Oh," I added, "and bring the gang." I hung up.

"Half an hour?" Aiko asked.

"Yeah. Give me a ride?"

"What, do I look like a cabbie to you?" she said, already holding her keys.

"Looks aren't bad," I said thoughtfully. "But the voice is wrong. You need a Middle Eastern accent, I think, and maybe a touch more sports-announcer. And sound angry. You might want to rant about immigrants not speaking English, even though you're barely intelligible yourself. That's always good for a laugh."

"And you call *me* crazy," she muttered.

We were the first ones there, taking the same upper-level table as the last time I'd been there. Such tiny amusements make life worth living, if you ask me. Especially when you don't have access to the large amusements.

I'd left most of my gear at home, because it wasn't legal to own. The gun, for example, and the knives. The armor, too, because it was conspicuous and wouldn't do much to protect me from magic in any case. Besides which they'd be fools to attack me on my home ground. Not that I had any real advantages there, it's not really my place, but *they* didn't know that.

Of course, I'd still brought my other gear, the foci and stored-spells and such. They'd be fools to attack me, but I'd be just as idiotic not to assume that they would.

I ordered breakfast, too, of course. Technically it was closer to lunch, but I'd only woken up recently, a few minutes before Aiko got there. The food was about half gone when Aiko murmured, "Company," not looking away from the food.

I followed her example, not showing any sign that I had noticed the new arrivals. Fortunately, today the bartender actually *was* a werewolf, one of the three or four who worked in the restaurant. In fur or out, a werewolf is close enough to an animal for me to work with. With a little magic I got an excellent view of the newcomers through her eyes.

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There were about half a dozen of them, Luke Laufson in the lead. Next to him was a big, bluff-looking fellow who, judging by the basso quality of his muttering, was most likely Mike. The rest looked vaguely familiar, and overall they gave the same impression as the last time I'd seen them—which is to say that they looked various flavors of young, unsure, and slightly nervous.

They saw us immediately, of course. A few of them, including Luke and Mike, did a reasonably good job of not showing it. The rest were almost painfully obvious, one man even *pointing* at our table like an idiot. Mike winced when he saw it, although I suspect that was more because he was a cop than anything.

They lingered for a few minutes downstairs, although I don't really know why. They must have known we were aware of their presence. Maybe they were waiting for Aiko to leave or something. In any case, when they did make their way up about five minutes later they'd been joined by another two people. Luke was still clearly the leader.

"Mr. Wolf," he said politely, stopping a short distance from the table. "You had something you wanted to talk about?"

"Call me Winter," I said. "Please. You're missing some people."

"Yes," he said. "Mac was called in to work unexpectedly. Given that she works at the hospital it seemed somewhat...improper to ask her to come anyway. The others should be joining us shortly."

"Excellent," I said. "Maybe some introductions are in order?"

"I suppose so," he said after a moment. "You already know me, of course, and I understand you've spoken with Michael as well. Then Katie's over there, and that's Brick Anderson next to her."

I nodded and made polite sounds. Katie was a small, slight young woman with dark hair, who wore ratty jeans and a T-shirt and no makeup at all. I was betting she was from the college. Brick, which was an even stranger name than mine, was about the exact opposite. He was better than six five, thin as a beanpole (and just what *is* a beanpole, anyway? It's ridiculous the comparisons we use, when you think about it), and had close-cropped blond hair.

Luke went around the group. The woman with frizzy blondish hair was Erica, who had been so confrontational the last time I saw these people. The silent man hanging around at the back, who kept his weight on the balls of his feet and who I was almost sure had been loitering around outside when we got there, went by Aubrey. Chuck was a sturdily built guy who looked about twenty-five, dressed in jeans and an oil-stained shirt. Matthew and James, who I was willing to bet went by Jimmy most of the time, were the ones who had arrived late. Kris, who was wearing a sundress and flip-flops, had been sitting at another table when we arrived.

I introduced myself as well, of course, and Aiko, though I didn't say who she was or why she was there. None of them asked, which suggested either remarkable courtesy or astounding stupidity. With this gang, I wasn't betting on politeness.

The really remarkable thing was that, now that I had the time and attention to spare, I could sort out each of their individual magics by scent. James, like Luke, smelled of fire and heated air, hungry. Brick smelled, essentially, like his namesake. Matthew, Kris and Chuck were sharper and musky, an aroma that reminded me of a werewolf without the lavender tones, while Erica's power was light and fresh like a morning breeze off the sea. Katie, Aubrey, and Mike were subtler, trickier to figure, though I remembered Luke mentioning that Mike was a shaman.

"All right," Luke said when that was finished. "That's all of us. Mac's at work, like I said, and Doug's out of town today. What did you want to talk about?"

I frowned. There was something...funny about Luke. I felt like I should know him, somehow, although I couldn't quite say *why*. Something in the way he so smoothly took control of things, like a masterful orchestra director, seemed uncannily familiar.

There was no point dwelling on it now, though. "You remember what I told you before?" I asked him. "About Jon."

"Sure," he said. The others didn't look excessively confused, so I presumed that he'd filled them in. "Did you get any proof?"

"Nothing irrefutable," I said darkly. "Incidentally, what did you call his apprentice? The woman you were going to meet with last night."

"Olivia," he said.

I grunted. "Well, that's something. Same name she gave me. Speaking of which, she was also working for a vampire. The same one who...what do you call it when a vampire makes another vampire?" I asked suddenly. "None of you know? Darn. Anyway, she was the one who made the vampire that I think Jon killed."

"And you think that's going to convince us to side against him?" Luke was still the only one speaking up. I had to wonder just how unanimous they were. "We're more likely to congratulate him for it than anything, you realize."

"Two points," I said. "One, I already told you why that's not such a good idea. Two, don't you think he should have at least *told* you? I mean, given that his apprentice was working with the vampire in question, it seems like common sense. Otherwise how would you know not to hit that particular nest?"

Aubrey spoke for the first time. "I notice that you're speaking of her in the past tense," he said, startling me a little.

"Oh," I said. "Um. I take it that means you didn't see it in the news." A bunch of blank faces looked back at me, and I frowned. "Huh. I thought sure they would have found the body by now."

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Mike cleared his throat meaningfully. "I take it," he said carefully, "that you did, in fact, kill Olivia."

"In all fairness," I said, "I feel I should point out that *she* attacked *me*. Also, I believe that she was an accomplice to at least one murder. Plus whatever fancy language you have for that. Conspiracy to something or other, I'm sure."

He frowned disapprovingly. "Even if she was," he said, "and that's a big if, it doesn't give you the right to take the law into your own hands."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, you really think they're going to buy 'psycho magic ritual' in the courts as a murder weapon?"

"Besides which," Aiko said suddenly, "is it not the same as what you're doing? I admit a certain unfamiliarity with your legal system, but I fail to see the difference between that and your brand of vigilante justice. Unless, perhaps, it's that what he did was to a human you knew instead of the faceless, nameless horde that you call monsters. In which case perhaps you should reconsider the rightness of your own position."

Mike looked like he'd swallowed a live eel.

"Do you have any proof of your statements?" Luke asked, dragging the conversation back onto topic by main force.

I shrugged. "Nothing that isn't dependent on my word. Which, obviously, if you trusted me that much we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"I don't think we can agree to act based on your suppositions."

"Don't blame you," I said cheerfully. "I have a proposal for you, though."

"This should be interesting," he said with a small, humorless grin. The expression nagged at me, making me wonder again why I felt so strongly like I knew him.

"I'm going after Jon," I said quietly. "I'm sure he's the one who's been behind this. And I'm going to take him down. I am not just going to kill him. I will visit such horror upon his head that it will be spoken of in whispers a dozen years hence. I will rain down fire and destruction on his house, and when I walk away there will not be two stones left standing. When I have finished with him even the demons that wait and watch in the darkness beyond our world and feed upon the misery we mortals inflict upon each other will cringe, and Satan himself will laugh when he sees the things I've done." I smiled brightly. "And, you know, I figured there's no reason for you to get caught in the crossfire. You seem like decent kids and, y'know, I'd really rather not kill you?" I grinned wider, leaned forward a little, lowered my voice. "If he calls...I'd suggest you not answer. You don't have to help me. Just stay out of my way, and everybody goes home happy."

Emrys Vaughn

We got up and left without another word. And, clever fellow that I am, I'd already eaten or pocketed all the food.

Think ahead, that's my motto.

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Chapter Twenty-two

"Satan himself will laugh, eh?" Aiko said as we drove off. "You're lucky I didn't break down laughing. Would've ruined the atmosphere."

I grinned. "You think *you* had it bad? Imagine how *I* felt. I had to say it with a straight face."

"Although I did like the bit with the demons," she said thoughtfully. "Had real panache. Not that I know what panache means. Still, it was nice. Lyrical, even. Like something out of Shakespeare."

"Might have come out of Shakespeare for all I know," I said cheerily. "I never did read that crap."

"Lucky," she muttered. "Think they bought it?"

"One of 'em did," I said grimly. "At least. And that's all it takes." I paused. "But, probably, yes. They seemed pretty fond of the melodrama and ridiculous speeches. I figure, speak to 'em in their language, that'll get the point across. Think it worked."

"Great news," she said. "How long you think we have?"

I frowned, estimating calculations in my head. "Call it an hour to get the message across. Another twenty minutes to organize a reaction. Maybe fifteen to implement it. Hour and a half, tops?" I shrugged.

"Guess we better get a move on, then," she said, accelerating well past the speed limit.

On the way back I got a phone call. I listened to the slightly panicked voice on the other side. I spoke a few words to him, as gently as I could, and hung up.

"Word?" Aiko asked me.

"That was Luke," I said, frowning. "Apparently Erica decided to go confront Jon and see what he has to say for himself."

"Think she's a plant?" the kitsune asked lightly.

"Probably."

"We should probably step up our timetable then."

Aiko dropped me off at my cabin and left. It was necessary, for this plan to work, that I do the next part solo.

I grabbed Tyrfing and belted it on. Slipped my pistol on, grabbed my shotgun and slung it over my shoulder, the whole ten yards. Which, again, is a ridiculous phrase, considering that I've never been all that fond of football. I left the armor, but other than that I had my entire kit.

Like I said, it's a delicate balancing act between seeming *too* casual, and looking like you're ready for World War III. In this case it was even harder, because Jon knew that I knew that he wanted me dead. Given my reputation and that fact, he would rapidly get suspicious if I didn't seem prepped for a fight. On the other hand, if I overprepared by much, he might start wondering what *else* I'd done to get ready, which would pose serious problems. This plan was kind of counting on him not thinking in that vein. If he started considering that topic, it wouldn't be hard for him to figure out what I was planning, in which case I was about to die in a distinctly unpleasant manner.

Eventually I got the balance right. Then, just when I was getting ready to leave, I was interrupted by a coldly unemotional voice from behind me, in my kitchen. It said:

"Drop your weapons, Wolf. It's over."

I froze and turned to face the voice.

It was, quite obviously, Jon. The fox's vision of him had been blurry, dulled both by the passage of time and the fact that I was looking through another being's eyes, but still remarkably accurate. Tall, a little on the thin side, he looked like he was in early middle age but had a confident demeanor that somehow suggested that he was a fair bit older.

The accoutrements were new. He was wearing dusty black clothes, including a full-length hooded cloak that should have been ridiculous but, instead, actually made him look kinda scary. There was a wand on one hip, and an elaborately decorated knife rode on the other. He was holding a staff, of course, a thick shaft of wood as tall as he was. It was pale and greyish, making me think of maple weathered and aged by long use and exposure to the elements. There was a ruby pendant prominently displayed on his chest. Overall, he practically radiated the "evil wizard" theme so strongly I could taste it.

Oh yeah, and he had half a dozen lackeys with him. They were human goons, big men holding assault rifles, and carrying pistols and grenades and probably other things, too. They all looked confident, though it ranged from the expression of a person looking forward to the prospect of hurting someone to the casual, bored look of a professional for whom violence isn't a terribly exciting thing, in either direction.

I, of course, immediately judged the second category to be the greater threat by far. Professionals are generally much more dangerous than lunatics. Insanity might make you harder to predict, but it has disadvantages too.

"Drop the weapons," Jon repeated, not sounding terribly excited. "It's over."

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I licked my lips nervously, thinking. There was a chance that this could still work out. I hadn't been expecting him to move this fast. I sure as hell hadn't expected the gunmen. But, well, you never know. I might win.

"Last chance."

A plan formed and crystallized in my head in an instant. I spent one more precious moment considering it, but I didn't see any obvious flaws—besides, you know, the obvious ones. The timing would have to be absolutely perfect, and it depended on luck to an uncomfortable extent, but if it worked it might even the odds.

I dropped my hand to my belt, and unclipped Tyrfing. At the same time I undid the clasp holding it into place, the motion small enough that hopefully none of them had noticed. I threw the sword forward to clatter at their feet, a dramatic gesture that just happened to also be totally meaningless.

Because the sword also slid out of the scabbard. Just a little bit. Maybe three inches.

I took my time about the rest of it. I dropped the shotgun off my shoulder and straight to the ground beside my feet, then bent over to put the pistol next to it. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, I removed things from my pockets and piled them on the ground. A leather pouch full of magically charged dust, another pouch filled with ball bearings, a couple ammo boxes, a set of lockpicks. Anything and everything that could conceivably be used as a weapon I took out and put on the floor. It took about five minutes.

That would have to be enough.

Then, as I pulled out my rope and dropped it to the ground, I also palmed a little chunk of crystal. Then things started to move very, very quickly.

I threw the crystal in their direction, closed my eyes and turned my head to one side, and focused my will on the stone. I had designed the thing to react to my power, and it did so marvelously. The spell that I had sealed into the structure of the crystal released, very suddenly and with tremendous force.

It had been the first stored spell I made, and I had deliberately done something about as simple as possible. Light is, after all, a very pure and very simple release of energy. No complicated structure or ideas, no elaborate effects. Just a sudden flash of light comparable to a flashbang. There was no noise, no heat, but suddenly the room was filled with an illumination that was painful even behind my closed eyes.

In the same movement, I dove to the side. Not a moment too soon, either; they were reasonably good marksmen, and they reacted instantly to my motion as I released the stone. Half a dozen assault rifles sent a veritable fusillade of bullets my way. They were temporarily blinded, which was the only reason I survived the first moment of the fight, but they were still filling the hallway where I was standing with enough lead that a few hits were inevitable. I felt a hot sting above my right hip as I

dove. Then, while I was crouching in the corner, another round hit my left bicep, and a ricochet caught me in the calf.

I sat, and endured without making a sound that might give them something to aim at it. It was hard, just sitting while that hail of death proceeded all around me. One heartbeat. Two, and I started getting nervous.

Then, as I had known it must, something went wrong.

Tyrfing's entropy curse had been searching for an opportunity, a way to turn events for the worse, and it had found one.

They were good men, as mercenaries go. Skilled, practical, and, perhaps most importantly, careful. But combat, especially under unexpected circumstances, is inherently chaotic. You can't control or predict every variable, meaning that there's always an element of chance.

And chance was what Tyrfing manipulated.

This time the crack was found in the bracing of a rifle against a man's shoulder. Now, you should know that an assault weapon generates a tremendous amount of force in the form of recoil, especially when fired on full auto. Which, in their surprise and sudden panic, these men were doing. If you're firing a relatively light round, you're experienced, and you're well braced, you can keep the gun under reasonably good control.

Unfortunately, one of the men was unlucky enough that the stock of the gun slipped. Without something to brace the weapon against, and caught by surprise, he was helpless.

The recoil did as recoil does, spinning him around.

Unfortunately for the other men, he didn't have time to let go of the trigger. Even worse, he spun in such a way that they were raked by friendly fire. Then, in another tragic coincidence, one of them, being temporarily blind, assumed that there was an enemy right next to him, panicked, and returned fire.

All of this happened in a couple seconds. Then the magazines clicked empty and I opened my eyes again.

Six men were bleeding on my kitchen floor. Several of them were obviously dead, while others were merely on their way to that state.

Well, damn. I was *right*. Throwing Tyrfing at a group *was*, like, the ideal weapon.

Except that Jon wasn't down. That, really, was the big problem with the situation. None of the bullets had even come close to him; there was literally a ten-foot circle around him that was totally, completely, impossibly untouched. Most of the walls looked like Swiss cheese, but that one section of

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the room was utterly pristine. The hooded mage was looking at the carnage with a mildly interested expression, and I realized with a sinking feeling that I hadn't even rattled his cage.

He knelt to examine Tyrfing, looking slightly more intrigued now. I took advantage of his distraction to go for the shotgun.

He heard me, of course. I mean, the man wasn't a complete idiot. He hadn't forgotten I was there. He glanced in my direction, his eyes showing no more emotion than they had before, and flicked his fingers vaguely in my direction. His lips shaped one word, which I never heard.

As it turned out, there was a difference between Olivia and her master. I'd been able to fight off her mental attack, but I never even felt his. I was prepped, ready, and alert, and he still demolished me in an instant. Sudden darkness swamped me, and I was not only unconscious before I hit the floor, I was out *before I knew I was falling*.

Chapter Twenty-three

Waking up was a difficult process. I became aware, first off, that I was uncomfortable. Not like horrifically or anything, just in an awkward position. My vision was strange, dark and red, and for a moment I was terrified that I had gone strangely blind before it occurred to me to open my eyes.

When I did, I was staring straight into a bank of fluorescent lights. The glaring light seemed to clear my head a little, and I started taking stock of my situation.

I was in a strange room, alone, tightly restrained, and naked. If you've ever had cause to say that sentence, you have my sympathies, because I see no way that situation could be good. Also, believe me, no matter how bad yours seemed, I was worse off. At least, I hope so. If not you might want to consider seeking professional help.

I was spread-eagled on my back on what felt like a doctor's examination table. The steel was cold against my bare skin, pushing me further into reality. My hands were cuffed somehow, above my head and at an acutely uncomfortable downward angle. If I tried to squirm I had an excellent chance of dislocating a shoulder. Not a fun time. My legs were straight, but otherwise in similar condition. The metal band around my forehead prevented me from getting a good look, but in my peripheral vision I could see what looked like a heavy-duty set of handcuffs around my ankles. Even if I could get any leverage, which I couldn't, I doubted that even lycanthropic strength would be enough to break them.

"Okay," I said aloud. "So he's got you. That's okay, man. Don't panic. You'll find a way out."

I closed my eyes against the light, not that it did a whole lot of good, and focused on what I could find out with magic. The room I was in was small, barely ten feet square, and from the way the air moved I was guessing there was only one door. No window, no furnishings except for the table I was strapped to.

I discovered, to my intense discomfort, that I couldn't figure out anything past that point. As far as my magical senses went, the rest of the world didn't exist. There was some kind of ward in the walls past which I could neither see nor act.

Okay, that was just great. This might put some serious crimps in the plan. It seemed like a really good time to move to Plan B. Unfortunately, I'd never even got around to a Plan A.5.

"Don't panic," I said again, trying to forestall the acknowledgment that I already was. "Don't panic, man. If he was just going to kill you, he'd have done it already. You can figure *something* out."

I don't know how long I lay there, growing increasingly scared and uncomfortable and trying to avoid thinking about my circumstances. As it turns out, serious discomfort, immobility, and knowing that there is absolutely nothing you can do about it are nearly as good as intricate magic for screwing with

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your sense of time. It felt like weeks, but it couldn't have been more than an hour before the door opened.

There was a brief silence, then a sigh. "I should have known," Jon muttered. Suddenly the light above my head flicked off, leaving me blinking in the sudden, comfortable darkness before another, dimmer light turned on. I heard footsteps coming closer, then a faint ratcheting noise. In short order my head and hands were free, and I sat up, rubbing the kinks out of my back.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I ordered my men to confine you, without telling them *how*. I should have known they would take the opportunity for a little revenge."

I turned to look at the mage incredulously. He'd ditched the cloak, staff, and wand, but otherwise looked pretty much the same. "Are you apologizing to me?"

"Is it really that hard to believe?" he asked, leaning casually against one of the concrete walls.

"Well, last time I checked you were trying to freaking kill me, so yeah, it kinda is."

He sighed. "Winter, if I wanted you dead do you really think you would have just woken up?" He shook his head. "I don't have anything against you, personally. If it weren't for your own grievance against me, we wouldn't have needed to meet under such unpleasant circumstances. There's no reason for us to be enemies."

I wanted to spit and curse and laugh in his face. But...frankly...I wasn't in a position to do it. He could kill me right now with about as much effort as it took to open a can of soda, assuming you're not arthritic. So instead I said, "Let me guess. This is the old 'join or die' spiel."

"I'm considering it, certainly," he said mildly. "You show a certain amount of promise. You have potential. A few years study with me and you could realize it. I could teach you things that Hoffman, whatever he might claim, is too timid to ever show you."

"Yeah," I sneered. "Just like you taught Luke. Or Olivia, for that matter."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, a touch of mockery coloring his own tone. "They are nothing, compared to the likes of us. They were never more than a tool in my hand. What I am proposing to you is entirely different. A partnership, of sorts."

"Yeah? Let's say I'm not interested in what you have to teach."

"In that case," he said, not seeming particularly put out, "you don't have to. Tell me how much your friends know and you can walk away."

I waited a moment, but it seemed that he had nothing more to say. "That's *it*?" I asked incredulously. "You'd let me go?"

"Of course," he said. Seeing my expression, he laughed, a sound like dusty parchments rasping against each other. "I am not a psychopath, Winter. I do not kill indiscriminately or without reason. If I

were to kill everyone who isn't in some way useful to me, there wouldn't be all that many people left, would there? I have no grievance against you. Granted, if you decide to continue working against me I won't be able to protect you. But otherwise there's no reason you have to be my enemy."

"What about the vampire?" I asked.

"Ah. The vampire, I had a grievance against. Besides," he said dismissively. "It was just a vampire. Not even human anymore. Killing such things is a favor to the world."

Have you ever been talking with someone and suddenly realized that, although you don't actually *disagree* with anything they just said, you are enormously terrified that a mind *capable* of forming those thoughts exists? No? Just me, then?

Anyway, that was how I felt right then. I didn't really think Jon was wrong about that. Nothing I had learned about vampires made me want to keep the horribly, literally bloodsucking things safe and sound. Jon himself seemed remarkably polite and reasonable, as evil sorcerers go. Or, to use a more accurate term from the inaccurate litanies I had learned growing up, an evil witch. He seemed to have a real flair for the mental stuff.

But...how far of a trip was it from that to killing Aiko? She wasn't human either, after all. And, from certain perspectives, she was probably a dangerous monster who was hazardous to be around. And yet, in spite of that, I liked her.

Or the werewolves. They killed people too, sometimes. There were packs that were involved in extortion, in the drug trade, packs that hired out as mercenaries for the highest bidder regardless of the worthiness of their cause. Certainly there were werewolves who I would say deserve to die. That didn't mean that I thought the species should be eradicated.

Where did I draw the line? More important, did I even have the right to draw that line at all?

I'm not a spectacularly good man. But you would have to be an ego freak of monumental proportions to make *that* claim.

"Not interested," I told Jon. I wasn't going to help in that cause. Not even through inaction. Not even if it meant my death.

He looked down at me, his expression reminiscent of a disappointed father. "You realize, of course, that this is a futile and ultimately quite pointless dramatic gesture. All that will happen is that you will hurt a great deal. From your reputation I doubt that this will convince you to tell me what you know, but I have to try. When that's over, I will consume you. You will die, and in dying you will make me stronger. Your friends will still die. And you will have sacrificed yourself for *nothing*."

I swallowed. "I know."

"You should be aware, as well," he continued relentlessly, inexorably, "that I found that tracking device before we even left your house. No one will be coming to save you."

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Well, shit. There went my hole card.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind? This is, I'm afraid, your very last chance."

I thought about it for a moment. Then I grinned.

When in doubt, go for the dramatic finish.

"You know something, Jon? You can kill me, sure. But you won't survive me by much. And when you go to Hell...when you're passing me by on the way to the lowest Circle they have...I just hope they let me loose long enough to stab you on the way down." I grinned wider, and I knew that there was an edge of hysteria to the expression, an edge of madness. "So yeah, I'm sure. You want an answer, Jon? Fuck off and die. That's your answer."

He regarded me. Cool. Level. Dispassionate. "Very well," he said calmly. He turned and walked out. A moment later a pair of thugs, much like the ones I'd killed, came in and restrained me once again. They cranked everything a little tighter, this time. One of them spat on me before they left. He gut-punched me hard enough that I thought I was about to throw up, too, drawing a disapproving mutter from his partner. There was nothing I could do about it. Then they left, leaving me alone with the light and the voices that had started gibbering in my head from stark, unreasoning fear.

"Okay," I said, once they were gone. "You can panic now."

The gap wasn't as long this time. It felt like only about ten minutes of terror and slowly growing despair. I searched again and again for some way out, but nothing presented itself. The blocks preventing me from projecting my power or consciousness beyond the walls of the room were too solid, too well-crafted for me to do anything about. Given several uninterrupted hours I might be able to take them down, but that didn't seem likely to happen.

The door never opened, but suddenly there were footsteps behind me. They were quiet, but seemed to echo strangely around the room, the sound hanging in the air weirdly. "Well, well, well," a male voice said sardonically, one that I almost recognized. "Look what we have here."

"What do you want?" I said, unable to keep the snarl entirely out of my voice. I'm not fond of captivity, and I have an unfortunate tendency to lash out at the nearest target when I'm stressed.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, and I suddenly remembered where I'd heard that voice before. "Entertainment, I suppose."

My heart sank. "Of course you do," I said bitterly. "Loki."

He walked around into my field of view, and I saw that I had guessed correctly. He was wearing more or less the same body I'd seen him in before, with red-blond hair and a scarred mouth, along with

cowboy boots and a floor-length duster. Appearance-wise, he was a little unnerving, but no more than I was.

Only the eyes gave his nature away. Where most people had normal eyes, Loki had what a charitable person might describe as freaking weird. Instead of a pupil, iris, and white, he had a mad swirl of color, orange and green like trees on fire. The colors moved and danced weirdly, distractingly. It was hard to look away from, although I knew that making eye contact with one of the scariest gods around was a bad idea.

"Excellent show," he said, continuing to walk slowly around me. "I particularly enjoyed your chat with our good host, there. Although I must say, you've been using quite a lot of Christian references in your threats recently. Perhaps you should try something new. You can always drop my name, if you'd like. That seems to get a good reaction sometimes."

"You were watching that?"

"Of course," he said, sounding vaguely insulted. "You're amusing enough, in your way. Better than any of the other channels on at the moment."

"Yeah?" I said. "'Cause I'm not seeing much entertainment in the near future for either of us. Unless you're into that kind of thing, I guess. Which, from your reputation, isn't terribly unlikely, is it?"

"That's why I'm here," he said, grinning his mad cruel grin. "Do I ever have a deal for you."

"Yeah? That's funny, because I almost remember making a deal with you once before. As I recall, I got utterly screwed. Ring any bells?"

"Funny you mention that," he said. "See, last time you were imprisoned, I put you there. No point holding grudges, though, is there? You escaped, after all."

My head was starting to hurt. "What does that have to do with this?"

"Nothing, of course," he said, winking cheerily. "And everything. Which you should probably have guessed. Anyway, the point is that I'm willing to give you the opportunity to make a comeback appearance. I can snap those bonds for you—seen and unseen alike."

"At what price?"

"Nothing."

I rolled my eyes, although I doubt he saw it. He was almost behind me again. "Yeah, right. Nothing's free."

"All right," he said. "If you want to put it like that...the problem with your escape from Ryujin's palace was that it was far too tame. Better than staying put, granted, but still utterly boring. Too much help on the inside, if you ask me. I'm hoping this time you'll put on a better show. Something worth watching. And tweak that arrogant ass's nose while you're at it, which would be worth it to me by itself."

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I considered that for a moment. "You can break the magic protecting this room as well?"

"Didn't I just say that? Obviously I can."

"Without Jon knowing?"

He looked at me disapprovingly out of eyes gone mad with motion. "I almost think you don't trust me. Of course I can do that. I am the Unmaker, boy, the Breaker of Ties and Lord of Destruction. Don't treat me like some petty mortal hack."

I swallowed dryly. "Do that, then. Rip down those protections—but leave the physical stuff in place."

"Interesting," he noted, and I got the impression that he had seen the entirety of my desperate scheme in that moment. "A daring plan. I look forward to seeing whether you can pull it off."

The God of Liars stopped in front of me, looking at me seriously with his inhuman eyes. He raised one hand and saluted me solemnly. Then he vanished without a trace or whisper of magic, taking all the wards with him as he went.

Chapter Twenty-four

Okay. So that was probably a bad idea. I mean, making deals with Loki has a tendency to be hazardous to your health. Laufey's son was quite possibly the single most terrifying person I'd ever met. More importantly, as far as I could tell, he was completely honest about his motivations. It appeared that he really was concerned only with his own amusement, in seeing interesting things.

Now, don't get me wrong. That's not the worst ambition in the world. I could appreciate that attitude, could even envy it. The problem was that it made him utterly untrustworthy. For example, the only other time I'd made a deal with him, he took advantage of a loophole in the wording of our bargain to set me up with a forged invitation, which got me thrown in prison. Not because he was incapable of arranging a real one, you understand. Just because he thought it was a hilarious prank.

The same thing might well happen here. If he thought it would be more amusing to, say, go tell Jon that I was getting loose in order to arrange a dramatic confrontation between us, he would. He had no particular reason not to, after all.

On the other hand, he would probably let me be for at least a little while. Unless he was playing a *very* subtle game, my efforts to fix my situation would make things more interesting. As long as I kept him amused, he'd leave me alone.

So I'd better get moving.

Actual escape was, of course, out of the question. Even if I'd had Loki undo my restraints, my chances of getting out were so small that you'd have to use scientific notation to estimate them. Up against Jon, any allies he had, and an unknown number of armed guards, I would most likely be caught and killed very quickly.

On the other hand, I didn't really *have* to escape. I didn't even really want to. I was in Jon's inner sanctum, after all.

The same place I'd been working so hard just to find.

I didn't want to leave, not until I'd dealt with the mage. I just had to get enough firepower into place to actually do so.

And, by some fortunate coincidence, the barriers preventing me from communicating with the outside world had been removed.

It took me a few minutes to get into the right headspace, but I've always been good at focusing under pressure. It wasn't long before I slid inside the mind of a raven, watching the house from his perch in a nearby tree. At my urging he flew up and away, carving effortlessly through the air.

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I hadn't been kidding when I told Aiko that the things I can do with my magic are addictive, and flight is a serious contender for the top position. I've never done drugs, never seen much of a reason to, but I imagine that it's a comparable rush. Humans have been dreaming of flying for ages now, probably since before their earliest ancestors started walking upright. In recent years we've figured it out somewhat, with airplanes and parachutes and wingsuits. But I think most people still secretly harbor a great longing for the idea of simply *flying*, without the accoutrements, nothing between you and the ground but your own strength and skill.

That was what I felt. The struggle of fighting gravity with nothing but our strength and determination. The immensely rewarding satisfaction of success. The lazy, confident relaxation afterward, gliding on a thermal.

It doesn't matter how often I do it. Flying is still one of the most amazing things I've ever felt. Every time I experience it, I'm reminded of how easy it would be to just...let go. Just throw the door wide and let it all come rushing in. So easy to not be me anymore.

There are days when that's an awfully tempting prospect. No more pain, no more fear. Never have to worry again. Never have to deal with problems again.

Maybe someday I'll give in to that urge. Maybe someday I'll let it all go and see what my magic can *really* do.

Not today.

I had the raven circle overhead a few times, to orient myself. I discovered, to my moderate surprise, that I knew where I was. Jon had himself a house out in the countryside. *Way* out in the countryside, situated out in the woods not far from Cripple Creek. I'd spent some time hiking in the area, and I recognized some of the landmarks.

The building itself looked like some pretty nice digs. The house was about as big as Kyra's, and looked to have at least a few undeveloped acres around it. Expensive place. It was a little unusual, though, in that there wasn't a driveway leading to the house. There wasn't even a clearly marked trail to the door. It isn't common for even a remote house to be that isolated. There are only a handful of reasons why you'd build one that way, and none of them are good.

Given my current circumstances, that was not a pleasant thought.

Okay. Phase one, accomplished. I knew where I was. Now to tell someone who could actually *do* something about it. I prompted the raven some more. He complained, but was eventually mollified by the promise of plentiful food to come later.

He didn't really *believe* me, of course. Ravens aren't stupid. They are, in fact, quite intelligent, more so than a lot of mammals. But he was amused and intrigued by what was going on, and he was willing to play along.

Colorado Springs was at least sixty miles away by road. Thankfully, the road was winding and took a ridiculously long loop out of the way. I was probably only around twenty miles away as the crow flies. And, as it turns out, as the crow flies is a pretty fast way to travel.

The problem was that magic is limited in range. That was why, for example, Jon had come to confront me personally. He *could* have cast the same spell from a mile away, but his magic would have experienced such severe decay that only maybe one percent of the power he used would have actually reached me, while I would be acting with my full force. Under those conditions I could quite likely have stopped him in his tracks.

Better yet, it decays faster the further away you get, in an exponential way. (For those of you more inclined to mathematics, it can most simply be described as an inverse-cube relationship with respect to the distance involved, multiplied by a value proportional to the inverse of the power input squared. Realizing how much I hate math, you will perhaps see why higher level magic is my own personal, customized Hell. It's like being told that the only way you can have sex with the woman you love is if you're lying on a bed of nails.)

For most types of magic, my functional limit is about twenty yards. At that point almost a third percent of the effort I make is lost as seepage. I guess theoretically I could push it further, but why bother? The most I could generate with that steep of a penalty would be a mildly stiff breeze, whereas if I waited for the enemy to come close I could hit them with gale-force winds.

Mental magic with animals is different for a couple reasons. One, it's what I'm good at, and that makes an enormous difference. Everyone's got one thing that comes naturally when it comes to magic, and this was mine. Two, the actual *power* investment is relatively tiny. It helps that I don't really have to *do* anything; compulsion, or a sleep spell like Jon had hit me with, takes a whole bunch more work than just lingering and occasionally whispering something.

On the other hand, I'd never tried to reach much further than two miles or so before. By my best guess, I was currently at least *ten times* that far away from help. I was not at all sure that I could do that.

I didn't have any better ideas, though. So I hung around in the raven's mind and, occasionally, murmured a course correction.

The first twenty minutes or so were easy. I was feeling the strain, granted, but it wasn't a serious pressure. We traveled seven miles, give or take. Not bad, all things considered.

By the forty-minute mark, well, not so much. I wasn't really seeing the ground below us at that point, wasn't even feeling the strain in our muscles. I'd stopped even *trying* to give directions. I wasn't even dimly aware of my own body by then—I couldn't afford the distraction—but I knew that, if I were, I would be feeling the effort physically as well as mentally by this time. Maintaining the connection at this

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distance was a struggle, draining power faster than I could replace it. I could feel the bond between me and the raven straining, and it was taking more and more magic to keep it from breaking completely.

We hit the edge of the city at around an hour into the trip. It took me several minutes to realize that the bird was trying to get my attention. He was starting to get tired, he'd ceased to be amused some time before, and he wanted to know where to go next. Honestly, in retrospect, I'm surprised he bore with me that long.

Thinking through the fog was difficult. Dividing my concentration even by that much was enough to almost snap my connection to the raven, and I knew that if I lost it even for an instant at this point I'd never get it back.

Aiko. The kitsune was still my best bet. She was, as a matter of fact, my only bet. Where to find her, though?

My house. She might be at my house looking for me, or...something. If she wasn't there then I'd...do something else. Yeah. That was a great idea.

The bird kept moving forward obediently. We blinked, and the next time I became aware of our surroundings was ten seconds later. I was nearing my limits. The torturer could have already started to work on me, back in Jon's stronghold, and I wouldn't even know it in this condition. A comforting thought, actually.

Circling over my house. There was a car out front. Nudge the raven to go closer. Circling, circling, tighter now. Black sedan. Not especially clean. Parked illegally.

Aiko's car, my brain informed me from somewhere very far away. That was important for some reason. We circled lower. Landed. Pecked at the door.

Human. Dark hair. Thin face. Eyes were kind. Female. Knelt beside us. Confusion on her face. Her lips—how strange, not to have a beak—moved. Some part of me recognized the appearance of speech, but I couldn't hear anything over the blood rushing through my head. Wait. I couldn't really hear that, could I? How could I hear that?

Vision dissolved, plunging me into a very confused darkness.

Chapter Twenty-five

I did not so much awaken as piece myself together. Damn, but I felt *awful*.

I seemed to be back in my own body, which was clearly impossible. For one thing, I didn't appear to be back in my cell. I was instead standing on the top of a lonely, isolated stone tower. All around me the darkness seemed to stretch forever, lit only by the stars above my head. Said stars burned with a pure, steady light, cold and white as Arctic frost.

Oh yeah, and Aiko was standing right next to me. That was a definite hint that something wacky was going on.

"Winter?" she said, sounding very confused. "What's going on?"

"Give me a minute," I said. "Feel like my head's full of cotton."

Below us, the tower melded into a mountain. The walls of the building, like the rooftop parapet we were on, were totally bare, Spartan, even desolate. The mountain, though...its slopes were covered in thick conifer forest, right down to the base of the peak where it ran into the sea. There was no other land in sight, no people, no sign that humans had ever seen this place. The forests seemed grim, full of dark and hostile shadows. Just looking at them I had to fight the urge to shudder, and I normally *like* the forest at night. The ground between the trees was covered with thick, pale mists, which seemed to swirl slowly in the breeze. The movement seemed odd, almost purposeful, with an inexplicable air of malice. The mists seemed to have an animus to them, giving an impression of volition and of *awareness*.

And then I suddenly realized what this reminded me of. "This is the spirit world, isn't it?" I asked, squeezing my eyes shut against the eerie, disturbing sentience that the island seemed to be pervaded with.

"That's what you called it," she agreed. "Our word for it is...hard to translate, now that I think about it. The closest English word might be Nowhere. Or Everywhere. Or Somewhere Else." She paused meditatively. "It's kind of a Zen word."

Okay. This was starting to make more sense.

Like I said before, there are tons and tons and tons of ways to go to the spirit world. The maddening thing is that, depending on which way you use, you might end up in a totally *different* world.

When I'd gone in, I hadn't just taken the safest route. I'd only *traveled* a very short distance along it, in the greater scheme of things. More into the borderland than a total transition, really. I mean, I'd still been *seeing* the physical. That's a definite indicator that you haven't really left.

This was an entirely different way of approaching it. It was, essentially, a representation of Aiko's own spirit-level existence—something I'd learned about from Alexander, but never actually

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experienced before now. That explained the isolation, the stark appearance, the way it wasn't quite clear whether the barriers were keeping outsiders away, or keeping us in. This was my mind's interpretation of those concepts and ideas which made up her being. And, like any simple representation of a very complex thing, it had to incorporate layers and layers and layers of subtlety and symbolism to get all the points across.

Considering what I'd learned about Aiko, I was suspicious that bringing me here was not an inconsiderable gesture on her part, regardless of how useful it might be. Showing someone that representation of yourself isn't something you do lightly. It's easy to see too deeply.

"Okay," I said, opening my eyes. "Think I'm better. Remind me to never, ever do that again."

"Do what?" she asked.

"Travel twenty miles by raven," I said, gazing out at the endless dark waters. "Think I went a little crazy for a minute there."

"Speaking of which," she said. "What the hell happened to you? The transmitter was on your floor, and Snowflake couldn't tell me much except that there was a big fight. Like the bullet holes hadn't conveyed that already."

Snowflake. Where had *she* been? It hadn't occurred to me at the time, but normally she wouldn't have missed a fight like that for the world. That bore looking into.

Later.

"Jon happened," I said simply. "With half a dozen thugs. Knocked me out and absconded with me. I believe next up on the menu is light torture, followed by being killed and metaphysically consumed when I refuse to talk."

"Screw that," she said. "I did *not* get you a custom-made suit of armor just so you could get your ass killed without even using the thing."

I grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that. Fortunately, I happen to know where I'm being kept. If you'd like, I can probably tell you how to get there." I laid it out in simple, blunt terms.

"Should I bring in the vampire? Found her business card in your pocket."

I blinked. "You were rifling my pockets?"

She shrugged. "Worked, didn't it?"

I frowned. "Four hours 'til sunset. I kinda doubt I have that long." I paused as a horrible thought occurred to me. "Aiko...this place, it's not like the Otherside, is it?"

She looked confused for maybe half a second, then laughed. "The time dilation thing? No. The opposite, actually. Time *does* pass here, but slower than in the real world. Call it a minute here to a second there, that's close enough."

I sighed in relief, closing my eyes. "That's a relief. For a second there...." I didn't bother finishing the sentence.

When I opened my eyes, the world was utterly different. Or, more accurately, my perception of the world had shifted. Unless maybe it was Aiko's perception. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that she was the one imposing her views on...what? There didn't seem to be an underlying structure to this not-place. Maybe that made sense, considering that it was *Aiko* I was looking at. Stability wasn't really her thing.

Anyway, now we were walking idly through a city, but a city unlike any I had ever seen before. I was moving, in that smooth loping rhythm you sometimes get when you've been walking for a while. The moment I became aware of my own motion I stopped, almost tripping as I realized that I wasn't actually consciously moving.

The buildings were all white stone, perfectly clean and antiseptic-looking. It was curiously, unsettlingly beautiful, like a blossom of nightshade in a vase. The sky was flat pearl-grey, without either clouds or sun, but there was light nevertheless, almost blindingly intense as it reflected off all the white.

There were no doors in the buildings, no windows. Where they should have been were only decorative arches filled with more stone.

And there was not another living thing there but us. Somehow I knew that this would be the case, no matter how far we walked. There would be open courtyards but no parks, yards but no grass, empty bins but no rubbish, no scavengers come to eat it. This wasn't a place that was friendly to life. Each and every blank stone arch seemed to have something horrible behind it, seemed almost like the reason there were no doors was because they had been bricked up to keep something in.

I wondered whether, if I were to go break down the walls, things might come out. Monsters, demons from the nether reaches of pseudoreality? That seemed unlikely. Horrible memories from Aiko's life? Or, worse, the worst parts of who she was?

Or, scariest of all...what if the reason there were bad things behind those arches was because *I'd* put them there?

I did the smart thing and pushed it from my mind.

"What about Kyra?" Aiko was saying, seeming oblivious to the change in our surroundings. I had to hurry to catch up with her, although we didn't seem to be making any progress down the promenade we had found ourselves on. The other side looked exactly as distant as before, the buildings not changing in size the way perspective would normally make them, nor were the buildings to the side

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moving in relation to us. When I glanced back, though, the other end of the square was getting farther away at a normal rate. If I'd had the time I would have gotten a headache.

"Kyra..." I frowned. "There's something funny going on there. I trust her, I think that she's probably telling the truth, I think she has my best interests at heart. And yet, for all of that, there's...something not *quite* right about it. Something fishy."

"I don't suppose you have anything more specific?"

"Of course not," I said sourly. "If I had something specific, I would have told you that instead. But...I really think there's something up. She contacted me in a weird way when this particular mess started. She seemed awfully quick catching on, too. And then there was that construct."

She frowned. "I thought she saved you from the construct."

"Well, sure. But how did it get loose? She was strong enough to rip the thing's freaking head off without breaking a sweat, but not enough to keep a hold? Then, once it did get away from her, she killed it fast. So fast that it almost makes you wonder...."

"Whether she wanted it dead from the beginning," she concluded. "To keep it from talking, maybe. Or whatever it is that constructs do."

I shrugged helplessly. "I can't put my finger on it, Aiko. But I don't want her any more involved with this than she already is."

"Hey," she said, shrugging. "You know her better than me. Your call." There was a brief silence. "So. Vampires are out. Werewolves are out. I'm not making bargains with the fae. Think there's a chance of mages?"

"Not so much. Either Luke or one of his cronies—or, if I have any idea at all how this kind of guy operates, at least two and probably more—are shilling for Jon, like we expected. Be suicide to bring them in." I hadn't noticed the transition, but we weren't walking aimlessly across an empty, open square anymore. We were climbing a tight, walled-in spiral staircase, all of it more white stone, surrounding us completely. There were small, strangely shaped windows in the walls. Not just a little strange, either; I saw at least one right triangle which *had three right angles*. Looking out them revealed a seemingly infinite expanse of sky, grey and misty like that above the city we had been walking through. It seemed like we were still in that city, except that a tower this tall should most certainly have been visible from a ways off, and I hadn't seen any such thing. I didn't see any other buildings out the windows, either.

"I know that," Aiko said scornfully. "I meant that old man you work for. The wizard."

"Alexander?" I considered it. "It'd be nice," I said. "He's freaking *scary* when he puts his mind to it. But I don't think it'll work. He's not keen on sticking his neck out, and he doesn't like me *that* much."

"So we bribe him."

"A good thought," I conceded. "But unless you're a lot richer than you look, not gonna work. The man got at least ten grand for a set spell that he made in under three hours. Without leaving his lab, or exposing himself to any danger worse than eyestrain."

"Oh." She paused again. "So it's just me, then?"

I grimaced and looked away. We both knew that that was pretty much a suicide mission, one that was likely to fail anyway. We also both knew that, if she had to, she would do it anyway, and die laughing. That was who Aiko was.

"Snowflake," I said eventually. "She'll help you. And...." I frowned. "Go to my lab. There's that skeleton, the one you gave me. It's the vessel for the demon I summoned. I told him to obey your orders. His contract doesn't include violence, but he might be willing anyway."

"I thought that place was warded."

"They shouldn't stop you if you go there with the intent of finding that building, specifically. Just don't mess with anything inside and you'll be fine."

She took a deep breath, then nodded. "Okay. You'd probably better leave now. Might take me a minute or two getting out of here, then an hour and change to that house. Um...better call it two hours, be on the safe side. If I'm not there by then, assume that I'm dead and you have to figure out something else."

I frowned. "How hard is it to leave this place?"

She shrugged. "For you? Should be just like waking up."

"And for you?"

"I made it. Unmaking it's my job. Now get out of here. You'll just distract me, anyway."

We climbed out of the enclosed staircase, from light into darkness, emerging on the same desolate, wind-blasted tower rooftop as before, looking out over the starlit seas. I glanced back, only to see that the tower was as bare as ever. There was no entrance, no sign whatsoever of the tall staircase we had climbed, or the barren city beneath, and no windows in the walls below us. The breeze was picking up, the water stirring into swells that would be terrifying on a boat, the air cold enough that even I began feeling it. Aiko's eye had a strange, slightly unnerving fey light to it, and her teeth looked very sharp as she smiled.

"Good luck," I said. And then I closed my eyes one more time.

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Chapter Twenty-six

Do you ever find yourself harboring an intense and abiding hatred of irony? I do. Although, at least on this occasion, I thought I might be better off blaming Loki than the generalized malice of the universe. Bad timing is one thing, but there's only so much coincidence can account for.

Generally speaking, opening your eyes right before somebody punches you in the face is not one of them.

I was even more uncomfortable than before, of course, my shoulders and knees starting to ache. I was covered in a cold, clammy sweat from the strain of the magic I'd done, which was good. With luck they would assume that it was from terror, and therefore not question why I had seemed so unconcerned.

It helped that, within a few seconds of coming awake, I wasn't anything like unconcerned. One of Jon's hired thugs had just slammed his fist into the side of my head, not hard enough to break anything but hard enough to hurt. A lot.

I snarled viciously and went at him like an irritated bobcat, clawing his eyes out. Or, at least, that's what happened in my head. In reality all I managed was the snarl. When I tried to fight back I was brought up short by the sudden and intense pain in my shoulders. It felt like the joints were on the verge of dislocation.

The thug grinned. It was an ugly expression, both in terms of the actual appearance and in the sense of what it meant for my immediate future. Some mercenaries aren't bad people. The Midnight Sidhe called Samuel Black, for example, wasn't too unpleasant. He was cold, uncaring, and ruthless, but not evil. Evil was unprofessional.

This guy was the other type. He liked hurting people. In fact, I was pretty sure that was why he'd become a mercenary in the first place. Not because the pay was good. He just got off on inflicting pain.

I feel no great desire to chronicle what happened next. In any case, you can almost certainly imagine it. There were burns, bruises, and mild lacerations aplenty. The burns were the worst of it. I hate being burned.

Nothing that wouldn't heal, so far. It might or might not leave a mark, scarring in werewolves being a strange and unpredictable thing. But it was painful and, almost worse, it was degrading. I'd experienced unpleasant things before, of course, that goes without saying, but this was a new and horrific flavor. Having never before been involved in torture from either end, I was surprised at how debasing the experience was.

There was no use of silver, which baffled me at the time. I mean, everybody knows that silver is painful to werewolves these days. I didn't understand why Jon wouldn't have some on hand. In

retrospect, of course, it makes perfect sense. The effect of silver on a werewolf is, after all, magical rather than purely physical. Jon didn't want to do anything to harm my power. He was planning on consuming it later.

Time once again seemed to stretch and twist. The experience was interminable, unending, hardly better when nothing was happening than when I was in pain.

It still has a prominent position in my nightmares, matter of fact.

Eventually, there was a pause. The thug stepped out briefly. When he came back, he had a can of soda. He leaned against the wall, drinking it, and smiling with satisfaction.

That was a minor point, though, quickly dismissed. Because I smelled something in the air, something familiar, subtle yet oddly potent. I grinned, although it made my face ache a little.

"Hey," I said. "Nice work. You have excellent technique."

The man stood and sipped his drink. He said nothing.

"I have a deal for you," I said. "You take these restraints off and start running, and maybe I'll be so happy I decide to forgive you."

"No," he said calmly. "You wouldn't."

"Probably not," I admitted. "Still. You leave now, I might be too busy to catch you. Best chance you have, really."

He crushed the can and carelessly tossed it into the corner. "Sounds like you need another lesson on who's in charge here," he said, advancing on me. There was an ugly light in his eyes.

I grinned wider. "I'm not the only one. Now would be good, if you please."

Snowflake just *appeared* in midair behind him.

And she looked very, very angry.

She was already moving when she appeared, and she didn't stop. She hit the man in the back of the head, feet first, bearing him forward and down. She kept moving, flinging her hindquarters around his head. Her flank hit him in the face, muffling anything he might have said in fur. Even as they were falling, her momentum carried her forward and around, snapping his neck like a toothpick.

It was sort of weird, seeing such a classic method of assassination adapted for a canine body. Effective, though, undeniably. And, much like the human version, it was quiet.

He was, if not dead, most certainly already dying when he hit the ground. He died quickly, and he died confused.

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A moment later, Aiko's veil flickered and collapsed. As a young kitsune (young by kitsune standards, anyway), she wasn't very powerful. But her kind has a natural talent for illusion, and she's good at it. If it hadn't been for that whiff of fox-and-spice scented magic, I would never have guessed that they'd slipped in behind the goon when he came in with the soda.

"Nice timing," I grunted. "You have much trouble getting in?"

She shrugged, coming closer. "Not so much. More tedious than anything." She suddenly saw my various injuries and froze. For an instant, before she closed down again, her face was suffused with utter and murderous wrath.

The kitsune looked down at the torturer. "He dead?" she asked, her voice dangerously and deceptively calm.

"Yeah."

She spat on the body—literally, I mean, and she made the gesture look serious instead of like some kind of pantomime. "Lucky bastard," she muttered. "I'd have done worse."

"Look," I said, "I appreciate the dramatic moment and all, but would you mind letting me out of here?"

She grinned. "I don't know," she said mock-seriously. "The situation *does* look sort of interesting...." Thus proving that there really is no situation too inappropriate for a kitsune to crack jokes.

I sighed. "Aiko...."

"All right, all right," she said unrepentantly. Snowflake watched the door while Aiko undid the various manacles and bands holding me in place.

I sat up, wincing and rubbing my shoulders. My arms had long since gone to sleep, and if I were human I probably would have had to worry about long-term circulatory problems. On the other hand, just being able to *move* was such a relief, it was hard to complain.

Sitting up also brought the last member of the rescue party into view. Legion, as enigmatic and silent and statue-like as before, was standing in the shadows where they'd been waiting. His total stillness, coupled with the black fog around the bones, made him very nearly as hard to see as if he'd still been under Aiko's concealment spell.

That might be useful, at some point.

"Glad you made it," I grunted, stretching limbs long since gone stiff. "Anybody see you on the way in?"

"Please," she said scornfully. "Nobody sees me. Or the freakish canine menagerie you've acquired, if they're with me."

"Given that you're canine number three in the menagerie," I said dryly, "I'd be more careful talking about it if I were you." I took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay. In my professional opinion, something needs to be done here."

"Really?" she shot back caustically. "'Cause in my amateur opinion, that statement puts you in the running for 'Understatement of the Week.' Fortunately I came prepared."

"Yeah, I noticed the armor."

Rather than answer me, she just smirked and snapped her fingers. She pointed at the ground, and Legion obediently trotted forward. A cheap, small black backpack was gripped carefully between his teeth. Aiko—or, possibly, Snowflake—must have worn it in here, then dropped it when the action looked about ready to start.

"You're awesome." Grinning, I bent down and went through the bag, quickly.

First thing out was a set of clothes, which I immediately put on. It was just an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt, both mine, but it was still better than doing this commando in any more senses of the word than was absolutely necessary. Most of the armor was there, as well, and I couldn't deny that the weight of it was comforting. It was probably inaccurate, considering what we were up against, but the protection it afforded still felt pretty nice.

Aiko had remembered more offensive gear, as well. There was my backup pistol, a .44. A decent gun, but most of the time I wasn't willing to rely on a revolver in a sticky situation. I belted it on anyway, under the premise that a moderately useful weapon was better than none. Another pouch of my specially prepared dust, which I hung around my neck where I could reach it quickly. Also, a few small metal objects that I was pretty sure were....

"Hand grenades?" I demanded.

She shrugged. "I know a guy in the black market. Speaking of which, mind handing me the gun?"

I drew her carbine out and handed it to her. I didn't bother checking whether it was loaded, because it was *Aiko* I was dealing with. Of course it was. She sighed happily, petting the muzzle of the weapon like a puppy. "Thanks. Thing would have gotten in the way sneaking in here, but I think I want it for the next part." She slung the gun across her chest.

I looked in the pack, which was empty now except for the grenades. "No knife?" I asked. Her own blade, a slim one-edged Japanese model called a tanto, was prominently displayed her belt. At least she'd left the sword at home this time around.

"Nope," she said. "I figured, if you want an edged weapon, you can just summon that sword of yours. Why carry it in?"

I frowned. "That won't work," I said absently, considering various options. "Tyrfing's magic's too strong. Draw it here, in the man's own house, there's an excellent chance he'll know."

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"Oh. Oops. Uh...you want to take mine, or...."

I held up one hand for silence. "Hang on," I said, still not really paying attention. "Something I want to try." I concentrated on my hand, reached for power, and tried something I'd never really done before.

Recently, when I used my magic, it had occasionally generated frost. It drew water from the air, which condensed and froze around me. Ice, basically, which was for some reason generated by my use of power—or, at least once, from my simple presence.

I'd never actively tried to produce it, though. It was a trick, especially because I was deliberately *not* using any magic. I couldn't think of how to reproduce the effect without doing so, but—inexplicably, undeniably—I knew that it was possible.

I thought about the first time it had happened, while we were escaping from Ryujin's palace—and don't miss the parallels *there*, God, you crazy sadist. It had been like stretching, like digging down deeper into myself than I had ever really gone before, like reaching into the depths of my soul and dragging out...what?

Power. Power and a cold, savage mentality that reminded me, to an uncomfortable extent, of Legion. Or, maybe a little more accurately, of the wolf that was Snowflake's darker half. Ruthless practicality, cruel and feral hunger, and a disregard for those outside my pack so profound it was almost beautiful. The mind of a starving wolf. Something, I could feel instinctively, that had been born from necessity, from a crueler and colder and more savage world than I could really begin to understand.

Ten thousand years of winter, an icy voice seemed to whisper in my mind. I could, just barely, recognize it as my own. *Ten thousand years of winter in your blood, the darkness and the cold and nobody to ask for help....*

I shivered and cut it off, opening my eyes. What I saw was...unsettling.

My body was covered in frost. It had coated me from head to toe, spread across the floor, plugged my ears and filled my mouth like a snow cone. When I shifted my weight it made a crunching, crackling sound, like packing down snow. There were literally tiny icicles hanging from my nostrils, lips, from the edge of my shirt and the hem of my jeans.

And I wasn't cold. Not even a little. Not externally, at least. Inside I could feel that voice, that terrible cold voice that was still *mine*, echoing inside my head.

I concentrated on my upraised hand, focusing my will instinctively in a way that I didn't even begin to actually understand. Frost melted, shifted, flowed, and gathered, directed by my instruction.

A minute or so later, all the water that had condensed out of the air onto me had migrated to my hand. More specifically, it had concentrated into a single, relatively massive icicle, defying all logic by

growing *up* out of my palm. It kept growing, until it was about six inches long and an inch wide at the base, narrowing to a literally needle-sharp point. I broke it off with my other hand.

It didn't seem like normal ice. It didn't slip around in my grip, for one thing. It wasn't cold. And, most telling, it didn't melt. Not normal ice behavior at all.

Unless, you know. It was me that wasn't quite normal.

"Nice trick," Aiko said, staring at the improv dagger with open envy. "You never told me you could do that."

"I never knew I could," I said, shrugging. "Not 'til just now. Shall we get a move on?"

"What's the plan?" she asked, shouldering the near-empty pack.

I chewed my lip for a moment. "We can't fight Jon and his goons at the same time. Therefore, the goons must go."

"Lethal force?"

"I'm not seeing much of a choice on that. I don't have a way to get them all to leave, except by killing them."

She nodded. "Right, then. This is the basement level. I'm pretty sure Jon's on the top floor, four levels up."

"Figures," I muttered. "As Conn likes to say, mages are like cats. They're never comfortable unless they're looking down on somebody." I gestured grandiosely at the door with my icicle. "After you, m'lady."

She made a rude gesture and opened the door, drawing her magic into a concealing shroud around us again as she did. The sorta-dogs crowded on our feet as we left.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The lot of us marched down the narrow, brightly lit concrete hallway. There was no one there, not that any of us could detect. The part of me that has entirely the wrong priorities noticed that Aiko's veil was visible from the inside. It rendered shading and texture outside the area of effect oddly warped, almost flat-looking.

There was one door at the other end of the hall. We all crowded around it, straining to sense anyone on the other side. I couldn't feel a presence with magic, not that I dared to extend myself much here. Snowflake didn't hear or smell anything. Legion...presumably would have done something to indicate it if he had detected someone.

Aiko eased the door open, and we let out a collective sigh of relief when there was nobody in the staircase thus revealed. That was one of the major drawbacks to this kind of concealment. If doors started opening and closing when there was no one around, it would rapidly become obvious that something was funky. And, like I'd told Kyra, no spell of concealment can ever be truly perfect. If someone really *looked* at us, our cover would probably be blown.

We repeated the same performance at the top of the stairs. There was a guard on the other side who was, in all probability, currently looking at the door. We waited for a long, tense minute, a stalemate made even worse by the fact that only one party was aware of it.

Eventually I felt a shift in the air patterns, and I knew that he'd moved. We slipped through, making no more noise than a cat through the grass, and closed the door behind ourselves. The room we found ourselves in was relatively large, with one visible doorway to our right. It currently had a guard standing on either side of it. No way to take them out without causing a ruckus.

I gestured to get Aiko's attention—no speech, that would get us caught in an instant—then pointed at myself, then the guard to the left of the doorway, then flashed thirty fingers at her. She nodded, almost imperceptibly, and began working her way around the edge of the room toward the guard on the right.

I went the other way, spinning my own concealment around myself as I went. It was a totally different method than hers, all about weaving shadows into an impenetrable cloak around myself. Visually, it would render me one more patch of darkness in a dimly lit room. And, thanks to all the practice I'd been getting in recently, it would also do a bit to muffle any sounds I might happen to make. It was harder, without the ring I used as a focus for shadow-based magic, but not undoable.

I worked my way around through the shadows at the edge of the room. I had to move with agonizing slowness to be sure of going unnoticed. Halfway through I had to speed up, because otherwise I wouldn't be in time. I had the longer distance to travel, to get to my target.

I made it in time. And, when my count was at twenty-eight, the other guard suddenly jerked to one side. A knife flashed into visibility as it darted forward and carved a broad, bloody grin across the man's throat. He dropped, gasping like a landed fish and pouring out blood across the marble floor.

My guard opened his mouth—to scream, to call the alarm, I would never know. In the same instant I darted forward, abandoning my shadows as I moved. One arm snaked around his neck in an eerie echo of Snowflake's earlier attack, clamping down on his mouth. The other plunged the glittering tip of the icicle into the side of his neck, just under the ear, where the carotid artery was close to the surface.

It was a crap weapon but, let's be honest, that's more than you need most of the time anyway. I drove it into his neck until half the length of the icicle was buried before I jerked it sideways, ripping the wound open and snapping the icicle off in my hand.

I held the thug up, holding my hand tightly over his mouth, and as I did I recognized him. He had been one of the men who'd hooked the restraints back up after my chat with Jon, the one who had disapproved of needless cruelty.

It's been a while since I was disturbed by blood or death. But I suddenly felt nauseous, like I was about to lose a meal that I hadn't even eaten. I stepped back, letting him reel to the side and slide down the wall. The broken icicle fell from my hand and landed in the scarlet pool slowly spreading across the floor. The ice refracted the light weirdly, making it hard to tell quite what you were seeing through it.

He hadn't been my enemy. He was just doing a job. Probably had a wife and kids—or, at least, a lover, parents, people counting on him to bring home a paycheck. He didn't like his job. Had tried, in some small way, to spare me something of the pain that I had experienced today. Had tried to be a decent human being, as well as he was able.

And I'd just killed him, for no better reason than that he was in my way. His blood was quite literally on my hands, like a visual aid to describe how thoroughly wrong things had gone.

Easy to see that I was on the wrong path. Harder to find the right one.

Aiko asked if I was all right. I said that I was, and we continued onward.

It went great right up until we were on the stairs to the second floor. Suddenly, no opportunity to hide or dodge, a pair of constructs turned the corner onto the staircase above us. They weren't quite as grotesque as the one I'd dispatched before, but they were still very obviously not human. One of the things narrowed its eyes, looking at the faint not-quite-rightness where we were. Its mouth opened.

Aiko shot it, and its fellow. That little carbine was the kind of weapon civilians aren't allowed to have, and for a good reason. It was small enough to fit under a hoodie, never mind a trench coat, and in less time than it takes to shout a warning she'd shot both constructs three times. One, having taken two

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bullets to the head, dropped right where it stood. The other, although the three holes in its chest would quickly prove lethal, lived long enough to scream.

"There goes the advantage of surprise," Aiko snarled. "What do we do?"

I considered the odds that remained against us. An unknown number of soldiers, an unknown number of constructs, and a mage of unknown but potent capability. Not good odds, in other words. I made a snap decision. "We run. Where's the entrance?"

She nodded once, sharply. "Follow me."

We turned tail and ran like...not little girls, we had more direction and purpose than that, but something that runs, at any rate. Rabbits, maybe.

It was a hectic race. We were making no effort at all to go undetected, and Aiko set a pace that was at the very upper edge of my capabilities. Snowflake was panting behind me, although she kept pace easily enough. Legion, as always, was utterly silent, although his skeletal footsteps fell with force that should, in a logical universe, have done some damage to the unsupported bones.

We turned one corner, another, another, too fast to keep up with, dizzying. I didn't even try to keep track of the turnings, trusting Aiko to know where we were going.

Eventually, we turned one last corner and saw the big glass door. And my heart sank.

We hadn't been fast enough.

There were a dozen or so mercenaries between us and the door, aiming various kinds of ugly in our direction. Another half-dozen constructs, hulking things with snakes' eyes, filled out their ranks. Two of them had silver claws where their hands should have been. The others were holding guns more or less like their human counterparts'.

We pulled up short. More than a dozen gun barrels were aimed at us, and I knew that there would be no offer of surrender here, no mercy, no chance to talk our way out. They would shoot us in just moments, and up against so many not even the four of us would have much of a chance. I can do a lot of things, but stopping bullets isn't one of them. The armor couldn't stand up against that much firepower, either.

My hand found Aiko's without either of us doing anything consciously. *Nice knowing you*, I thought, though I didn't have time to say it aloud. Nice knowing all of them, really. I just regretted that I would be dragging them down with me.

And, right about that time, the newest player entered the field.

There was a sudden explosion in the back ranks of the mercenaries, as though someone had thrown a hand grenade. A blast of fire and light. A great force, sending people staggering. An enormous cloud of smoke plumed up.

Through the smoke walked Luke Laufson.

He didn't look like a kid anymore. He just looked scary. Fire crawled along his arms from fingertip to shoulder, climbing and shifting. It seemed to dip into his flesh and rose six inches from the skin, looking absolutely terrifying. A cloak of flame cascaded down his back and pooled around his feet. He obviously should have been in agony, burning to a crisp, and he just as obviously wasn't.

The mercenaries chose the better part of valor—which, in the face of such an overwhelming and terrifying force, was definitely the smart thing to do. The constructs, lacking human intelligence, threw themselves either at him or at us. Some of them were struck down with fire more intense than I had ever seen someone conjure. The rest learned, as their fellows had earlier, that firearms are actually just as dangerous as magic, in the right hands. The last couple turned and ran alongside the humans.

"I thought you didn't call him," I whispered to Aiko under cover of this distraction.

"I didn't," she hissed back, taking aim and sending a quick burst of bullets into a fleeing construct.

"Winter," Luke shouted, his voice roaring with mad laughter. "How you doing?"

"We need to get out of here," I shouted back. "There have to be reinforcements coming."

He cocked his head to one side, then nodded. "He has a bloody army out here. I'm reading...sixty-five constructs currently active? And he has more coming online."

Aiko said some very creative and very, very impolite things under her breath in German. I only recognized them because one of the things Dolph had taught me when I was younger was how to swear in a dozen different languages, most of which I knew literally no other words of.

"We have to leave," I said again, darting a glance behind myself.

Luke laughed again. "You have a job to do, Wolf. He's still on the third floor."

"You don't get it," I said. "We can't beat that many."

He grinned, wide and insane and with very little humor, and I almost recognized him then. "Can't we?" he said, challengingly.

As though on cue—which they might have been—figures began filing in the open doors. James had fire dripping off his hands too, though not anything like what Luke had been throwing around. Katie, almost unrecognizable behind the darkness that wreathed her like a cloak, held a short wooden wand which burned with an eerie violet light. Her magic felt familiar, and I realized that she was doing something not unlike my own work with shadows, though hers was a little less subtle than what I'd used it for.

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And more of them came after. A wolf, not as physically imposing as a werewolf but moving with the same uncanny intelligence, followed by a polar bear. Shapeshifters, I assumed. One after another, too much to process and no time to spare for thinking about it, in any case. The clashing scents of their magic was harsh, jarring to my senses.

Luke grinned, the expression mad and twisted, flexing his fingers. The fire seemed to respond to the movement, flaring up so bright that he was briefly nothing more than a silhouette amid golden flames. "We'll hold the doors. Go get this done."

Chapter Twenty-eight

The four of us made another mad dash through the house, up the stairs to the second floor. We found another guard patrol there. They panicked when they saw us, going for their guns. Aiko was faster, had already drawn a bead on them before they had the weapons clear of their holsters. I held up one hand to forestall her shooting.

"Think real careful about this, boys," I said to the mercenaries. "Your contract really worth this much? We're out of your weight class. Now get you gone, or we'll visit the wrath of us on your head."

The two men ran. Aiko looked at me curiously, measuring, but said nothing.

Finally we reached the third floor. The landing of the stairs opened into a small balcony. In front of us was a wall with a single oak door set in it. We opened it and found...

"What are *you* doing here?"

Samuel Black smiled and flipped another card over. "Work," he said simply, not bothering to stand up. He was playing solitaire at a small table next to another door. I knew, somehow, that Jon would be on the other side.

I raised one eyebrow. "Isn't this job a little lowbrow for you?"

He said nothing, didn't pause in his game.

"Okay," Aiko said after a moment, "be that way. We need to get through here."

"Ah," Black said. "I can't let you do that."

I suddenly realized, with a sinking feeling, what was going on. "He didn't hire you to fight. Did he?"

"No. The contract was that I would watch this door."

That was the thing about hiring Samuel Black. He wouldn't ever break a contract, would sooner be tortured to death—but, at the same time, he wouldn't do more than he was contracted for. Most of the time that was a limitation—if, for example, you forgot to ask him not to talk, he would gladly tell anyone who paid what you were doing. On the other hand, it meant that not even a full-scale battle would get him to abandon his post.

"Okay," I said after a moment. "You get your money already?"

"Half up front," he said dispassionately, flipping over another card. "Half on completion."

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"I'll double it."

"Even if I thought you were capable of that," he said, "which you're not, I don't break contract."

I licked my lips. "Even if he won't be holding up his end?"

He paused. "You have evidence?"

"The Khan will have gotten my message by now," I told him. "By this time tomorrow, the Pack will be coming down on his head like a ton of bricks. So will the mage clans and at least one vampire. This isn't a good place to be when that happens."

Black relaxed and resumed playing. "That's an excellent reason not to take another job from him. Not such a good reason to quit this one."

I got an idea. "But you won't take another contract from him," I said. "So...if he told you to kill us..."

"I would tell him that I'm not contracted to do that," he said coolly. "Unless, of course, you were to try and go through this door."

"And that's all," I said. "So...for example...if we attacked him..."

Black smiled sharply. "That," he said, "wasn't covered in the contract."

I nodded. "Aiko," I said. "Could you pass me a grenade, please?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"Thanks." I pulled the pin and then rolled the grenade over to the door.

"What the hell!" Aiko shouted. She grabbed my arm and pulled me back out of the antechamber, yanking me down to shelter behind the wall.

A second or two later, there was a surprisingly loud *boom*. Like, it even shook the floor a little.

Back inside, the door was gone. So was the frame. And, um, a good portion of the wall around it. Black and his table, for whatever reason, were untouched, although the mercenary looked rather startled.

"Damn," I muttered. "Nice grenade."

"It's an advanced model," she said modestly.

I cleared my throat. "Look," I said in my best pointing-out-the-obvious voice. "The door's gone." I paused. "Wait a second," I said disingenuously. "Does that mean you can let us through now?"

Black started to speak, stopped, then shook his head and chuckled. "I like your style, Wolf. Sure, why not." He shook his head again, gathered up the cards, and began to shuffle.

We proceeded through a small library into Jon's inner sanctum.

"Interesting," he said, not looking up from the book he was reading. "You're better than I thought, Wolf. I wouldn't have expected you to bypass my defenses that easily."

"He likes me," I said. Aiko lifted her carbine and began to sight along it. I shook my head slightly; it wouldn't be that easy.

Jon was standing in a set of circles not unlike that I had drawn out in the forest, but far more elaborate. The outermost was a simple ring of silver set into the floor, followed by an elaborate pattern of runes laid out in stone and exotic wood. Within that was another pair of circles, one a permanent fixture made of bronze, the other recently laid down in iron and silver chains.

Looking at that, I realized that I knew what this was. This had been the ritual setup he was planning to use to consume me. Looking at it in that light, it was sorta creepy. I'd been in bad situations before, but that ticking-clock feeling had been new and unpleasant.

I frowned. I had the distinct feeling that there was a reason he wasn't worried about having a gun pointed at his face. And, sure, I could have done some work and concentrated and figured out what all spells he had up and running....

But, really, why bother?

I looked around for a moment and located a chunk of wood from the door. I bounced it in my hand a couple times, feeling the heft of it, then chucked it right at Jon's smiling face.

Needless to say, it never hit him. Exactly halfway across the outermost circle it bounced off air seemingly turned to stone. A kinetic barrier, undoubtedly—and, given an unknown length of time to prepare and a permanent circle to work with, there was no telling how strong it was.

Aiko knew what it meant as well as I did. "Grenade?" she murmured. "Take it out by main force?"

I shook my head very slightly. "Even if it worked, the circle is the only thing keeping him from killing us. He can't do any magic out here without dropping it, thus giving us a shot at him." Circles are, after all, simple magical fences. And fences keep things in, as well as out. Ordinarily it isn't too hard to project magic across a circle, but he'd charged this one with a *lot* of power. It would attenuate any spell he tried to cast to the point that it became powerless.

The kitsune nodded. "Mexican standoff."

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"Except he's got a lot more friends here than we do." I frowned, then projected a simple mental communication. Very, very quietly, to be sure that Jon wouldn't hear it. I didn't *think* he could detect even an obvious magical action from inside the circles, but I didn't see a great need to test that. Behind me, Snowflake started to circle around behind the mage.

"Where's my stuff?" I asked aloud.

"I destroyed it," he said calmly. Then, seeing my expression, he laughed, a smooth and confident sound. "What? You expected it to be nearby, I suppose? Protected only by a single, easily picked lock, I suppose." He shook his head. "I'm not a fool, Wolf. And I *have* read the Evil Overlord List. I examined your foci briefly—excellent job on those, by the way—and destroyed them."

"Dammit," I muttered. "You have any idea how much work those took?"

"Of course I do. Also, you can't really expect a dog to get through that barrier, can you?"

"Not particularly," I agreed. "On the other hand...."

A skeleton animated by unwholesome power and driven by an inhuman will left the ground directly behind Jon's back, passing through the barrier around the mage without even slowing. Legion was, after all, an entity of decay and corruption, chaos and destruction. As he leapt he directed his power, his *nature*, against Jon's magic, converting the ordered structures that made up his spell back into the chaotic and formless energy they had originally come from.

He hit the ground within the circle and started to leap again. Jon, with a shout of startled anger, knocked him aside easily with a blast of force.

But for one moment, he wasn't paying any attention to us at all. And the barrier had fallen.

The instant Legion jumped, I started moving. I sprinted across the gap between us, calling Tyrfing as I went. The cursed sword appeared in my hand, and I undid the catch without breaking stride.

Jon turned to face me. His face went pale, and he lifted his hands. I felt the stirrings of magic as he began to gather power for another strike. I flicked Tyrfing to the side, sending the sheath flying, and drew the sword back for a strike.

Behind me, I heard a gunshot. A moment later, blood started spreading across Jon's shirt. He staggered to the side, and the magic he'd gathered dissipated harmlessly.

I'd finally made it within reach. Tyrfing descended, mirror-bright steel cutting a beautiful arc across the air.

Somehow, Jon managed to recover his focus in time. I felt a quick burst of power, unfocused and clumsy, and Tyrfing bounced off a barrier maybe three inches from the mage's skin. He staggered away from me. I heard another gunshot, and a spray of blood erupted from his shoulder.

I stepped forward, taking my sword in both hands, and brought it down in an overhand strike at his head. He held the barrier against it, but grunted with pain as he did. A moment later another bullet hit him. Blood splattered the floor, and something in his knee went out with a nasty sound of ripping cartilage. The mage fell, landing hard on his back.

I stood over him, sword in both hands. On the first swing the barrier cracked, and Jon screamed in pain and terror. On the second swing, Tyrfing shattered the barrier like a pane of glass.

On the third swing, Jon collapsed in a rapidly growing pool of blood. His head rolled away, coming to rest with the eyes staring at me reproachfully.

I stared back for a few moments. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel. Satisfied, maybe. Maybe even guilt, or at least regret.

There was none of that. I just felt numb.

I found the sheath and put Tyrfing away. Then I limped over to where Aiko was standing, her carbine still trained on Jon's corpse. I'd aggravated the damage to my left leg, and it was slowing me down, but I didn't think it would cause me any long-term problems.

Samuel Black walked in the door behind us. "The hubris of some people," he said sadly. "It never ceases to amaze, does it?" He walked by me, shaking his head with disappointment. "For someone so clever, he was an incredible fool. Excellent work, Wolf. I'll be sure to tell my employer you did well here."

"Wait. What employer?"

He smiled and swept a mocking half-bow in my direction. He straightened and, much like Loki had earlier, vanished without a trace.

I hate it when everyone I meet knows better tricks than me.

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Chapter Twenty-nine

Downstairs, things were a bit more hectic.

The mercenaries had apparently decided to fight after all. The constructs, of course, weren't able to decide otherwise. They were gathered outside in a crowd, firing shots inside.

Luke and his gang were sheltered behind a short wall of stone that had been erected not far inside the front doorway, seemingly pulled up out of the granite floor. It should have been shattering under the sheer amount of firepower being directed at it, and the reason it wasn't was pretty obvious. Brick, whose name was even more bizarrely appropriate than mine, was leaning against it, eyes closed in concentration, and earth-scented magic poured off him like heat from a bonfire.

I didn't get a really good look at what the rest of them were doing. It was simply too chaotic to follow, too many energies flying to sort out. I saw fire pouring out in strikes that weren't nearly as intense or focused as they had been when I left. Luke wasn't showing the strain, but James looked barely able to stand. I didn't know how he was still fighting. The shapeshifters I'd seen earlier were standing to either side of the door. When one of the clawed constructs—with steel claws, this time, rather than silver—darted through, I saw why. The bear fetched it a blow to the head with one paw. It looked casual, but it literally took the thing from its feet and tossed it sideways. The wolf was on it in an instant, just in case the first hit hadn't been enough to kill it.

A grenade flew in the doorway and, caught in a sudden and powerful headwind, flew right back out. There was shouting on the other side, panicky and startled. Then there was another *boom*, a good bit quieter than Aiko's custom model, followed by brief silence.

"Listen up," I bellowed as loudly as I could into the pause. "Your employer's dead. You aren't getting paid enough to throw your lives away for no reason. Start running now, and you don't have to."

Luke glanced back at me, face flushed and exuberant and not in the slightest afraid. "Winter," he called, laughter dancing just under the surface of his voice. "You finished it?"

"Yeah," I shouted back, jogging forward to join them behind their improvised shelter. "Are they running?"

"Hard to say," he said. "Aubrey?"

The quiet young man closed his eyes briefly. "Most of the mercenaries are. There are...six of them still here. I can't feel the constructs."

"They won't run," Luke said confidently. "What's the word from our eye in the sky?"

Aubrey was silent for a moment, and I could feel a low, quiet pulse of magic from him. "Kris says they're mostly broken," he said eventually. "We've got about thirty constructs out there and another group just went in the back door. They'll be on us in less than a minute."

"Anything between us and the car?"

"Ah...she says just the ones right outside."

"Wonderful," Luke said, once again giving the impression of an orchestra conductor. "Jimmy, if you would."

Hah. I was *right*.

The two fire mages turned their backs on the door. There was another surge of magic, one that went on longer than I had anticipated. Jimmy was swaying on his feet by the time they finished, but Luke didn't even look like he was even making an effort. I had to wonder what he really was; he did *not* seem much like the rest of them. I would still say that they were largely untrained, relatively weak mages who didn't seem particularly versatile, but Luke had to be at least as good as Alexander in terms of raw power.

"Wonderful," he repeated, turning back to the door. "We're running now. Wolf, if you want to live, I suggest you and yours come with us. Aubrey, kindly tell Mac to bring the car as close as she safely can."

"What about the people outside?" someone asked. I thought it might be Katie.

Luke grinned. "They're either constructs or idiots. In either case, killing them is a favor to the universe." He paused. "We have less than a minute before this house goes up in flames. I recommend we get out now."

Aiko muttered more curses, some in German and some in what I thought might be Arabic. Even Snowflake made an unusual growling sound, and mentally I heard her suggesting that Luke do several things which were extremely unsettling, conceptually, and also probably anatomically impossible. Especially the bit with the wombat, the porcupine, and the sausages. Even Aiko would think that one was a little over the top.

I settled for calling Tyrfing. The sword appeared literally in my hand, and I could feel its incredible hunger without even drawing it. I undid the clasp and threw the sword out the door. I saw that, by some incredible coincidence, it lost the sheath in midair and *accidentally buried itself in somebody's chest*.

"Give that a minute to work," I told the others.

"We don't have a minute," Luke reminded me.

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We compromised at the thirty-second mark. Aiko chucked another grenade out, and in the aftermath of the explosion we ran for it.

There were dead constructs outside. Lots and lots and lots of them. They were burned, hit by shrapnel, shot by us or by each other, and in some cases dead without any mark to show what had happened. Mixed in among the corpses were more than a handful of human mercenaries. Other mercenaries, still standing, were running away. Trying to, anyway; mostly they slipped and staggered and fell, and made remarkably little progress. The combined effect of panic, fatigue, poor footing, and Tyrfing made it hard for them to keep their footing, let alone sprint.

The constructs, being essentially just robots, didn't run. They didn't feel fear, either. They attacked us with the same mindless ferocity as they had at the beginning, with guns and claws and their bare hands. We cut them down, in some cases literally, and kept moving.

Twenty seconds out the house behind us literally went up in smoke. It started small—flames visible through the windows, smoke leaking out of them, that kind of thing. Within another ten seconds or so, though, it had accelerated into a full blown conflagration.

A red-tailed hawk stooped out of the sky above us. I felt magic building as it came, and when it was about ten feet from the ground the power released in a sudden and surprisingly powerful surge. The falling hawk morphed in a blur of color, every bit as fast as Aiko changing, and the shape that hit the ground wasn't a bird at all. Kris landed in an easy roll and came to her feet. "Last group is still after us," she said without preamble, keeping up easily. "You got a few of them in the house, but most of them made it out."

"Not a problem," Luke said. "Without Jon, they'll die within a week. All we have to do is get out of here and we'll be fine. Speaking of which, there's our ride."

Their ride, as it turned out, was a big white step van. It was about a hundred yards from the house, a distance we covered at a speed that would make some sprinters envious. It's amazing, really, what raw terror does for your adrenaline.

Luke took over driving, while the rest of us piled into the back. It was a little crowded, especially with Snowflake and Legion packed in, but none of us were complaining. Fortunately both the other shapeshifters had also reverted to human. The bear, as it turned out, was Chuck, while the wolf turned into Matthew. Luke drove out much, much faster than was really safe. We didn't complain about that either. Especially not after there was a sound behind us like a small bomb going off.

"You know," I said, "when I talked about raining down fire and destruction, I didn't actually mean it literally."

"That'll teach you to joke around," Luke said brightly. "Oh, Mac? Would you mind taking a look at our guests? Also, someone should call the fire department. I'd hate to start another wildfire."

The tall blond woman who had been driving before Luke took over looked at me. "You're injured?" She closed her eyes, and then let out a surprised breath. "Wow. You *are* injured."

"Nothing that won't heal," I demurred.

She opened her eyes and glared at me. "You know how often I hear that?" she demanded. "And how often it gets infected, and they come back, and it's ten times more trouble than if they'd just gotten it looked at when I told them to?"

I blinked, and then realized what Luke had meant. "Ah. You must be the healer."

"I'm a *nurse*," she said in precise, clipped tones. "The magic is incidental."

"Right. You ever done work on a werewolf before?"

"No. Willing to give it a try?"

I shrugged. "What the hell. Why not."

At that point, nothing would do but that I strip down to my skivvies, lie down in the back of the van, and let Mac do...whatever it was she did. I could smell the magic, like growing grass and blood, and even feel it sliding through my body, but I had no idea what it was actually doing. It must have worked, because when she was finished I wasn't stiff or sore anymore, and even the burns and cuts were feeling better. She was good at that trick.

It made me feel better when she made everyone else—except Legion—go through the same process. It was especially amusing when she did it to Snowflake, because the dog complained bitterly and with a plethora of obscenity to me. I managed to keep myself from laughing, in the interest of not seeming like a total loon, but it was a struggle.

Which was silly, and immature, and pretty reckless considering we were surrounded by mages who had wanted to kill me not that long ago, but screw it. After surviving that ordeal, I'd *earned* it.

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Epilogue

A little more than an hour later we were back in Colorado Springs. More specifically we were back at the Full Moon Grill. Incidentally, if you're life ever starts including bracketing devices, I advise you to get out fast. It's seldom a good thing. Enrico, who was there when we showed up, promptly joined us and started wheedling information out of the mages so smoothly that I doubted they would ever realize that was what he had been doing.

Once we were there, Luke seemed content to fade into the background. Then, while we were eating, I decided to confront him. Both his exceptional power and the lingering, nagging sense of familiarity concerned me, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it.

Except that, the moment I decided to act, he stood up. "Well," he said, "I'm afraid I have to leave you. Permanently, I expect. Old friends, treasured opponents, I wish you luck."

"Wait," somebody said. "What?"

Rather than answer, Luke swept a mocking bow in my direction. And, when he straightened, I knew why he had seemed so familiar. Because, in place of innocent sky-blue eyes, he had two orbs of mad, dancing flames.

"Son of a bitch," I sighed. "It's all but your real name. Loki Laufey's son. You never get tired of screwing with me, do you?"

Loki grinned. "Of course not. You're so much *fun* to mess with."

I suddenly realized that there was something very wrong. It was quiet. Too quiet, literally. I would have expected confusion, questions, at the very least outrage from Aiko, who knew as well as I did how dangerous Loki was. Instead, there was nothing.

I looked around at a frozen world. People sitting with their mouths open, with forks in the air, but not moving, not speaking. They weren't even breathing. Even the dust motes seemed to hang in the air immobile.

"How..." I trailed off and looked at Loki. "Did you just stop time?"

"Technically," he said, "that's impossible. Time isn't what you perceive it as, you know. Think of it as being like a road. Most of the time, you travel at the recommended speed of one second per second. I just pulled us out into the passing lane." He frowned. "Unless it's actually more like a roundabout. This isn't a very good metaphor, is it."

"Why?"

"To have a chat," he said grandiosely. He ambled aimlessly about the room. "Excellent job back there, by the way. Eight out of ten for style, nine out of ten for pacing and lateral thinking. I do have to say, though, that your final confrontation with Jon was somewhat disappointing. Not nearly enough dramatic tension, and I was really looking forward to an epic battle scene. I'm afraid you get only seven out of ten for action."

"Explains how your gang there knew how to find me, at least," I muttered.

"Indeed," he confirmed. "You were right about them, incidentally. 'Those who fight monsters,' indeed." He laughed. "Can you believe they started applying that term to themselves without any encouragement on my part? Quite appropriate, really. As you observed, they're already becoming the monsters they profess to despise."

"Was there ever a real Luke?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know the answer. "Or did you invent him out of whole cloth?"

"Some of both," Loki said, not seeming offended at all. "The person was real, but you only met him once. After your first encounter, he confronted Jon directly. The old man killed him. I took offense. The persona you actually interacted with, though, was almost entirely an invention on my part. Frankly, the original wasn't worth imitating. I've no idea how he got to be the leader of the group in the first place."

I sighed. Typical, really.

I hadn't lost sight of what he'd said, though, and it was kind of concerning. "How bad of monsters are they?" I asked quietly. "Bad enough that I should do something about them?"

Loki grinned wider, an edge of madness to the expression. How could I ever have missed seeing that in Luke? "How would I know?" he retorted. "I have no idea how monstrous somebody has to be to motivate you." He paused. "Of course, if you'd like, I could tell you their dark secrets. All the things they don't want anybody to know...."

"Would you be telling the truth, though?"

"Of course," he said, offended. "You've been reading Odin's press again. I hardly ever lie. The truth is almost always harder than any lie I could tell, anyway. Besides, you should realize that telling truths that were never meant to be spoken is something of a specialty of mine. You've read the *Lokasenna*."

I blinked. "That was for real?"

He shrugged. "There's a difference between being factual and being truthful. And sometimes even something which is neither factual nor truthful does, nevertheless, express Truth."

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"You make my head hurt," I said sourly.

"Get used to it," he said, not unkindly. "You can expect more of the same, and worse."

"What's the cost?"

"Nothing," he said grandly. "Truth is I feel responsible. I got them together, after all. And got you involved."

"Yeah, right," I muttered. I thought for a moment, then nodded. "The truth," I said confidently. "That's the cost. The loss of whatever comforting illusions and false impressions I might otherwise have harbored."

"There, you see? You possess the potential to be quite intelligent. Granted you're wrong, but that's really a small point, don't you think?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What it came down to was, ultimately, which I valued more: my own peace of mind, or the damage that might be averted by understanding a dangerous thing.

Is that even a choice?

"Fine," I said. "Tell me."

Loki grinned and snapped his fingers. Bright, bouncy circus music started to play, from no source that I could tell. He took two steps and then seemed to blur, only coming into focus again when he stood directly behind Jimmy.

"James Frazier," he said, his voice bright and happy. "Jimmy. He's prideful. He thinks he knows best, with or without reason. Won't let anyone tell him what to do, even if he knows it's a good idea. He would sooner watch his fellows burn than surrender control. I had a hell of a time keeping him in line. It was his idea, you know, to attack this bar—but did he come himself? No, he did not. Because for all his posturing, Jimmy is a coward at heart."

He spun on his heel and pointed one finger at Mac. "Mackenzie Sorenson," he said, his voice thoughtful now, at odds with the music. "She's the best one here. Not a monster, not even a fighter. I do believe that, right now, I couldn't tempt her from the right-hand path. She's afraid, you know, every time she sees her friends off to battle. Afraid that they won't come back. Like you, she fears that the things they do will stain their souls so dark that she won't recognize them. She is afraid of blood, and needles, but still she became a nurse so that she could help people." Loki paused, tapping one finger against his lips. "Of course, I expect that when she does go bad, she'll fall farther and faster than any of the rest."

"Don't you mean *if* she goes bad?"

"Oh, no," he said, a note of sadness unlike anything I'd heard from him entering his voice. "No, that isn't how it works. You should know that as well as anyone. The hero business is, alas, not one you can be in forever. There are only really three options, I'm afraid. You die, or you quit the trade, or you see yourself become the villain of the piece." He smiled gently, not looking away from Mac. "I wonder which she'll choose?"

I shivered.

"In any case," he said, turning and taking another few steps that turned into a rapid blur of motion. "Matthew Fisher," he said, snapping into place beside him. "What a grand and magnificent liar. He pays lip service to their cause, but he doesn't believe a word of it. He's a shapeshifter, you know." The wolf, as I recalled.

"If he doesn't agree with them," I asked, "why does he help them?"

Loki smiled, and it was an ugly expression. "Wrath," he said simply. "That's his sin of choice. Matthew does so love to fight, you see. He loves the battle, the blood. He likes chasing things."

I shivered again. "Does he hurt innocent people?"

"Oh, no," Loki said. "It's not the killing proper that he hungers for, you realize. The hunt, the chase, the fight...those are what Matthew is addicted to. Innocents aren't nearly enough of a challenge to intrigue him. Criminals, though, vampires, why, *those* are interesting game. And, on some level, he does prefer doing good to doing evil. No, odd as it may seem, I think Matthew is perhaps the least worrying of the group, from your perspective."

The room abruptly faded to black, a velvety darkness so thick I couldn't see my own hand in front of my face. The music changed, as well, from circus music to a slow, sad nocturne. A spotlight came up, slowly, illuminating Katie where she sat, water raised halfway to her lips. "Katie," Loki said, softer now, almost a whisper from the darkness. "Katie Schmidt. She works in the shadows, to serve the light. You ever play that game? It was really quite well designed, I think."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He sniffed. "Not my fault. Anyway. Katie. A pure soul, though like most pure souls she would deny any such allegation. Not a pacifist like Mac there, but still a good person. She sees that what they do is of, to say the least, dubious morality, and it makes her worry. She knows Nietzsche as well as you do. That particular quote occurs to her more and more frequently, recently. She sees that she is willing to fight, to kill even, in the name of the cause, and wonders whether...just maybe...she's already gone too far down that slippery slope to ever come back. She lied to her parents, yesterday, about what she was doing. She can't stop thinking about it, even now in your moment of triumph. It haunts her. She would never believe you if you were to tell her, right now, that within a few years she will be perpetrating atrocities that...well, if the person she is now were to see it, it would chill her soul."

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"After all," he continued slowly, sadly, inexorably, "pure isn't the same as good. It's hard to find someone much darker than the person who used to be so good."

Between blinks, the world changed again. The room came back to full lighting, the music switched to the William Tell Overture (Lone Ranger music, if you don't know the actual name), and Loki was standing next to Mike.

"Michael Adams," he said, laughter dancing beneath the surface of his words. "Ol' Mike Adams, going all vigilante. Who'd have thought it. He used to believe in the law. Never had a God, but then he never much needed one. Thought that the world was a cruel place, but that was okay because he knew his place in it. He knew what he was doing, and it was the right thing to do. He was making the world a better, a *safer* place every day."

"Faith is a funny thing, though," Loki said meditatively. "Some men don't have much faith, but what they have, well, you'll never take it from them. Others are strong in their faith, but it breaks so easy you have to wonder whether it was ever really there in the first place. Mike, here, was one of those. He started seeing the monsters hiding in plain sight, and it broke him."

I frowned. "You mean the monsters? The werewolves, the vampires, that sort of thing?"

Loki shook his head. "Not really, no. It's a bit like what you told Olivia, actually. Vampires are horrific monsters, sure, but that's what they're supposed to be. It's so, so much worse for him when he sees a person doing things that would make your average werewolf sick. He saw that, and he realized that everyone has a monster inside of them. To know that the people he'd built his life around helping were capable of such atrocities? It broke him." He grinned. "That gangster your werewolf friend mentioned, so casually, making deals with? Mike knows his work. And he's seen how these people can get away with anything, anything they want, and the law can't touch them. That's what convinced him to join this little coterie.

"I think it's being a shaman that's his real problem," Loki said thoughtfully. "Shamans make terrible warriors. They see too deeply, all the way to the heart of things. You can't fight when you can see all the horrible things that made your enemy what they are now." He sighed dramatically. "Let's move on, shall we? This is depressing."

Blink again. Loki was standing over one of the few I hadn't been introduced to, and the soundtrack had switched to classic rock. Loki's face was set in a broad, honest-looking smile. "Douglas Fir," he said. "And he's good with plants. Can you believe that? I mean, that's his real name, even." He paused, a musing expression on his face. "He's the opposite of Matthew, there, you might say. He doesn't believe in what they're doing either, but he doesn't do what he does for the joy of it. He's here to protect them."

"Why?"

"Because Doug here can't stand to see a friend in pain," he explained simply. "He's a simple man, but good. It hasn't occurred to him yet that he might have to protect them from themselves, but if it comes down to it he would." He paused. "I just hope he doesn't have to choose between his friends and the world. I think that might break him, and that would be a shame. Men like Doug are few and far between."

"Moving on, here's his best friend Charles Moore. Better known as Chuck. Likewise a simple man, with simple tastes. Chuck's twenty-eight, the oldest one of them. Works in an auto shop across town. The pay's a joke, but he likes it well enough. Chuck's never had much ambition. A lot like the bear he sometimes resembles, in many ways. All he really wants is a place to sleep, plenty of food, and a few friends to drink with. If he has time to spend chasing the ladies, something he's never been much good at, that's just icing on the cake. He likes a fight too, but he's nothing like as twisted as Matthew. Or you, for that matter."

"If Jimmy's pride," he said slowly, "and Matthew gets wrath, I think Chuck must be closer to sloth than the rest." He paused. "You know, this whole 'seven deadly sins' idea is working out better than I thought it would. I'll have to keep it in mind."

"All right," he said, turning around as though surveying the room. "Who's left? Aha!" He took a couple long strides across the room to stand next to Kris. I noticed, absently, that now we were listening to upbeat salsa music, with lots and lots of maracas.

"Kristin Lake," he said. "So like her fellow shapeshifters, and so unlike. An interesting conundrum, really. She doesn't like violence, and yet she's embraced it to a surprising extent. Did you know that no two of these people started down this road for the same reason?"

I blinked. "Really?"

"Yep," he confirmed. "My idea of a joke, I suppose....Anyway, Kris here has the saddest reason of anyone, I think. She just wants not to hurt anymore. The first time she ever found her power was two years ago. She was sixteen, sitting and watching the sky, and thinking of how much she wanted to be free, free like a bird." He laughed. "Got her wish a little closer than she probably expected. The next day she flew away and never went back. A runaway, and nobody tried very hard to find her."

I blinked. I hadn't expected that. "How'd she get from that to this?" I demanded.

"Chuck," he explained simply. "She flew straight from...actually, I don't think you need to know where she came from...straight to Colorado Springs. He found her about a week after she got here, in one of the bars he frequents. I think we can both imagine what she was doing there." He paused. "I'm glad he did, actually. She deserves better than that. She would do anything for him, you know. After what he did, she would die or kill if he asked her, and never ask why. I think that will be what leads her into darkness, in the end. It'll be interesting to see what happens."

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"Continuing with the theme," Loki said, turning again. "We have Mr. Aubrey McArthur, our very own patron saint of envy. He went to the same school as Kris, but without the happy ending. Just one day after another of the same sad song. I'm sure you can guess most of it. Single mother, alcoholic. String of abusive boyfriends. Aubrey learned his lesson early. Trust no one...he lives it. Like Kris, he seeks not to be hurt, but his methods are very different. Where Kris finds her safety in friends and comradeship to keep away the things in the night, Aubrey relies only on himself. That, and nothing else, is why he seeks power, knowledge."

I held up my hand, interrupting him. "Two things. One, why the envy then?"

"Because Aubrey's talents aren't all that powerful," Loki said. "He has a flair for mental magic, not unlike what you do with animals. I'm sure you can imagine what a living hell that made his childhood." I winced. "It's not as bad as he makes it out to be, in his own mind—both Doug and Mike, for example, have less immediately useful talents. But he still looks at someone like Jimmie, or you for that matter, and he envies what they can do. A fire mage is strong, you see, can make himself safe. What is he? A glorified telephone." Loki shrugged. "That's what he thinks, anyway. Someday I expect he'll learn better. Whether that will be a good thing is still up for grabs."

I nodded. "Okay. Two, why help them if he's so antisocial as all that?"

"Who said he's antisocial?" Loki wondered aloud. "He's not a bad person, per se, he just thinks everyone else is. A classical pattern for an ambivalent attachment style, really. He wants friends and looks for them, he just doesn't trust them once he gets them, and usually drives them away pretty fast. This particular gang has stuck around because, honestly, with this much dysfunction around what's a little more?" He paused. "Also, Aubrey *is* looking for enough power to defend himself. This is a good place to find that kind of thing."

Loki shook his head like a dog shedding water. "Whew," he said. "Okay. Next up, we have greed, otherwise known as Erica Reilly."

I blinked. "Erica? I thought she was the one that warned Jon."

"I made that up," he said with a grin. "It seemed a convenient explanation for why Jon would know about your activities so soon. Although Erica did argue for contacting him, even after I persuaded the rest of them against the idea."

"Somehow," I said dryly, "I find it hard to believe that the embodiment of greed didn't have any ulterior motives in arguing that point."

"Of course not," he agreed. "All of them had ulterior motives, that's why they fell in with Jon so easily in the first place. She wants more, always more—not power, that's not her addiction. Money, though, she loves money, tasteful paintings, handmade rugs...." Loki shook his head and looked at the blond woman with disgust in his eyes. "She, you see, is from the opposite side of the spectrum as Aubrey. She grew up with wealth and privilege. Her parents disowned her when her magic came in. Not

that they believe in magic; they perceived the physical aspects as simple vandalism, the psychological as mental instability coupled with a drug habit."

"I think I get it," I said slowly.

"Excellent," he said. "In that case, let us move on." He snapped his fingers again. The music switched to techno, the room went dark, and Brick was highlighted with another spotlight. "Last one of my little club," Loki said brightly. "But don't worry, I saved the best for last."

"I can't wait," I muttered.

He laughed. "They call him Brick, Brick Anderson. They don't know his real name, wouldn't recognize it if they heard it on the street. He hasn't used it in, oh, more years than he wants to remember. That's an impressive thing to say, when you've only just turned twenty-three. The rest have shared at least a little of their pasts with each other, but Brick here is still as enigmatic as ever. He knew more magic than they've ever learned before he met them, and he hasn't shared much of it."

"Where'd he learn?" I asked.

Loki grinned. "You've already guessed, haven't you? Yes, Brick used to be in Olivia's position. With another mage, of course, although one quite similar to Jon in many ways. He's improved himself since then, but he still has the echo of that gluttony in his heart. He learned and did a lot of things that weren't all that pleasant, things he regrets. He's tried to forget it, been trying for years now, but he still has nightmares, almost every night. Eventually he decided he'd had enough and he tried to leave. Only to discover, as such people often do, that you can't just walk away from a black mage."

"How'd he get away?" I asked, morbidly curious.

Loki smiled nastily. "Who says he did?" He laughed. "Ah, just kidding. He made a bargain. Physically, at least, Brick is a free man, even if in his nightmares he's still trapped there."

I didn't *even* want to know what the terms of that deal had been. "Thanks," I said to Loki.

"Don't know what you're thanking *me* for," he said modestly. Then, to my surprise, he kept going.

"Aiko Miyake," he said. "As you should be aware by now, she's the best pick for lust in this room. Not in the sexual sense, you understand, although there's plenty of that at work as well. No, her sin was always to want all the things she couldn't have, and discount the ones she could. As a child, even, she ignored the safety and security she had been gifted with, and sought out adventure and danger instead."

"Nothing wrong with that," I said defensively.

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He raised one eyebrow. "No? Tell that to Aubrey. He would have sold his soul for what she had." He shook his head briskly. "In any case. She's an enigma, even to my eyes, and there aren't many that can say that. She's let you closer than anyone else, closer than anyone has ever come to the real her. She worries, sometimes, that she's getting tied down, now that there's finally something in her life that she couldn't drop and run away from at a moment's notice without any regrets. She wonders whether you'll be the next to stab her in the back."

"That's what she's been taught by life, you see," he continued inexorably. "The opposite path from Aubrey's, yet they converged on the same place. Don't trust anyone wholly, because they'll all betray you if they get a chance. Her instincts say to run away, you know, to run away from you right now before she starts to like you any more than she does now. She has to fight herself every day to keep from doing that. I expect it'll be worse after today. For your sake, after all, she was ready to go alone into the lion's den. Without even hesitating. There is no one else alive she extends that level of trust to, not even her own family." He shook his head. "A priceless treasure, Winter. I hope you value it as much as it deserves to be valued."

"And," he said, turning to the last person sitting there. "Finally, we come to Mr. Enrico Rossi. I arranged for him to be here, just so we could have this talk."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," Loki said grandly. "I like you, Winter. You're amusing. I'd hate to see you die for no reason, especially in a boring way. And you have *grossly* misestimated Enrico. You think he helps you out of friendship, don't you?"

I blinked. "You mean he doesn't?"

"Some, some," Loki allowed. "But the man is an absolutely marvelous actor. You even *know* that, you've seen it in action, and it still never occurred to you that he might be lying to you too." He shook his head and, with a wave of his hand, changed the background music to the kind of dramatic song that plays during boss fights in video games.

"You see," he said, "you are to him what I am to you. The eyes in the darkness, the grim face that you can't predict and could never trust. He fears you. He guessed that you were a werewolf years ago, not that long after you met him. You knew that already, or guessed. But did you know that, since he first guessed, not a day has gone by that he doesn't consider killing you, at least briefly?"

"Why hasn't he?" I whispered. Enrico—or the Enrico I knew, at any rate—was usually a decisive man.

"At first because he couldn't be sure. As they say, an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence, and he didn't have any. Once he did, the situation became more complicated. First off, he couldn't be sure, not really *sure*, that any given thing would kill you. And, as they also say, you'd be a fool to take a shot at the terrifying thing in the darkness if you aren't planning to kill it. Plus, by that

time, he'd come to know you, and he liked you. Also, he apparently wanted to be an actor, and now he thinks he's playing Hamlet."

"What about now?" I asked. "Is he still...considering...?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Very much so, in fact, even as we speak. You see, now that he *is* a werewolf, his perspective is somewhat changed. He still thinks of you as a dangerous monster, much more dangerous than the average werewolf—which he's right about, by the way—but he also knows that there are even more dangerous monsters out there. So far he thinks you do more good than harm, protecting people from the worse things, and thus he leaves you alive. He follows the same course as he always has. He stays close to you, hides his true feelings, and watches. He watches, and waits, for the day that he has to kill you."

Loki shook his head. "He likes you, Winter. But he is a defender of the people, first and foremost. He keeps his gun loaded with silver, these days, and it isn't the pack he's afraid of. You should be careful around your friend Enrico."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "I can live with that." I paused. "So what do you have to say about me?"

He laughed, sadly and, for once, without that touch of insanity underneath. "Oh, Winter. You should know better. That isn't the way it works. Why, imagine if I went around telling people about themselves all the time. The world would be so boring. I expect there'd be a lot more suicides, if nothing else." He glanced around and waved his hand. Several things happened at once then. First off, all the plates and glasses rearranged themselves, several into truly amusing configurations. I particularly liked the glass of water upside-down on Jimmy's head. At the same time, Loki vanished without a trace, taking the background music with him. And, finally, time started back up again.

I think the most irritating thing about Loki is his insistence on *always* having the last word.

"What the hell was *that*?" Aiko exclaimed. She was the first to get her mental feet under her again, by virtue of having an enormous daily dose of weird.

I sighed. "That," I explained, "was Loki being himself."

"Loki?" Mike asked. "Like, *the* Loki?"

"Yeah," I sighed.

Mike swore, and the rest looked disturbed or confused according to whether they actually knew who Loki was. "Will we see him again?" Katie asked, somewhere in the middle.

"Pray that you don't," Aiko said heavily. "To the deity of your choice."

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I shrugged. "Not much you can do about it either way," I said philosophically, going back to the food.

About half an hour later, Aiko stood up. "Well," she said, "it's been a pleasure and whatnot, but I think I'm out of here. I'm in the mood for a bit of a celebratory clicket."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Enrico asked.

Grinning, I stood up to leave, fetching Snowflake on the way. "Trust me, Enrico," I said. "This is one of those questions you *do not* want to know the answer to."