

Event Horizon

Emrys Vaughn

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Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and locations herein are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual locales, events, and persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. At this point I'm only adding meaningless text to the end of this disclaimer out of a bizarre sense of tradition.

Emrys Vaughn

This book is dedicated to everyone who continues to everyone who continues to read dedications after the author has made it abundantly clear that they have no intention of taking them seriously. On the one hand, yes, this is basically a repeat of the time I dedicated one of these things to whoever happened to be reading it at the time. On the other hand, are you *really* going to complain? Seriously?

Chapter One

In retrospect, it should have been obvious that things were about to go to hell. I'd had half a year of peace and prosperity, and that was about half a year more than I could count on. I should have known that when it all fell apart, it would do so with more than the usual enthusiasm.

It all started innocuously enough. I was sitting in my throne room hearing petitions. It wasn't my favorite activity, at all, but it wasn't horrible. Almost two years into the jarl gig, I'd finally gotten it somewhat figured out. Most of my nominal subjects had figured out that I wasn't really that into dealing with their problems and reacted poorly when they attempted to drag me into the middle of a spat, so mostly they didn't bother me unless they thought a situation had gotten fairly serious. As a result, I only had to actually hold court once or twice a month these days, rather than on a weekly basis.

That should not be taken to mean that it was any less unpleasant. Less frequent, but not less unpleasant.

It was currently just past dusk and I'd been sitting in my hideously uncomfortable throne for the better part of eight hours. Thus far I'd heard a dispute between a pair of vampires over who owned one of their pet humans, an allegation that Jimmy and his little gang had used unacceptable methods while hunting a vampire down in Pueblo, and an accusation that a minor mage had stolen a significant amount of money from, of all things, a coffin maker.

The fact that it had taken eight hours to deal with those three complaints should tell you something about how fun my job was. It made herding cats look pleasant; with cats, you're at least allowed to use filthy language. I had to remain polite, calm, and levelheaded the whole time I was dealing with this crap, and it left me in a mood that could charitably be described as foul.

Finally, after two full hours of wrangling with the coffin maker and the mage he'd accused, I managed to arrive at a compromise. Like all good compromises, it left no one happy and wouldn't last five minutes outside my line of sight, but at least I might not have to see that particular complainant again.

I sighed. "Another one down," I said. "Who's next, Sveinn?"

My housecarl glanced at a sheet of paper. "It seems to be one Mr. Laufson," he said.

I froze. "Luke Laufson?"

"That's correct, jarl."

"Oh shit oh shit *runrunrun*." That's what I *didn't* say, because it would have ruined my image.

Having an image can be such a pain in the ass.

Thus, while my initial reaction was to hit every panic button available and run out of the building screaming, instead I said, "Show him in, please," as calmly as I could manage. I must have been getting better, because Sveinn didn't seem to see through me. He just nodded and went to the door. We made everyone wait their turn outside in summer, as another way of ensuring that they had to *really* want to talk to me.

Luke brushed past the giant casually as he walked in. He was wearing a body I hadn't seen before, less visually distinctive than was normal for him. It was short, a little overweight, and pale, which combined with short, unkempt black hair to make him look vaguely nerdy. If I'd passed him on the street I wouldn't have thought a thing of it.

For a second I hoped that this actually *wasn't* the single most terrifying entity I'd ever encountered, and the name was just a coincidence, or someone trying to scare me or something. Then he winked at me, and a muddy brown eye vanished into orange-and-green madness for half a second before returning to mundanity. I sighed. It was Loki, all right.

"Everyone leave, please," I said quietly. "Sveinn, this will be my last appointment for the night. If anyone's still waiting, get their contact information and let them know that I'll see them tomorrow."

I could tell that the housecarls were confused. They didn't know who this was, and they didn't know why I didn't want them present for this conversation. The lot of them filed out without comment or question regardless. They knew my rules. I was fine with—welcoming of, even—questions, recommendations, and complaints. They kept me from getting complacent. In front of outsiders, though, I expected prompt obedience. Anything else made me look bad, and I couldn't afford that.

"I love what you've done with the place," Loki said, wandering idly around the room. "Very...Spartan. Is that chair as uncomfortable as it looks?"

"Worse," I growled. "What do you want?"

"Come now," he said. "Is that all the patience you have? For me, your dear friend?" He sighed and shook his head. "You need to work on your manners, Shrike. Surely Conn trained you better than this."

"I've been in this chair all day," I said. "I'd rather not be here all night too. I know you want something, or you wouldn't be here. What is it?"

"As you wish," he said, stopping and turning to face me. His expression and voice were both unwontedly serious, and I almost shivered. Anything bad enough to make Loki start paying attention was way out of my league. "This is a time for brevity, in any case. I desire a favor."

"A favor," I repeated.

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm a moron?" I asked. "I remember the *last* favor I did you."

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"That was jest," he said. "This is serious. I will provide you with all the assistance I can. You will be well rewarded, I assure you."

"I also remember the last favor *you* did *me*," I said dryly. "It isn't a terribly good motivator."

"Knowledge, then," he offered. "I will answer nine questions for you, truthfully and to the best of my knowledge and your capacity for understanding."

I paused. "Any nine questions?"

"Yes." Loki sounded impatient.

"And they only count if I explicitly state that they do?"

"Naturally. Petty word games are for lesser beings, and unworthy of such as us."

Wow. That was...an extremely good offer. Almost good enough to be tempting. I mean, Loki was a god. A *god*. Not even a weak, unimportant deity, like the god of kitchen drawers or something. He was probably in the top ten most powerful and influential entities in the world. He was *old*, too, older than I could probably hope to understand.

You don't get to that kind of position without knowing all kinds of things, things better left forgotten. If you knew to ask the right questions, even a single truthful answer from Loki was the sort of thing that could change the world. Nine of them was a priceless treasure, worth far more than any dragon's hoard.

Loki was many things, few of them good. But he wasn't an oathbreaker. If he was offering me this deal, he meant it. I was utterly confident of that. He wasn't trying to bilk me, or trick me into accepting a fool's bargain. He was being sincere.

Which, in turn, meant that him saying this was serious was the understatement of the year. Even for a god, the sort of thing he was offering me was a rare deal. It was the kind of thing you don't give away without a damned good reason. If he was taking *anything* that seriously, it was a safe bet that the smartest thing for me to do was run as far and fast as I could. Like, maybe into another world. And then hunker into the toughest bomb shelter I could come up with, and pray I could weather the storm.

I took a solid five minutes trying to decide what answer I should give him. Loki seemed content to wait in silence, not even breathing or blinking. Impatient he might be, but he was still Loki. Five minutes just doesn't mean a lot to someone who's seen the birth and death of millennia.

What eventually decided me was, oddly enough, not the promise of reward. It was curiosity. It's a serious problem for me. When I'm presented with a fascinating question, I want to know the answer, even if I know that the information will cost more than it's worth. If I turned him down, I'd never know what it was that had him so upset.

And I wanted to know.

And, on a more practical note, it was hard to figure out which way to run if I didn't know where the threat was coming from.

Ah, well. It probably wouldn't have worked anyway. I'd dealt with Loki a few times in the past, and if there was one thing I'd learned it was that I was going to get screwed no matter what I did. Might as well go into it with open eyes.

"I'm not agreeing to anything," I told him, "until I know what favor you want."

"It's fairly simple," he said, resuming his pacing. "Someone in this town summoned something, something which should have been left well alone. I want you to find them."

"What, exactly, did they summon?"

He made a frustrated sound. "There isn't a word for it. It's a bad thing, Winter, a very bad thing. It doesn't belong here."

"Dangerous, I presume?"

"Extremely," he said dryly. "I would recommend you avoid it. You aren't ready to handle something on this level."

Wonderful. If *Loki* thought this nameless thing was extremely dangerous, it probably meant I was playing with something closer to thermonuclear weaponry than fire. "Do you know who summoned it?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be asking you. They're somewhere in or immediately around this city, I know that much."

"Not very helpful," I commented.

"That's why you get the big bucks. Now come on, Winter, I'm in something of a rush. Will you do it or not?"

"Is there a time limit?"

"Seven days," he said after a moment's thought. "You have until dawn on Wednesday to come up with the information."

I took a deep breath and then, before I could think better of it, said, "All right then. I find the person or persons you're looking for within a week, and you answer nine questions for me. Deal."

Loki treated me to a smile which, even by werewolf standards, was rather predatory, and tipped a black bowler hat which hadn't existed until he reached for it. "Bargain struck, Winter Wolf," he said, bowing grandiosely. "Good luck." He straightened, turned around, and vanished in an instant.

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I was muttering curses as I left the building. None of the housecarls asked me what had happened.

"If I told you I was incredibly stupid and deserved to be shot," I said, "what would you say?"

Aiko didn't look away from her dinner. "Loki or Scáthach?" she asked, the question only slightly muffled by a mouthful of steak.

"Loki. How'd you guess?"

"Most of the time it takes you a while to figure out you did something stupid," she said, taking a bite of mashed potato. "But even you catch on pretty quick when those two are involved."

"Wait a second," Alexis said. "When you say Loki, you don't mean, like...*Loki*, right?" My cousin, not being as accustomed to my particular brand of dumbassery as Aiko, seemed somewhat disbelieving.

"Yes, unfortunately," I sighed, grabbing a plate. Alexis had made dinner, which always meant good things. Tonight it meant steaks, mashed potatoes, three loaves of bread, potato salad, pasta salad, actual salad, and cheesecake. Alexis *really* likes to cook, which kind of weirds me out. I can't complain, though, because I like food.

"Jesus Christ, Winter, isn't there *anyone* you don't know?"

"We've been through this," I said. "And I thought you guys weren't supposed to do that. Isn't there a rule about the whole 'taking the Lord's name in vain' bit?" Alexis was some variety or other of Christian—she goes to church and everything. I've never paid too much attention to the details, because it seems to me that the best way to avoid religious arguments is to avoid the whole subject.

I was also raised Christian, to one extent or another. I never really got into it, though, and it's been years since I even paid it lip service. It's hard to act like there's a benevolent supreme power watching over you when you've seen as much bad shit as I have. It gets even harder once you've actually met some gods. They tend to be rather frightening.

"In this case, I think it's justified," Alexis said dryly.

Aiko snorted. "Never mind that. What dipshit move did you pull this time? You didn't make a deal with him, did you?"

"Sort of," I admitted.

She froze, then sighed. "You really are a bit thick, aren't you? Haven't you gotten burned enough times already?"

"Yeah. But his offer was really good."

"What could *possibly* be worth that?" Aiko asked skeptically.

"Nine true, complete answers. To any question I want."

There was a shocked silence. "Okay," she said finally. "I can see where that might be worth something. But you don't get something for nothing. If freaking Loki's offering a deal like that, it's gotta be bad."

"That occurred to me, too," I agreed. "But there's something I'd like to point out. If this is that valuable, Loki's taking it seriously."

"You are not helping your case any, Winter. Anything Loki takes seriously is too big for the likes of us."

"Ah," I said, sitting down. "But let me ask you something. If Loki's taking this that seriously, he isn't likely to drop it if I say no. So if a god gets tired of subtlety and just starts swinging, what's the minimum safe distance?"

She grunted. "Good point. What did you sign on for?"

"Someone summoned something. He wants me to find them."

"Could you *be* any more vague?" Aiko wondered.

"Hey, that's all I know." I took a bite of rare steak, delicious as usual—Alexis is vegetarian, but there isn't much she doesn't know how to cook—before continuing. "I figure I'll start asking around tomorrow. This is local, and that means that someone must know something."

"Somebody's feeling optimistic," she snorted.

I wasn't, of course. This wasn't going to be as easy as that. If it were that simple, Loki would have done it himself. But I'd already signed on for the job, and it wouldn't do me much good to start complaining before I'd even started. Just because it was going to be a disaster and we all knew it was no reason to have a negative attitude.

I somehow got the idea, getting dressed the next morning, that things might be dangerous. I'm not sure quite how I came by this idea. It probably had something to do with the fact that, oh yeah, I was working for Loki. That might have done it.

Anyway, I wanted to be ready for when things inevitably went to hell. I also wanted to present the right kind of image. Image is everything, especially when you have a reputation to uphold. I'd spent a lot of effort developing my rep, and I couldn't afford to blow it now.

Fortunately, armor never really goes out of style. I put mine on, draped my newly-redesigned cloak of shadow over it, and grabbed the weapons, foci, and random crap that I thought might help

when something bad happened. The final result was more than a little scary looking, especially with the cloak hanging open.

That being said, I didn't have a thing on Snowflake, who was patiently waiting next to me. She'd gone with a plain black silk eyepatch today, which looked rather severe. She was wearing her collar, as usual, a heavy leather braid set with bits of bone, as well as various semiprecious stones and metal charms, most of which had some sort of magic in them. She'd lost most of her teeth when she took a blast of force in the face seven months earlier, and we'd eventually decided to have the rest yanked. The lot of them were strung on gold wire, and she wore the result as a necklace.

This should not be taken to mean that she was toothless. That would have been a stupid decision, considering how often and gladly she bites various bad guys. We'd had a full set of dental implants installed instead, and a permanent set of stainless steel dentures put in. It was more difficult than you might think. First we had to find a veterinarian willing to do that who was still the sort of person I would have trusted to even *brush* her teeth, and that combination turned out to be quite rare. Once that was done it was a fairly involved medical procedure, and incredibly expensive. The dentures themselves were pricey, since we'd had to have them custom made—when was the last time you saw steel dentures?—and once they were installed I'd taken advantage of my contacts to have both the steel and the connection to the bone reinforced extensively with magic. Taken all together, her new teeth had cost somewhere around three million dollars, a price which would have been quite prohibitive even a few years earlier.

Fortunately, these days money wasn't really much of a concern for me. I make the better part of a million a year in the form of payments from various supernatural groups who feel like paying me for jangling, and a good chunk more from selling things I make. Between that, our minimal expenses, and the fifty million the Watchers had paid us to get rid of Zhang Qiang for them, finances were way down the list of my problems.

These days, Snowflake looked actively frightening. She's a beautiful husky, but a one-eyed husky with metal teeth and a bunch of grim adornments made out of bones is terrifying under any circumstances. It's even worse when she wears her armor—which she wasn't, currently, because that would have been a little bit *too* aggressive. Even without it, people don't like to get close to us. Random strangers have been known to cross themselves and walk the other way when they see us coming.

On the other hand, those steel teeth plus her preternatural strength give her a bite that can crush a brick in one go. Given a little time, she can chew through concrete, rebar and trees with equal ease. Little things like bones and meat don't even register on that scale. That's worth a few aesthetic flaws.

I patted her on the head and then went upstairs to collect the others.

Alexis has so far managed to avoid looking like a movie monster. My cousin was about as tall as me, putting her a little above average for a woman, with long black hair and dark, serious eyes. She was wearing a copper ring and a plain wooden bracelet, but no other adornment. Alexis's strongest suit is

electricity, and someone with that kind of specialty would have to be remarkably stupid to wear anything conductive if they didn't absolutely have to. She was getting better at precision, and her control over electric currents was good enough that it would probably take a direct lightning strike to pose a serious threat to her, but still. It wasn't the sort of thing you wanted to take chances with.

That, obviously, ruled out a lot of armament choices. Knives were right out, as were guns, and steel armor was something she wouldn't even consider. She had a set of Kevlar-lined leathers that were almost as good, though, and she was carrying a traditional wooden jo stick. That wasn't just an affectation; in addition to being a magical focus, she'd spent enough time practicing aikido to make the short staff a practical weapon for her. She wasn't a match for a skilled swordsman, or even a really decent knife fighter, but she wasn't incompetent either.

It was also a much subtler weapon than mine. Swords and knives and guns are all lovely weapons, but they're hard to mistake for anything *other* than weapons, while a jo is pretty much indistinguishable from a walking stick. Alexis has gotten pretty good at faking a limp, too, and it's a rare person who will take a walking stick away from an attractive woman with a limp.

Aiko rounded out the ensemble nicely. In her human form she was a little on the small side, and clearly of Asian descent, but otherwise visually unremarkable. Of course, that impression couldn't last long; Aiko just isn't cut out for blending into any crowd. Her short, unevenly cropped hair was currently dyed a vibrant cherry-red, which contrasted sharply with viridian nail polish. She had a few rings on, as well as a number of bangles and a gold pendant set with a large ruby.

The "rich" look was, of course, somewhat offset by the stained T-shirt and holey jeans. Aiko enjoys messing with people's heads.

I looked from Snowflake to Aiko. Then I looked from Aiko back to Snowflake. Then I broke down laughing at the contrast between them.

The laughter died quickly, of course. Things were too serious for it to last. But it made me feel better.

Chapter Two

When you have a problem and you don't know quite how to solve it, there are a few ways you can approach it. You can take the time to investigate the issue carefully and thoroughly, until you know exactly which avenue of inquiry is most likely to yield a solution. Or, if you're on a tight deadline and you don't even really have a place to start, you can take a more random approach, trying every path available and hoping that one of them pays off.

Since I seem to be under a time constraint pretty much all the time, it should come as no surprise that I was more familiar with the second method. It's got some problems, but there are also some definite upsides.

If you want to get good results from that approach, the first thing you have to do is make sure that you have a *lot* of avenues, with a lot of variety between them. The more ways you have to look at the problem, and the less overlap there is between them, the more likely it is that at least one of them will hit pay dirt.

That's where obsessive preparation comes in handy. It's hard to assemble that kind of network on the spot. But if you happen to already have it in place, you can access a lot more information in a hurry than a more considered, precise approach would ever allow you to pull off.

I'm *really* good at obsessive preparation. So, before we'd even left home, I'd already placed several phone calls. I called Kyra and asked her to meet us in Wyoming in a few hours. I called Katrin Fleischer and left a message saying I wanted to meet with her tonight. I called the housecarls and told them to be on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary. I left messages with Brick, Pryce, and Val asking them to let me know if they saw or heard anything. I called the strange, feral half-breed who called herself Jackal, and let her know that I was in the market for information. I called my contact with the Watchers, a sorcerer who called himself Moray, and told him to pull everything they had on summonings in the area and get it to me—I had access to their information network, but it was entirely unofficial, and had to go through certain channels.

All of that, without my having to do any real work or expose myself to anything dangerous. I could get used to this kind of work.

I opened the first portal in a small park a couple of blocks from home. I'm not especially good at opening portals to the Otherside. On the other hand, it's an incredibly useful talent to have, and being able to do it quickly and easily provides all kinds of options you'd never have otherwise.

I can't do that. That's why I'd taken the time to make a focus for that specific kind of magic, and I wore it pretty much everywhere—a ring made out of ice, it wasn't hard to conceal, if I even felt the need to bother. It was entirely useless for any other task, but it cut the time I took to open a portal from

almost twenty minutes to somewhere around ten. That was useful enough to be worth the thirty or forty hours it had taken to make it.

That's what sucks about magic. It's useful, sure, and impressive as hell, but that's mostly because you're only seeing a tiny part of the process. A mage can throw around gusts of wind, bolts of lightning, or fireballs, and that's quick and flashy and liable to make their enemies crap themselves and run away—but it's also the end result of a much longer and more involved process, one that isn't nearly as fun or impressive as the final product. Behind that one spell, the mage probably has hundreds of hours of study, calculation, practice, and refinement.

It's much easier to just be a thug with a gun.

After a suitable recovery period and a quick jaunt through the streets of El Dorado, Aiko opened the next portal. This one led from a small alley between a pair of enormous silvery towers to another small alley between a pair of glass-walled skyscrapers. I'd been here several times before, but usually late at night—the time difference between Colorado and Italy is a substantial one, and trying to align schedules between the two is difficult in the extreme.

It was late afternoon here, this time, and I was a little surprised at the difference. The streets, which I was accustomed to seeing empty, were thronging with crowds, most of whom looked like businesspersons—just getting off from work, most likely.

Aiko managed to flag down a cab anyway, largely by dint of being quite willing to elbow a woman in a three-thousand-dollar suit between the ribs with no hesitation. It probably helped that she was with Snowflake and I; we tend not to have many problems with crowding. That turned into a hindrance once she was trying to convince the taxi driver to let us inside his car, of course, but she managed to talk him around. The process seemed to involve a great deal of rapid speech in Italian, which I didn't understand, and also a fair bit of cash.

Magic is great, but shameless bribery can take you at least as far.

"So," Alexis said as we got out of the cab. "Not to cramp your style or anything, but what are we doing here?"

Projectile vomiting, probably, Snowflake said gloomily. *I swear this place gets nastier every time we come here. I think I can actually smell him all the way out here.*

I choked back laughter and answered Alexis's question. "Aiko knows a guy here," I said. "He works in the black market, does a lot of business as a knowledge broker."

She blinked. "Seriously? You've got a friend in the black market?" She shook her head. "Wow. That's...kind of cool, actually."

I snorted and opened the door to the apartment building. "Yeah, that's what I thought too. Jacques was something of a letdown."

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A few minutes later I was pounding on Jacques's door, and trying not to preemptively gag in the expectation of him opening it. Shockingly, it took less than five minutes for him to get to the door; possibly he had actually been conscious this time, rather than in his more normal state of alcohol-induced stupor.

Jacques is not a pretty man. Actually, I'm pretty sure he's not a man, *per se*, at all; I doubt he's anything as simple as a human being. But he both looks and smells like one, in the worst way. An overweight, middle-aged man with jagged yellow toenails, bloodshot eyes, and filthy, matted black hair, he carried a stench of alcohol, sweat, and spoiled food that hung around him in an aura that could have stopped small-caliber bullets. His breath should have been licensed as a weapon, and probably banned by the Geneva conventions while they were at it.

He glared at us through the narrow opening of the door. "Cupcake," he said sourly. Aiko had introduced herself to him with that pseudonym years ago, before I met her, and it was the only thing I'd ever heard him call her. It's a matter of etiquette, I think; there's no way he doesn't know exactly who we are, but politeness forbids him from using real names. "Shrike," he continued, which was the name I was stuck with around him. "And Spike. Lovely. Who's the chick?"

"Cricket," Aiko said impatiently. "Now hurry up, I'm not talking business out here."

Jacques snorted and opened the door the rest of the way. "You're no good at naming things, Cupcake," he said, stepping out of the way.

"I'll try to live with myself," she said dryly, brushing past him without making physical contact. The rest of us followed her into a small, dimly lit living room. Jacques locked the door behind us.

"What do you want?" he asked, dropping heavily onto the couch. It both squealed and squelched, and as usual I resolved to never, ever touch it.

"Information," I said. "As soon as possible."

He yawned and grabbed a large bottle seemingly at random off the floor. "What kind?"

"Loki wants something," I said, watching the information broker closely. "I want to know what."

Jacques didn't react. "Hell, Shrike," he snorted. "Loki wants a shitload of things. You gotta be more specific than that."

"It has to do with some kind of summoning. And he *really* wants it. If I didn't know better I'd say he's actually scared."

Jacques looked confused for about three seconds. Then a flash of realization went over his face. "No," he growled. "Screw you, Shrike, I ain't touching that. Get out."

"We'll pay—" Aiko started.

"You lot aren't worth it," he said. "Nobody's worth that. They'd eat me alive." I opened my mouth, but he cut me off before I could figure out how to respond. "I said no," he roared. "Now get the fuck out of here!"

Suddenly Jacques did not look amusing or pathetic at all. He was sitting upright now, one hand shoved down between the cushions of his couch. I thought about some of the weapons I'd bought from him, and how much damage they could do in an enclosed space. I thought further about the fact that we were currently on his turf, and a black marketeer could probably manage all kinds of defenses.

Aiko, Snowflake and I all tend to be reckless. We are not stupid. We left.

"That was exciting," Alexis said once we were back out on the street.

"Yeah," Aiko agreed. "I've never seen Jacques that upset before."

Personally, I was rather concerned. I mean, I'd bought some fairly serious info from him in the past—nothing godly, sure, but there were still some awfully powerful groups involved. He'd never even flinched at that, never let his mask slip—but just the mention of this had taken him from zero to sixty pretty damn fast. There'd been steel in his voice when he told us to leave, and I had no doubt he would have resorted to force if we'd resisted. But there had been fear under that, real and genuine terror.

Jacques knew something. He knew what Loki wanted, all right, or thought he did, and it terrified him. It would take a lot of fear to override the man's innate self-interest. Even if he hadn't been willing to talk, I would have expected him to try and turn a profit somehow.

What could they have summoned that would make Loki nervous? What could be so bad that Jacques wouldn't even discuss the topic, at any price?

What on earth had I gotten myself into?

Aiko opened another portal from Milan to Faerie—none of us thought it was a good idea to stay in Italy very long, not after Jacques had blown up like that. He had a lot more resources there than we did, and if he decided we were a threat that needed to be dealt with, there wasn't a lot that any of us could do about it.

I didn't really expect for him to do something like that—but, then, I hadn't expected him to react the way he had to my question, either. He had no loyalty beyond self-interest, and while that usually made him fairly reliable, I couldn't predict what he would do right now. This was just too big, and I knew too little about it. Smarter to put some distance between us and him, and give him a chance to cool down and remember what profitable customers we were.

From there it was a relatively simple matter for me to open another portal to Wyoming. It opened in a small clearing in the forest just outside the town of Wolf, where my sort-of foster father had been the Alpha for a century or two.

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I hadn't called Edward. Even if I felt like explaining the situation to him, which I very much didn't, he wouldn't have been much help. Edward doesn't come to Colorado, ever. I don't know all the details, but I gather that there's a whole lot of bad blood between him and one of the Colorado Alphas. Whatever happened was a long time ago, close to two hundred years, but werewolves can hold a grudge for millennia. The solution they'd arrived at was to simply avoid each other. He stayed out of Colorado, the other Alpha stayed out of Wyoming, and on the rare occasions they both had to attend a meeting or something, everyone was real careful not to schedule them both in the same place at the same time.

Edward wouldn't break his word. It just wasn't the kind of guy he was. Even if he would have, I didn't want him to. The last thing I needed was *another* powerful person out to get me.

Fortunately, Edward wasn't the only werewolf I knew.

It was a fairly long walk to the only bar in town, a small place that had been open for at least a hundred years. I think the same werewolf might have been running it that whole time, too; things tend not to change much in Wolf. It was early in the day still, but the bar was also the only restaurant in town, and there were a handful of people there eating.

"Hey," Kyra said. "I was starting to wonder if you guys were coming."

"Travel took a little longer than I was hoping," I said, staring at the person waiting with her. "What are you doing here?"

Anna Rossi smiled lazily. "Thought I'd come give you a hand," she said. "What's up?"

"It's dangerous," I said warningly.

Anna rolled her eyes. "So what, she gets to help but I have to stay here? Come on, Winter. If I wanted to be safe that much I wouldn't be here."

I wanted to tell her no, but it wouldn't have been right. Anna was an adult; she could make her own decisions. Heck, it wasn't like she didn't already know firsthand that bad things might happen as a result of her helping me. If two missing toes, three broken fingers, and a whole bunch of scars hadn't taught her that, she was beyond helping.

"All right," I sighed. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Cool," Kyra said, standing up straight. "So now that we've got that out of the way, what did you want us for, anyway? Last I heard you had plenty of thugs."

"I do," I agreed. "I'm actually hoping you might be willing to track someone for me."

"Who?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Honestly, I don't know if I'll need your help at all. But I figured I'd better ask early than late."

"Hang on a second," Alexis asked. "You're talking about scent tracking someone, right?"

"Yup."

"Couldn't Snowflake do that?"

I shrugged. "Sure. But Snowflake's sense of smell isn't as acute as a werewolf's."

Also I have too much dignity to walk around snuffling the ground, she pointed out. I snorted, and Kyra cracked a smile. Snowflake recently figured out a way to get werewolves to hear her—I have no idea how it works, but I think it has something to do with manipulating the pack connections that are built into a werewolf's psyche. It's a very different system from what I do, but it works for her.

"What about you?" Alexis, not being a werewolf, couldn't hear what Snowflake said. She's pretty used to missing out on a certain amount of the conversation, though, and it didn't slow her down much.

"I could. But it's like anything else. You have to practice to do it well, and I haven't put in anywhere near as much time as Kyra has."

"So who are you looking for, anyway?" Kyra asked, clearly impatient with the topic—for obvious reasons, she already knew all this.

I thought about Loki's expression when he said that this was serious, and remembered Erica Reilly lying on the floor of her dorm without a skin. "Someone who isn't very smart," I said. "Are you ready to go? I want to get back before someone blows the city up or something."

Kyra snorted and shouldered the plain black backpack that had been sitting on the sidewalk by her feet. It looked heavy. "We've met you, Winter. I've got enough kit here to fight a small war. Let's go."

A short while later we were back in Colorado. It took a little longer having Kyra and Anna along—they hadn't done this as much as the rest of us, and the transitions were harder on them, so we had to wait a few minutes in between for them to recover. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, admittedly; they'd both been coming to visit fairly regularly, and they'd gotten used to the experience. It was still vastly superior to flying.

Moray called while we were in an alleyway not far from Val's shop, waiting for Kyra to feel well enough to walk again. He told me that the files had been sent, but he didn't know how much use they would be. The Watchers collect information obsessively, but they have their limits; for them to have specific details available this quickly would be a rare stroke of fortune. Moray also, more quietly, told me that this was being taken seriously—very seriously. He'd received personal orders from Watcher to expedite my request, and she'd also added files that weren't in the official record.

That wasn't a good sign. Watcher—the head of the Watchers, that is, whom I'd never heard referred to by any other name—had gotten involved in my business a couple of times in the past. It never ended well. She wasn't the sort of person who bothered with small things.

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The documents had been sent by special courier, and would be waiting at the small mansion which had once belonged to the pack, and was now, however reluctantly, mine. I seldom went there, except to hold court; I've never liked the place that much, and that hasn't improved now that I own it. I'm not willing to tell people where I really live, though, so I always used it for my official address.

That wasn't a surprise. Mail was too slow, and, predictably enough, the Watchers avoid electronic means of communication like the plague. It isn't secure enough for their tastes. Encryption is a wonderful thing, but you can't hack paper. I'd dealt with them a couple of times, and they always sent documents by courier. Their couriers were ridiculously fast, but they still had their limits. The files I wanted wouldn't arrive for a while.

My next stop was Pryce's. Pryce himself wouldn't be much help; he hardly ever strung three words together, and even if I could convince him to he was adamantly neutral. Trying to get him to help me on something this important—and, more to the point, this probably-dangerous—was a laughable proposal.

On the other hand, pretty much everyone in the area who was involved with the supernatural passed through his doors at least occasionally. Pryce's was where I went when I wanted to get a sense of how the community was feeling. It was also the best place to find my favorite local information dealer. Given that this was a local problem, Luna would probably have the most relevant information available.

It would have to wait, though. It was just now noon, and Pryce's wouldn't start filling up for a couple hours. I was also hoping to meet Katrin there, and, obviously, that couldn't happen for a while. I don't really know whether vampires burst into flame at the touch of sunlight—popular culture gets a lot of things wrong, and I haven't seen what happens myself. But they definitely don't like it much. I've never yet seen one out and about in the daytime.

That left us with a few hours to kill. We started by getting lunch at a small Mexican place Kyra was fond of. It was cheap and within walking distance of both Pryce's and Val's shop, and as a result we'd both eaten there quite a few times. It had been a long while since those concerns were of particular importance to either of us, but the food was still good.

They didn't let Snowflake in the building, of course. Most buildings don't, on account of her looking a bit like a fashion-conscious hellhound. She probably could have convinced them otherwise—intelligence at least on a par with most humans does wonders for your acting ability—but she doesn't want to. She thinks that the benefits of being terrifying outweigh the costs.

It didn't take us long to eat—it seldom does; werewolves tend to bear a strong resemblance to their natural cousins in that regard, and Aiko can put away three days' allotment of sugar and caffeine in less than ten minutes. Alexis ate more slowly, but then she also just didn't eat as *much* as the rest of us, so it balanced out.

Anyway, what I'm saying here is that it was still quite early in the day when we walked out into the sunlight. It was uncomfortably warm in my armor; Colorado has a reputation for being freezing cold,

but that's pretty much only in the winter, or in the mountains. It was currently July, and Colorado Springs is not by any reasonable definition in the mountains. Ergo, it was above ninety a lot of days.

"That was nice," Kyra drawled lazily as Snowflake emerged from under a car across the street. She shouldn't have been able to hide there—bright white fur is supposed to be a little more conspicuous than that—but none of us were surprised. She's always been better at concealment than a husky has any right to be. "What now?"

I glanced at the sun. Still quite a long time 'til dark. "Go see if the Watchers' guy dropped of those files," I decided. It hadn't been that long since I asked, but the Watchers tend, as a rule, not to let much grass grow under their feet. They don't have the spare time for it.

I used to drive a Jeep. It was a nice car, very sturdy, and it served me well for a year or two. I'd bought it used, though, and I couldn't deny that it had some issues. It couldn't reach highway speeds, for one thing, and that's a fairly serious problem in a getaway car. Between that and the fact that Aiko's car had since gone by the wayside (I have no idea what actually happened to the thing; it just disappeared, and by the time I noticed it had already been gone for a few months. I've never asked her what she did with it, because I'm not sure I want to know), we'd invested part of Watcher's blood money the previous winter in new wheels.

Said bribe was somewhere in the vicinity of fifty million dollars. As you might imagine, that meant we probably went a little over the top with the whole project. What good does a fortune do if you can't squander it?

What I'm getting at here is that Aiko bought a Lamborghini. And yes, I mean that literally. It was expensive as hell, and then I spent a fair chunk more having most of the important bits reinforced with magic. I would have done it myself, but I'm *really* not skilled with that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, as some car aficionado is doubtless already saying, Lamborghinis only have two seats, which presented certain difficulties under the present circumstances. Even if we'd wanted to pack that many people into that much space, which we didn't, it still wouldn't have been an option. We left it parked outside the pack house. It blended into that neighborhood much better. It was still more expensive than some of the houses, but at least it wouldn't buy most of the block.

Besides. Since that house was built it had been owned by, in order, a pack of werewolves, a pride of rakshasas, and a gaggle of whatever you called my band of freaks. At this point, I figured anyone dumb enough to steal a super-expensive car from out front was pretty much asking for it. The housecarls would probably run them down before they made it off the driveway.

Of course, that wasn't the only vehicle we'd purchased. We were wasteful, not moronic. I'd purchased an armored truck from a bank (I'm pretty sure that sort of thing wasn't allowed, but it's amazing what people will overlook if you wave enough money in front of them). By the time I got

finished upgrading it, it was probably sturdy enough to drive over a landmine without suffering any harm.

It was also almost as conspicuous as the Lamborghini, and probably a bit of overkill right now. It was fortunate, then, that we'd *also* purchased a nicely anonymous SUV, for cases in between. It looked vaguely Men in Blackish, jet black with darkly tinted windows. It was reinforced and armored, as well.

That impression was slightly spoiled by the large bumper sticker which read, in garish red letters: MAKE WAR, NOT LOVE. WE ALREADY HAVE A POPULATION PROBLEM. I hadn't wanted to put it on there—it ruined any chance the vehicle had of blending—but Aiko had been insistent, and in the end it was just too damn funny for me to argue very much.

Kyra smiled when she saw the bumper sticker, probably because she was the one who'd given it to us.

Aiko wound up driving, probably because Alexis, Snowflake and I were the only ones who had any real experience with Aiko's driving, and none of us were above a practical joke at the moment. I'm not particularly fond of driving—too many years of not owning a car, I suppose—and apparently Kyra and Anna weren't in the mood.

I'm pretty sure I saw the exact moment when they started to regret that decision. Aiko was doing eighty down the Interstate at the time. She slid through a gap in traffic perhaps ten or fifteen inches larger than the car, flipped off the semi driver directly behind us, and hit the accelerator. Snowflake, who was currently hanging her head out the window, flashed a steely grin in his direction as we pulled away. Aiko laughed and started fiddling with the stereo, steering one-handed around another car.

The expressions on the werewolves' faces were priceless. I saw Anna gulp and discreetly check her seatbelt.

Is this...Mongolian throat singing? Snowflake asked after a few moments. *Crossed with gangster rap?*

I listened for a few minutes. *Pretty sure it is, yeah. Could be worse. At least she's laid off the splittercore.* Aiko's taste in music was...bizarre doesn't begin to describe it. Neither does erratic. She can quite literally go from Gregorian chant to Viking metal in the space of a song, and sing along with both.

We didn't actually wreck on the way there, but more because Aiko has a literally superhuman reaction time and the luck of the devil than anything. She navigated the mess of twisting streets leading up to the house flawlessly (which, even after years of visiting the building, was *still* more than I could reliably do) and slammed to a stop less than two feet from the Lamborghini.

The werewolves exited the car in less than a second and a half. They didn't say anything—both Kyra and Anna were smart enough to realize that Aiko would only be encouraged by a reaction—but their expressions were eloquent. I followed them at a more leisurely pace, grinning, and went inside.

Sveinn met us at the door. I don't know how he knew that we were coming, but he opened the door before we reached it, his posture ramrod-straight. "*Heill, herra,*" he said, nodding almost deeply enough to count as a bow.

"Good afternoon, Sveinn," I replied, moving past him into the building. "Has a file arrived from the Watchers?"

"*Já,*" he said. "I will bring it." The jotun jogged upstairs.

"I can't believe you still haven't redecorated the place," Kyra said, looking around dubiously. It was overcast enough that not much light came in the numerous and large windows, casting the throne room into shadow. It made the omnipresent wolf motif look creepier than usual.

"I don't spend enough time here," I said, shrugging. "Besides, I've always suspected that Skrímir's spying on me, and I don't want to piss him off."

Sveinn returned, carrying an unmarked folder, taped shut. "Thank you, Sveinn," I said, taking it. He went back to watching the door. I opened the folder and pulled out a few sheets of paper. There was no letterhead, of course; if you didn't know where this file came from and where it was bound, you had no business knowing.

The first sheet of paper was a form letter, entirely unsatisfying. The Watchers had no information regarding any unusual summoning activity in the area. It might have been a lie, of course, but I didn't think so; I'd been useful to Watcher often enough that I didn't think she'd antagonize me at this point without a reason.

The next paper was much more interesting. I was pretty sure it was one of those papers Moray had mentioned Watcher slipping into the file. It read like an internal memorandum, and I didn't think anyone outside of the organization was even supposed to know that it existed. It read:

An unusual degree of activity has been observed in the central Colorado region, centered on the city of Colorado Springs. We have reason to believe that prohibited activities are taking place, including but not limited to summoning rituals, proscribed research, and noncompliance with official orders. Any unusual behavior related to this area, or expression of interest therein, is to be considered a subject for official inquiry, and all related information is to be relayed to your superiors.

Your compliance is appreciated.

Well, shit. The Watchers were scrambling to figure out what was going on, too. Hell, I probably knew *more* than they did right now. This was so not good news. I pulled the last sheet of paper out, dreading what it might say, and glanced it over. Then I blinked.

It wasn't as bad as I'd feared. It was worse.

Brick Anderson hadn't been seen or heard from for close to a week. That didn't surprise me too much—when he'd been threatened before, he'd retreated to his hideout in an abandoned mine tunnel.

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It was almost impossible to reach, and once you got there it was damned near impregnable. It wasn't too strange that, in the face of what was clearly another very dangerous situation, he might hide there again.

But he hadn't reported in to the Watchers, either. He hadn't responded to their messages, or—when they started getting concerned—to emergency channels. A search of his known locations hadn't turned up anything. All things considered, and keeping in mind that this had gone on for at least a week, it seemed safe to say that Brick had disappeared.

There were several possible explanations for that. It could be that he knew what was going on, and it was bad enough that he needed to take precautions this extensive to feel safe. Or it could be that whoever was responsible had, for whatever reason, removed him from the equation.

Or it could be that Brick himself was responsible.

Personally, I was hoping for that last one. Considering Brick's combat skill, anything that could take him out without making a show of it was more than I could deal with. At least if this was all Brick's fault, I had a reasonable starting place and a chance at dealing with him.

Plus I wouldn't owe him a favor anymore. Bonus!

I passed the file to Aiko, who skimmed the papers and snorted. "Well, we're a bit screwed, aren't we?"

"Quite." I wasn't entirely sure what to do with this new information. I'd been prepared for the Watchers to have no useful information, but the implication that they were truly concerned by the situation was unsettling. On top of that, I didn't really believe that Brick was the person we were looking for, which meant that I had to seriously consider the possibility that the culprit had the power, skill, and cunning to remove a combat-trained and paranoid mage without any kind of disturbance.

A moment later Sveinn, standing at the edge of the room, cleared his throat. "Jarl?"

"Yes?"

"The rest of the petitions were rescheduled for tonight. Will that work, or...?"

"No, I don't think I can spare the time. Not for at least a week." He didn't say anything for a moment, and I sighed. "What's the problem?"

"One of the plaintiffs speaks for Katrin."

I groaned. Katrin would help me in the end—Loki was liable to do something insane and destructive if I didn't find this summoner for him, and nobody wanted that. Katrin had more invested in this city than I did. The problem was making *her* see that. I had to talk to her before I could make her realize how high the stakes were. If she thought I was insulting her by making her minion wait, she would put me through the runaround for days.

I'm not sorry that I don't get along with Katrin. The only way we *would* get along is if I were to roll over for her, and I'm not willing to do that. But at times like this, I wished I hadn't gotten into this pissing contest with her.

"All right," I said. "Fine. I'll be here tonight." I resented the time lost, but enlisting Katrin's resources would be worth it. The vampiress had clout, and minions. Her assistance, even if it was reluctant and limited, would be worth vastly more than another few hours of my time.

Sveinn bowed. "Já. I will tell them to come." The housecarl left, probably to go do exactly that. Sveinn is nothing if not efficient.

"Right, then," I said briskly. "Might as well go to Pryce's now, then. Something tells me I won't be hearing from Katrin tonight anyway."

Aiko snorted. "What, just 'cause she's a prickly, domineering bitch?"

"Now that you mention it, that might have something to do with it, yes."

Around four hours later, the long summer twilight had reluctantly given way to night. We'd enjoyed an excellent and very large meal, and I got to watch Kyra walk into Pryce's for the first time in quite a while. It was sort of funny; anyone who didn't know would have sworn she hadn't been gone a week. He hadn't remodeled, of course, and there wasn't much staff turnover either. Pryce himself didn't say a word—no surprise there—but a few of his employees and several longtime customers stopped by to say hello.

The bad news was that that was all of the good news. I talked to everyone I knew and the handful of people I didn't, and everywhere I heard the same thing. There was *something* going on, something big, but nobody quite knew what. Pryce's bar had the same charged atmosphere you would expect to find in a warzone. People clumped up and spoke in harsh whispers. I noticed that there was a lot more hard liquor moving than normal. This surfeit was more than balanced by the general lack of cheer, and near-total absence of laughter.

People were scared. They might not know exactly what was happening, but this crowd hadn't survived this long without developing a weather eye for this sort of thing. They knew that something was up, and that all sorts of people were paying attention to it. That alone was enough to frighten them.

I offered people money, in quantities which literally made me wince. I might have it to spare, but a pile of cash doesn't make you rich. That's an attitude, and my attitudes were still those of a guy who'd barely been able to afford food for most of his life. You don't change that in a year or two. I offered them information in trade. I offered stored spells. I even offered favors, which I normally avoid like the plague.

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It didn't matter. The things I wanted to know simply weren't available, at any price. Nobody *knew*. Luna was the best source, as usual, but that wasn't saying much. She was the only person I talked to who'd heard the summoning angle, and she didn't have anything concrete.

Long story short, after three hours of work, I'd gotten exactly no result. Rumor and innuendo, whispers and implications, all of these things I could have in bulk, but there wasn't even a scrap of actual information.

Needless to say, this left me feeling rather frustrated.

"So," Anna said brightly. "What are we doing here again?"

I glowered at her. "Don't look at me. I suggested that you stay in a hotel or something until I came up with something you could do."

She opened her mouth to respond, but my cell phone cut her off before she could. I pulled it out and answered it, because seriously, what else was I going to do under the circumstances?

"Jarl?" Sveinn sounded...a little scared, actually, which couldn't possibly be good news.

"Yeah?"

"You said to call if we heard anything unusual? Well, we heard it."

I perked up instantly. "What's up?"

"I don't know. But it sounds like something you need to see for yourself." He rattled off an address and hung up.

"Sounds like a clue." Anna sounded, gods help us all, *excited*.

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "Yes, it does. I think we'd better go check it out."

"Fine." Kyra sounded distinctly less enthused. "But I'm driving this time."

I was chuckling as we walked out into the night.

Chapter Three

I stood in the rain and watched the world end.

It had been an apartment building, as far as I could tell. A simple enough thing, as square and blocky and unattractive as you could ask for.

Now it was...actually, I can't think of an appropriate word. "Wrecked" implies the possibility of reconstruction, "annihilated" suggests some degree of precision and discrimination, "destroyed" fails to convey the intensity. Devastated, perhaps, conveys more clearly what had happened here.

So, then. The apartment building had been *devastated*. It was impossible to see the details of what had happened, but the aftermath was brutally eloquent. Where there had been a building, there was now a large pile of rubble. Bits of the apartment building were still standing, seemingly at random, sticking out of the heap like the mast of a sinking ship. The lines of division were bizarrely sharp, sometimes cutting through rooms as though the plans had been marked out with a straightedge.

There was no fire, no debris, none of the things you would expect from a bomb or, indeed, any other mundane cause of such a scene. There was, as a result, less activity at the scene than I would have expected. There was an ambulance, and a handful of police cars. A few people, cops and civilians both, were picking through the wreckage, presumably looking for that rare category of people unfortunate enough to have been in the building, yet lucky enough to survive the experience. Others were standing around the edges, staring in dumbfounded shock at the destruction.

As I watched, one of the cops walked up to a young woman in a bathrobe. At this distance I couldn't hear what was said, but I got the gist well enough. A few moments after he approached, she broke down crying—not gentle, demure weeping, but the sort of wracking, heartbroken sobs people seldom allow themselves in public. The two young children standing next to her looked numb, like they couldn't comprehend what had happened. The police officer looked horribly uncomfortable.

I looked past the group, and saw that they were standing outside of a small house. It would probably have been a fairly nice house, had it not been for the minivan halfway through the wall. Something had, evidently, picked it up and thrown it, hard enough to break through the wall of a building.

I winced. I might not be able to fill in the details, but it wasn't hard to sketch out what was going on. Somebody wasn't coming out of that house.

Aiko was staring at the same scene with disturbing intensity. "Someone is going to die," she said. Her tone was bright, almost sweet, which made it even scarier. Aiko seldom really takes things seriously. When she does...well. Suffice to say that, if someone literally starts riots for casual entertainment, pissing them off *might* not be a good idea.

"Yes," I agreed simply. Granted, at the rate things were going, it would probably be *me*, but that was beside the point.

Kyra, who had been staring dumbfounded at the wreckage, shook her head. "Jesus. The guy you're after did *this*?"

"Most likely. I mean, I guess the timing *might* be a coincidence, but it's not bloody likely."

The werewolf was quiet for a long moment. "You're insane," she said bluntly. "Not, like, funny-insane, either. Not normal-for-you insane. You are seriously out of your fucking mind. You're picking a fight with *that*? What the hell are you going to do if you find it, ask it to stand still while you make like a lumberjack?" Kyra's voice rose as she went on, until she sounded nearly hysterical.

"Calm down. People are starting to stare." That was true enough, and the whole lot of us walked away before they decided to do more than just stare. I had enough on my plate without people deciding I'd somehow done this too.

"Calm down?" she hissed incredulously. "That doesn't even make sense! This isn't hysteria, it's a perfectly rational response to the idea of fighting something that can demolish buildings and throw cars through walls!"

"I hate to say it," Alexis said reluctantly, "but I'm with Kyra on this one. I'm not happy with letting someone get away with this, but trying to take something capable of this is a little out of our scope." My cousin's a relentless do-gooder, but she's had enough lessons in hard knocks not to be stupid about it. She makes a better voice of reason than I would have expected, honestly.

"What is it with you people and deciding that I'm too stupid to think of these things?" I wondered aloud. "Come on, give me some credit for not having died yet."

"From where I'm standing," Alexis said dryly, "your not having died yet is more luck than skill."

I chuckled. "Point. But I actually do have a plan this time."

Kyra snorted. "God preserve us. I've *seen* your idea of planning, Winter."

"You guys really need to ditch the negative attitude and look on the bright side," Aiko said seriously. "Winter's plans might get you killed horribly, but you won't die bored."

I'm starting to remember why we don't bring Kyra along more often, Snowflake commented. *It's bad enough with just Alexis and Aiko here. More than that, and so much time goes into making fun of you that nothing gets done.*

"Yeah, well, as much as I hate to cut this party short, I have work to do," I said, while Kyra laughed and Alexis looked confused. "I told Sveinn to schedule the rest of the petitions for tonight."

"What should we do?" Anna, at least, seemed to be taking things seriously. That was probably just because she hadn't had as much experience with this crap—there's only so many times you can be

scared out of your wits by an eldritch monster from the netherworld before you pretty much have to start laughing at them instead, or else go insane—but it was still a nice change.

I snorted. "You're welcome to come with me. But unless you want to be bored out of your freaking skull, I'd recommend you go home and get some sleep instead."

"Seriously, don't," Aiko added. "You *will* shoot someone, and apparently people get upset about that sort of thing."

"Don't complain," I advised her. "I got you off on a technicality, remember? Hell, the plaintiff *thanked* you."

Kyra looked back and forth for several seconds, evidently waiting for a more informative explanation, then sighed when it became apparent that none was forthcoming. "You two are insufferable," she said wearily. "Come on. If we move fast, I can drink myself into a stupor before bedtime."

"You're a werewolf," I reminded her. "I literally do not have enough drinkable alcohol for you to drink yourself into a stupor."

"Spoilsport."

I dropped everyone else off at the mansion and kept going alone. Kyra and Anna had both taken over one of the guest rooms in the past few months. They weren't in town all that often, but we could have hosted a moderately sized army in that mansion without crowding. It wasn't like anyone else was using the rooms.

Not even Snowflake was willing to come with me to deal with petitions. That says a lot about just how incredibly, mind-numbingly boring it was. I knew what I was getting myself into with this gig, even if it was more of an unfortunate side effect than anything—but if I'd known just how much boredom being a jarl entailed, I would have put a lot more consideration into it.

Astonishingly, not a single thing happened on my way down there. I was halfway expecting a divine visitation, or a rain of fire, or at the very least a kamikaze attack or something, but things were entirely boring.

I finally got to the house at around ten, several hours later than I was supposed to have shown up, having gotten turned around twice on my way there. The rain was falling heavier now, and Sveinn had evidently decided not to make everyone wait out in the weather for an unknown period of time. I hurried up the stairs and in the door, dripping wet, grumpy, and generally not in a very good mood.

Inside the house, things were warmer and better lit, if not any more pleasant. There was a small crowd milling around the throne room, divided into a number of very distinct clumps. Nobody seemed inclined to mingle. The housecarls, arranged along the back wall, were openly fingering weapons, and I

think if I'd taken much longer they would have needed to use them to prevent a small riot from breaking out. Sveinn was the exception; he was standing beside the throne, and looked about as happy as I felt.

I stormed through the crowd to the front of the room, where I sat in the throne and immediately remembered why I seldom do so if I have any choice in the matter. How they can make a chair less comfortable than the ground is beyond me, but they managed it.

The water dripping off of my clothes and running into my eyes probably decreased the solemnity of the scene somewhat. But I feel reasonably confident that my scowl was foreboding enough to make up the difference.

"You're late!" someone called from the crowd.

"I was unavoidably detained."

"By what?"

I looked in the general direction of the person who was shouting and smiled. It was, quite deliberately, a grim and menacing smile. "You'll see it in the news tomorrow," I said in a flat, cold voice. Which was, technically, true; I was pretty sure that they'd call it a terrorist attack or something similar.

Of course, the way I'd phrased things suggested that I had been the one to *do* it, but that wasn't an accident. A reputation for being the sort of person who can make bad things happen to people that piss him off is, sadly, not a bad thing.

I can't make the people love me. It takes a great leader to do that, and I'm not. But I can damn well make them fear me. Which, and let's be honest here, is a safer thing to rely on anyway. Most people will forget love for a million dollars. Unless it's the kind that spends in hell, though, they won't forget that that's where they're going if they betray you. Sad, but true.

"Now," I continued while they absorbed that, "if there are no further questions, let's begin."

Sveinn stepped forward and cleared his throat. "Case of Jacob Cohen versus Schneider the Mad."

Two figures stepped up out of the crowd. The one on my left was a tall, stooped fellow with long white hair, a tangled beard that reached most of the way to his belt, and pale, watery pinkish eyes. Between that and his skin tone, he was either albino or trying very hard to look like it. He was wearing a grubby overcoat that stank enough to make my eyes water at ten feet, unless the smell was him. I was guessing it was both.

The other guy looked forty years younger and ninety years prettier. He had tan skin, dark hair, perfect teeth, and an expensive suit. I disliked him on sight.

"What's your grievance?" I said, already developing a headache.

The guy in the suit pointed a finger at the bearded man as though hoping to stab him. "This man has robbed me!" he exclaimed. "I demand recompense!"

I looked at the other man, who didn't seem particularly concerned. Then I blinked and looked again. "Is that...a squirrel?" I asked hesitantly. "In your *beard*?"

The man—who I was pretty confident at this point was Schneider the Mad, because *duh*—reached up and scratched the squirrel behind the ears. It chittered happily. "Like squirrels," he said with a beatific smile. "They're so chewy. Chew chew chewy-chew chew chew chew."

"Right," I said slowly, while everyone in the room tried to pretend they weren't edging away from the crazy old guy with the squirrel. Including the housecarls; apparently this was enough to tip even their astonishingly dysfunctional scales. "So...would you care to respond to this accusation?"

"Just chewing around," he said. "Chew, chomp, munch, crunch, nibble, nosh, gnaw." He looked out the window and started humming. It sounded like "Itsy Bitsy Spider."

"Okaaay then. Mr. Cohen, could you specify how exactly you were robbed?"

"Certainly," he said, gesticulating vigorously. The guy seemed entirely unaware that his opponent apparently thought he was in the forest, and also seemed to be off of way too many meds for comfort. "I agreed to pay him five hundred dollars for a rubber chicken. I paid up front, and he has not held up his end of the bargain. I demand a refund and compensation for my inconvenience."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. It didn't help, so I went back to staring. Schneider appeared to be feeding his squirrel something that smelled suspiciously like squid. "Are you telling me that you paid five hundred bucks...for a rubber chicken...to a guy called Schneider the Mad...who carries a squirrel *in his beard*?"

Cohen bristled. "Yes."

I closed my eyes again, then took a deep breath and opened them. "That," I said slowly, "is quite possibly the stupidest thing I have heard all week. Well done. You don't get a refund. You additionally owe me a hundred dollars as compensation for wasting my time and forcing my brain to consider possible explanations for the mind-numbing stupidity of your actions."

"You can't do that!" he shouted. He was definitely a shouty man, was Jacob Cohen.

"You'd be amazed how often I hear that," I said dryly. "I think you'll find that, as a matter of fact, I *can* do that. Now pay your hundred and get out before Schneider's squirrel chews your nose off."

"Chewy!"

As beginnings went, it was less than auspicious.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

I rubbed my eyes and looked at the clock. It was getting close to midnight.

The problem, essentially, was in how I'd set up my position here. I hadn't intended, at the time, to actually *do* the job, so I'd just declared myself jarl without thinking too much about the consequences.

That meant that, theoretically, I was allowed to do pretty much literally anything I wanted—jotun law is very old-fashioned, and that was technically the only system of laws I was obligated to follow. I might run into trouble if I flaunted my disregard for other cultures' expectations, but there was no official, legal requirement for me to follow them.

On the other hand, that very antiquatedness worked against me in other ways. Jötunar expect their jarls to take a personal interest in the lives of their subjects, to a much greater extent than I would have preferred. Since I'd—rather shortsightedly, it must be said—claimed the entirety of Colorado Springs as my territory, that meant that anyone in the city could insist that I personally settle their dispute, for any reason or none.

And I couldn't stop them from doing so. I could *annoy* them, sure. I could be an absolute dick about it. I could make the request procedures so arcane and convoluted that almost nobody had the patience to get through them. I could schedule their hearings for ungodly times of day. I could make them stand outside while they waited. I could do all these things, and I did—but I couldn't actually stop them. I could not, for any reason, outright refuse *anyone*.

"Case of Thomas Burkett versus Elisa Hosking," Sveinn announced, ushering forward the eleventh supplicant of the night. The crowd had thinned out considerably, which was some consolation.

"What do you want?" I said wearily.

Burkett, a short, overweight guy with a toupee and a bad attitude, puffed himself up self-importantly. "I run the largest company providing—"

"You would not believe," I interrupted, "how little I care."

Burkett stared, face going red. His eyes literally started to bulge. Kyi giggled. A moment later the housecarl turned it into a fake cough that wouldn't have fooled a deaf cat.

"Find a point," I suggested. "You have ten seconds before I have you thrown out." I paused. "Of a window. I'm really not in a very good mood."

I thought he wouldn't get himself under control but, alas, he made the deadline by a second or two. "This woman worked for me up until two months ago," he said, biting off each word. "Since then she's been slandering me to all her friends. I want recompense and a public apology."

"Could I say something here?" Hosking asked.

"Not until it's your turn. What, specifically, is the slander you're accusing her of, Mr. Burkett?"

"She says that she quit because she was being sexually harassed."

"Could I *please* say something?"

"No, and if you interrupt again I'll have Sveinn gag you." Hosking sat back in her chair, clearly nonplussed. "So," I said to Burkett. "Sexual harassment, eh? That's quite a serious thing to suggest."

"It is," he agreed.

"Is it true?"

Burkett froze. His mouth opened and closed like a landed fish, which he resembled more than superficially.

"Ah, that's a bit of a problem. See, in order for something to be *slander*, it has to be a *lie*— maybe you should have looked it up?" Behind me, Kyi started laughing. This time she didn't bother covering it up.

Burkett did not seem as amused. "I, I, I don't know what you're suggesting," he stammered feebly.

"Yeah, I think you probably do. I'm guessing Ms. Hosking hasn't gone any further than talking with her friends, is that right? She hasn't brought a suit against you for harassment?"

"That's correct," Hosking said once it had become clear that Burkett wouldn't or couldn't answer.

"Thank you. In that case, Mr. Burkett, you will not be getting anything. You will apologize to Ms. Hosking and provide her with whatever she deems to be adequate recompense. Is that clear?"

"Whatever I want?" Hosking said slowly. She started to smile.

I grinned. "I'm glad at least one of you understands me. Now get out."

They did so in silence. I'm pretty sure Hosking was gleeful, and Burkett was afraid to speak up lest I slap him around some more. I was, after all, legally allowed to hand out anything up to and including the death penalty to anyone foolish enough to willingly submit to my version of justice, and they didn't have much of anybody to complain to about it.

Jotun law also tends to be rather harsh.

"Next," Sveinn said, sounding about as enthused as I felt. It had been a long day for everyone. "Case of Katrin Fleischer versus Friedrich Schwarz."

"Finally," I muttered as a pair of vampires stepped forward.

The one on the left was female, with curly brown hair and a generically cute face. She was wearing an expensive suit and a charming, entirely false smile.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

It was not, of course, Katrin. The master vampire of the city would hardly stoop to attending something like this herself. No, this vampire's name was Natalie Sullivan—or at least that's what she preferred to be called. She was, for reasons entirely unknown to me, one of Katrin's inner circle.

Generally speaking, when Katrin wants something from me, Natalie serves as her mouthpiece. I suppose that the official reason for that is that she's an attorney, insert your own evil lawyer joke here. Personally, I suspect it's more because Katrin knows that I can't stand her. Of course, Natalie isn't too fond of me, either. I think she's upset that she can exploit the most intricate, arcane legal maneuvers and loopholes in the world, and I don't have to care.

The other vampire was a male I didn't recognize, and it was only by scent that I knew what he was at all. He was average looking, with stringy blond hair, glasses I was pretty sure he didn't need, and a sneer that seemed to be a permanent part of his expression.

I am not fond of vampires. They're parasites, utterly dependent upon hurting and killing people in order to continue their own existence. Furthermore, they are freaking creepy as hell, and when *I'm* saying that you know that it means something. That probably makes me racist or something, but I feel justified in this case.

Most of the time, of course, I had plenty of additional reason to dislike vampires. I disliked Katrin because she was a prideful, deceitful bitch who was constantly testing me to see what she could get away with, and that got annoying fast. I disliked Natalie because she was a lawyer, and she acted like one. That also got annoying fast, not to mention that her efforts to seem human, rather than blending in, usually took her straight into the uncanny valley. Vampires were creepy enough already.

I disliked Friedrich because his smug, supercilious attitude was readily apparent. He walked in like he owned the place, and sneered at me like he expected me to grovel.

I'm a bit of a hypocrite, really. I dislike having authority over people. I hate giving orders. But at the same time, I absolutely can't stand people giving *me* orders. That's a large part of why I've never actually been a part of a werewolf pack. People who won't take or give orders don't fit in well to the dominance structure, and wolves who don't fit in the hierarchy have all kinds of problems.

All of which meant that, when the strange vampire walked in and looked at me like a servant, it prejudiced me against him. Not that it mattered particularly, since I needed to stay on Katrin's good side right now anyway, but it made things easier.

"What's the problem?" I asked, rubbing my temples. That never seemed to help with a headache, and yet I never ceased to try.

"Dumbass went poaching," Natalie said with a grin that made me want to shudder. Her casual inflection was slightly *off*, like listening to a ninety-year old trying to use modern slang.

"What, exactly, does 'poaching' mean in this context?" I asked dryly.

The vampire's grin vanished instantly, as though she'd suddenly remembered that it wasn't a good way to charm me. "He preyed on someone that another vampire had marked," she said, her voice entirely businesslike.

Vampires getting territorial about their food. Just what I needed. "Is he from out of town?"

"No, he's been in the city for five years."

"And the other vamp, was he local, too?"

"Yes."

I paused. "So what you're saying," I said slowly, "is that one of Katrin's minions insulted another one, so he threw a hissy fit."

Natalie gave me a cold look. It reminded me uncomfortably that, ridiculous and contemptible as she was, she was still a scary monster, and I'd be wise not to underestimate her. I could probably beat her—as vampires go, Natalie is distinctly at the bottom of the violence totem pole—but whether I'd get the chance was another question entirely. Vampires have a reputation for being sneaky bastards, and Katrin wouldn't keep her around without a reason.

"Your statement," she said a moment later, not sounding at all pleasant or amused now, "while a crude oversimplification of a complicated situation, is not entirely inaccurate."

"And I'm handling this...why, exactly?" I asked, ignoring her hissy fit entirely. "I didn't agree to handle Katrin's discipline problems for her. If she's trying to outsource that to me, I'm going to be upset."

Natalie looked as though she were smelling something unpleasant. "Ordinarily," she said in a tone which suggested she was about as happy with this as I was, "my mistress would prefer to handle this in-house, as it were. However, in this specific case, she didn't have the option."

I paused to read between the lines. "Are you saying dipshit here decided to appeal his case to me himself?" I asked incredulously.

This time the vampire's smile almost looked honest. "That's right," she confirmed.

"Could I—" said dipshit started to say, sounding confused about the course this discussion had taken.

"Shut up," I interrupted offhandedly. "I wonder who gave him that idea. They can't have liked him very much."

Natalie's face was carefully neutral. "I don't have any information on who suggested it to him."

Yeah, I bet. It was Katrin. I couldn't prove it, but it was her. Oh, she might not have been the one to say it, but she was responsible. It was too neat to be an accident. She got to punish an insubordinate

minion without taking the blame herself, piss me off, and remind me of how hellish she could make my life, all at once. If she wanted to badly enough, she could make *every day* look like this.

That prospect was upsetting enough to make me feel a little ill. It went well with the pounding headache and building fatigue I already had.

Of course, two could play that game.

"What sort of punishment," I asked casually, "would this sort of thing typically get? If Katrin were handling things, I mean."

Natalie shrugged. "Nothing too serious. Confinement for a few weeks, perhaps, or he'd have to provide the vampire he stole it from with a replacement."

As casual as she sounded, you could almost forget we were talking about a human being. Almost, but not quite. I'm not generally the biggest fan of humans, but some things were beyond the pale.

I found myself smiling maliciously, and did nothing to hide it. "And rather than accept that," I said softly, knowing quite well that I sounded rather creepy, "you decided to take your chances with me?" I smiled wider. "Friend, I think you made something of a mistake."

Natalie paused, looking a bit like you might expect someone on their first skydiving trip to look right before they jumped. Then she sighed. "Jarl Winter," she said, sounding almost pained, "could I speak to you in private for a few moments?"

I considered her for a moment, then shrugged. "Why not. Everyone, if you could please wait outside for a moment?" I would have preferred to just vacate the room myself—it would have been much more convenient for everyone—but I could hardly afford to send that message. Jarls don't worry about inconveniencing other people, however much I personally hated that attitude.

The small crowd that was still waiting left, with much speculative whispering, and took the other vampire with them. It only took a few seconds before the door shut, and I leaned back in my throne, shifting uncomfortably. "Well?" I snapped, in no mood to continue pretending I had any patience left for Natalie. She wouldn't believe it anyway. I don't like Natalie, but she isn't stupid.

"And your minions?" she said, eyeing the housecarls significantly.

I snorted. "If you think," I said dryly, "for even a second that I'm going somewhere alone with you, you've vastly underestimated my intelligence. Now get to the point, vampire, before I lose what few scraps of patience I still have this late at night."

She almost smiled. It was a better job than most of Natalie's expressions; if I hadn't been watching her eyes, I might have almost thought it was sincere. "As you wish. I'd appreciate it if you could go easy on Friedrich, here."

"And why," I started, before being interrupted by a long and genuine yawn. "Why," I continued, "would you want me to do a thing like that?"

"His progenitor is an old friend of mine. I must admit I harbor a bit of lingering fondness for the boy."

Yeah, right. And in unrelated news, scientists had developed aeronautic bacon, and there was a guy on the corner selling the deeds to a dozen bridges at cut-rate prices. Natalie was simultaneously a vampire, a lawyer, and a politician, which meant she had only slightly more chance of doing something out of the goodness of her heart than Loki did.

She wanted something. And given that this involved Katrin, it wasn't hard to see that it was probably some sort of vampire politics. I knew nothing about the internal politics of the vampires in town, and the longer I could keep it that way the happier I'd be.

On the other hand, it would also give me leverage on Natalie. And that wasn't a bad thing to have.

"I do this for you," I said, "you owe me one. Got it?"

She didn't look happy, but she also didn't look surprised. She nodded tightly, and I smiled. "Great. Sveinn, get everyone back in here, all right?"

It took only slightly longer to get everyone herded back inside than it had taken them to leave. "So," I said. "Friedrich, you did some pretty stupid things. But I've decided to cut you a break, so I'm not going to kill you. You owe Katrin and the vampire you poached from a favor each, to be claimed at their discretion. And you also owe me, oh, let's say ten thousand dollars, to be paid within the year."

"Why do I owe *you*?" he protested indignantly. Beside him I saw Natalie rolling her eyes, and almost smirked. Yeah, she definitely wasn't saving this guy's ass because she liked him so much.

"Let's say it's a tax," I said with a smile. "To discourage any other vampires from coming to me with their problems. I have enough of my own to deal with."

Natalie herded him outside before he could talk himself any further into trouble, fortunately for the brains of everyone in the room. I looked at the small group of people still waiting and sighed. "It's late," I said. "I'm tired. Does anyone object to postponing the rest of this session until next week?"

No one did, and they filtered out into the rain, not without a certain degree of grumbling. I stood up and stretched, giving them a few minutes to disperse before I left to go catch a few hours of sleep.

"Jarl?" Sveinn said, while the rest of the housecarls wandered out, most of them also yawning and grumbling. "What should we do with the money?"

"You guys split what we took in tonight," I said, yawning again. "To make up for the late night."

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

Kyi, who was still lingering, sighed. "This is not jarl," she said disapprovingly. "Jarl does not apologize." Kyi's English, while still shaky, was distinctly better than when she'd started working for me.

I glowered at her. "Housecarls," I countered, "don't tell their jarls what to do."

She smirked. "As you say, jarl."

Sveinn cleared his throat, cutting off any rejoinder I could have made—which was just as well, really, considering I couldn't think of a witty one. "And the money from the vampire?"

I shrugged. "Assuming he pays up, it goes in the general fund." I took in a lot of money jarling, but I already had vastly more cash than I was ever likely to need. Some went to upkeep for the housecarls, and the rest I split between various charities.

"I'm going home," I announced a moment later. "If you hear about another building blowing up or some shit like that, you know how to contact me. Otherwise, it can bloody well wait 'til morning."

The housecarls are, as a group, psychotic, dangerous, generally unsafe to be around, and not as obedient as some overlords would prefer. They aren't stupid. None of them argued the point with me.

I was delayed getting home by an overturned semi which, even at this time of night, had traffic backed up to a ridiculous extent. By the time I finally staggered in the front door, it was almost two in the morning, I'd achieved nothing since sundown, and I was in the sort of mood that could only be described as "homicidal." I was actually a little sad that nobody'd tried to assassinate me on the way home; in my current state of mind, taking my mood all the way to *actually* homicidal would be a relaxing diversion.

My frustration was somewhat alleviated by the fact that Alexis had left dinner in the kitchen, some sort of pasta with cream sauce that wouldn't suffer excessively for being left out a few hours. I shoveled a plate of it down my gullet and, now feeling only somewhat grumpy, went to bed.

End of day one, and nothing accomplished. At this point, it wasn't looking too good for me to get this sorted out within my one-week deadline.

Chapter Four

"You're a hell of a heavy sleeper, you know that?" said a male voice I didn't recognize. "I mean, I was just going to wait for you to wake up, but this is getting ridiculous."

I went from a dead sleep to actively freaking out pretty quickly, for reasons which should be pretty obvious. I mean, I don't care if you're the least paranoid guy around, if you wake up to a stranger in your bedroom—your *incredibly well-defended bedroom*, where no stranger should ever be—you freak.

I sat bolt upright, grabbed Tyrfing, and launched myself out of bed, landing in a crouch and growling softly. Or, at least, that's what happened in my head. In reality, Aiko had at some point wound up draped across my chest. That was a pleasant enough state of affairs, except that she woke up at the same time I did and had about the same reaction. The end result was that we thrashed around a bunch and, rather than badass fighting poses, ended up in an undignified tangle of limbs.

"That was pretty good," the stranger said, chuckling. His voice was low and rough, evoking images of a lifetime spent exposed to the elements. "Do you guys do parties?"

I managed to disentangle myself enough to twist my head around and glare at the intruder. He was of average height and build, with heavily tanned skin and dark eyes. His features were sharp, with an aquiline nose that had clearly been broken at some point, and an inscrutable expression. He was wearing jeans, a plain black cowboy hat, and a leather jacket covered in intricate geometric quillwork.

I had absolutely no idea who the hell this was.

"Who the hell are you?" Aiko asked, sounding understandably hostile. She'd also managed to contort herself enough to get a clear look at him.

"Friend of a friend," he said, which wasn't actually terribly informative. Then he laughed. "Come on, get out of there. I don't bite. Much."

There didn't seem to be much point in arguing, so we untangled ourselves and got out of bed. Fortunately, neither of us was particularly modest. I snatched my cloak of shadows off the floor and threw it on anyway. I might not have issues with nudity, but there were still all sorts of toys in my cloak from last night. Most of them weren't weapons, but I could make do with what I had.

"What did you do to Snowflake?" I asked, glaring at the intruder. Snowflake has a reaction time that makes a snake look slow and a territorial instinct that makes me look welcoming. Ordinarily she would have been chewing on this guy's spine by now. It didn't even look like she was awake.

The stranger rolled his eyes. "Your hound'll wake up in an hour or two," he said, not seeming to notice my hostility. "I wanted to talk to the two o' you a bit, and I reckoned it'd be simpler doin' it this way." He nodded toward the door.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

"You still haven't told us who you are," Aiko said. She was holding a small, plain knife, and making no effort to hide it.

"Some people got no patience," he sighed. "I s'pose if I told you I was God you'd laugh, right?" Not waiting for an answer, he grinned broadly, showing teeth that could have featured in a toothpaste commercial. "So I guess you'll just have to call me Coyote, instead."

I stared. "Coyote. You mean, as in, *Coyote Coyote? That Coyote?*"

"That's right."

"Oh shit," Aiko said. "Oh *shit*."

Coyote looked offended. "I ain't that bad. Hell, you're workin' for Loki, you'd think a person like you'd be takin' this in stride."

"Winter's the one working for Loki," she said in an offended tone. "I've never even met him, and frankly I'd be freaking ecstatic if it stays that way."

Coyote snorted. "Bullshit. I don't think anybody in this room's buyin' that line." He pointed one finger at Aiko. "You're in deep with Mister Wolf, and he's got trouble like a dog's got fleas."

"I don't get your point."

"I reckon you do, and I don't particularly care. Now come on and walk with me. I got some things to say that you ain't gonna like, and it'll sound better in the sunshine."

The sun was indeed shining outside. It was about nine in the morning, and already shaping up to be a hotter day than I would prefer. A bit of a change from the rain of the day before, but that, generally, is Colorado.

"So what's this bad news?" Aiko asked, glaring suspiciously up and down the street. She'd taken the time to get dressed and throw her armor on before we left; Coyote didn't seem to care, and I could tell she was feeling more than usually antsy.

Not that I could blame her. I was wearing armor, too.

"It's about this job Loki's got you doing," Coyote said, ambling along down the sidewalk. He seemed totally unconcerned; anyone watching him would have thought he was just out on his morning constitutional. "More to the point, the thing he's got you looking for."

"You know about that?" Not that I was surprised—this was Coyote we were talking about, after all, and he could probably hang around in the same general class as Loki—but it would have been nice not to feel quite so obvious.

He snorted. "Son, let's get real here. *Everybody* knows about that." Lovely. In case I wasn't feeling quite exposed enough already.

"So what do you have to say about it, then?"

"Well," he said, "I think you could maybe stand to know just what it is you're after. True?"

"It couldn't hurt," I allowed.

"Well, that's where you've got problems. See, Loki don't think you oughta know. He thinks you can't handle it." Coyote shrugged expansively. "Normally I'd trust his judgment. Loki's a hell of a sharp guy, and he can judge a fellow's character better'n most. But when it comes to people close to him, he's got a blind spot an inch wide and a mile deep. I reckon that's what's happening here."

I blinked. "Loki? *Close*?" I asked incredulously. "You've gotta be kidding me! I can't even *count* all the ways he's screwed me over!"

"Whatever you say, Mister Wolf," Coyote said with a smirk. "If that's what gets you to sleep at night, you go right ahead. What matters is I think Loki's sellin' you short. I think you're ready to see this, and I can show you."

I waited a moment, then sighed. "And?" I prompted.

Coyote glanced at me slyly. "And," he said, "I'm thinking maybe you could do me a favor in return."

"Oh God," Aiko said. "I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"Seconded," I agreed. "I'm in deep enough already, thank you."

"Now hold your horses. I ain't talkin' about a debt to carry the rest o' your lives. I got a favor to ask, you do it for me, and we're even. That sound a little more to your likin'?"

"First," I said dryly, "I'd have to know what the favor is."

He laughed, a high sound that resembled the yip of a coyote. I wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't already known his nature, but it was unmistakable now that I knew what to listen for. "That's cause you ain't entirely stupid, Mister Wolf. It'll take a bit of explainin', though." He was quiet for a moment, presumably deciding where to start, then nodded. "You've read that book the Bible thumpers get so worked up about, I'm guessing."

"Yeah," I said.

At the same time Aiko said, "Hell, no."

Coyote snorted. "Yeah, that's what we're talking about here. Hell. See, a thousand years and change back, a few of us got to thinking that was pretty funny. So we decided to make it."

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

I blinked. "Wait a second. Are you telling me that you *made Hell*?"

"Yup. Took a while to get it right. Then when Alighieri wrote that book of his, we went back and changed it up a bit to match." He chuckled. "Let me tell you, that guy was all kinds of messed-up. We'd a never thought of the shit he had those bastards going through."

"So, when you say we," Aiko asked, "who are you talking about?"

He shrugged. "I did a little, and Loki pitched in on some of the details. He's almost as twisted as that Italian guy, you know. Xmucane helped us get the atmosphere right. It was Iblis's idea from the start, though, and he did most of the work on it."

"Iblis," I said. "He's...Arabic, right? The lord of the djinn."

"Hey, you ain't bad at this game. And yeah, he's a genie. Little on the crazy side, but in a good way. This one time we were out in the desert, this was the Mojave, and there was this guy out wandering around with a bucket—"

"Not," Aiko interrupted, "that stopping you from finishing that sentence isn't enough reason to interrupt you in itself, but could you get to the point of this story?"

Coyote cleared his throat. "Yeah. Right. So anyway there's this Otherside domain modeled on Hell, right? So we decided to make some demons, 'cause you can't have Hell and no demons. There's this one succubus—the demon kind, not one of those saps on the Vampires' Council—anyways, she's not all that experienced. A week or two ago she screwed something up pretty bad."

"And you want me to kill her?" I guessed.

"What? No! Why the hell would I want you to *kill* her?"

I shrugged. "You'd be surprised how often the favors people ask me for boil down to that. So what *do* you want?"

"I want you to give her a job."

I stopped and stared at him. So did Aiko. Coyote took about three steps, realized we weren't following, and turned to glare at us. "What?"

I cleared my throat. "Um...not to be impolite or anything, but...are you *kidding me*? You want me to hire a literal succubus who messed something up badly enough to get thrown out of Hell? Are you *insane*?"

"It's not like she stabbed someone," Coyote said testily. "She was between assignments up here. Her boss was showing this guy around—they give tours sometimes, for wannabe dark lords and whatnot—and he decided she should tag along. Well, Hell has this whole fire-and-brimstone thing going on, right? And this guy wasn't used to it, so he sneezes. And she said 'God bless you.'"

Aiko had started choking about halfway through Coyote's retelling, and was currently having such a hard time restraining laughter that it looked more like a seizure than amusement. I, on the other hand, was fondly remembering a time when I could make all my problems go away by hitting them very, very hard.

"Coyote," I said slowly, "in ten words or less, kindly explain why I would *ever* want this person working for me."

He thought about it for a moment. Then he thought about it some more. After about thirty seconds, he finally came up with something. "She's really good at poker?" he hazarded, sounding less than confident.

Aiko physically collapsed laughing.

I closed my eyes and counted to ten before I trusted myself to respond in a way which wouldn't get both of us smote by quasi-divine fury. "Does she have *any* skills that are actually relevant?" I asked hopefully.

Coyote snorted. "Look, Mister Wolf, girl's a succubus. She ain't gonna cut shit up, and let's get real here, if you need more o' that than you already got you're in deep shit anyway. You want somebody to sweet-talk a mark? You want to run a honey trap? She can do that, and I don't think you got another minion as can."

"Well, that's something, anyway." Not that I really thought I'd ever *need* that particular skillset, but hey, I wouldn't have guessed I'd get into politics either. It wasn't impossible. "Does she want paid?"

"I reckon room and board should do for her," he said. "Maybe kick her a little somethin' every now and then." He narrowed his eyes. "She wants more than that, you tell her to talk to me."

I sighed. Damn, but I am a sucker. "Fine," I said reluctantly. "It's a deal, with the condition that I get to fire her if it doesn't work out."

Coyote smiled in a way which really reminded me of all the stories where he swindles some sucker out of everything they own, and then gets them to pay him for the privilege. "That sounds pretty good to me, Mister Wolf. I reckon we can make this work. I'll send her around."

"Um," Aiko said, having recovered enough to form intelligible speech. "Not to intrude, but why do you want Winter to help this demon in the first place?"

He glared at her. "I think that's a touch intrusive, now, don't you? And besides, I'll have you know I'm doin' this out of the goodness o' my heart, and that's all the explanation you folks need."

I stopped. "Actually, Coyote, I don't think it is. I don't mean to renege on our deal, but I can't hire someone I can't trust, and that answer really makes it sound like there's more to the story than this."

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He switched his glare to me, then looked away. He mumbled something under his breath which I couldn't quite make out.

"Um, sorry, but I couldn't quite make that out." Which, considering my hearing, pretty much meant that it hadn't been audible.

"She's my granddaughter!" he shouted, loud enough to hear from across the street. "Christ on a crutch, get a clue already! I hate when people need everything spelled out for them!"

"Your granddaughter," Aiko said blankly. "And...she's a succubus."

"Yeah, that was a fun month or two. Succubi really know their business, let me tell you." He paused and glared at me some more. "That being said, you even *touch* my granddaughter and I'll hang you by your toes for the next hundred years." Judging by his tone, I didn't think he was exaggerating.

"Don't worry," I said dryly. "This whole conversation is so freaking bizarre as to make the idea physically nauseating." I took a deep breath and let it out. "So what's this super important secret you have to tell us?"

"It's more of a 'show' than a 'tell,' really," he said, stopping. "I reckon you two oughta close your eyes for the next bit."

When a god tells you to do something, you don't ask too many questions. It doesn't matter how inane what they're saying is. Even if it isn't important, and in my experience it's usually safest to assume that it is, they're liable to just smite you for not listening to them.

I closed my eyes.

An instant later there was...well, it's hard to describe it. It might be the most *peculiar* sensation I've ever had. It was an intensely uncomfortable, full-body sort of thing, not like anything I'd ever experienced. It was a little like pain, and a little bit like numbness. It wasn't particularly intense, but it was strange and unpleasant and entirely unfamiliar, and hard to ignore.

"You can open your eyes now," Coyote said. His voice was strange, louder than it should have been and with an odd echo. It sounded, at least to my ears, as though the yipping and howling of coyotes underlay the words. I'd heard a similar effect with Fenris and, occasionally, my own voice, albeit with different sounds.

I did so. What I saw was a bit like the tactile sensation, but a thousand times stronger.

Go down into a cave sometime. I don't mean a small cave. I'm talking about a *real* cave, the sort of place where there are thousands of tons of rock overhead and it's a twenty minute hike to the surface. Go down there, into the dark, and turn out your light.

It's hard to understand what you see, at that point, if you've never had the experience. It's not just dark. It's this total, overwhelming darkness. It's not that you can't see anything, it's that you can't

see. The black is so deep, so total, that your brain starts making stuff up to fill the empty spaces. The experience is terrifying. I suppose there are some people who get a thrill out of it, but I'm mildly claustrophobic and the prospect of blindness scares the shit out of me. Not my idea of a fun time.

Looking out at...whatever I was looking at...was like that, but worse. There was this *void*, stretching out on all sides into infinity, the way you might imagine the vast emptiness of space to look. It wasn't just black; it was that same total, mind-breaking darkness of a cavern that had never seen the light of day. Every few seconds a streak of color moved across my field of vision, moving very quickly and leaving a vivid afterimage. The colors were vibrant, intense.

Not all of them were natural colors, either, which makes it hard to describe. It's an interesting philosophical problem, really; how do you describe a color that doesn't have a name, because nobody's ever seen it before? There's no meaningful comparison you can make. It's like asking what sound green makes.

The only contrast was an area about ten feet in diameter, filled with air. It was a bit like standing in the middle of a soap bubble, the surface clearly visible against...whatever was out there. Coyote, Aiko and I were all standing in this bubble, with no visible surface supporting our weight.

"What is this place?" Aiko whispered, staring out at the swirling lights with a strange fascination.

"Ah," Coyote said. "See, that's where we're gonna run into some problems. This ain't a place, exactly. It's what comes before place."

"You're going to have to explain that one to me," I said.

He grunted. "I can try, anyway. How much do you know about entropy?"

I blinked. I'm used to non sequiturs—seriously, I live with Aiko—but this was a pretty good one. "You mean, like, chemical entropy?"

"Closer to mathematical. Think information theory."

"Pretty much nothing."

He made a frustrated noise. "You've gotta broaden your horizons, Mister Wolf. Don't do a lot of good to know who Iblis is if you don't know shit about science." He muttered a few additional things under his breath, which I suspected were less than complimentary, then sighed. "Fine. The short version is, think of it as randomness. The harder it is to predict something, the higher the entropy. You with me so far?"

"I think so," I said. Aiko just nodded, still watching the mad, chaotic dance of color against the void.

"Good. So, and I'm not going to bother explaining this one, entropy always increases in the long haul. So that means that the eventual state of any system is maximum entropy. Except that, by

definition, perfect entropy is entirely unpredictable. It could turn into *anything*, including perfect order. So what you get is a dynamic equilibrium, with orderly structures being produced at the same rate as other structures degrade into a state of chaos."

I was starting to get a headache. This was starting to sound a lot like the advanced magical theory Alexander used to lecture me on, and that involved *way* more math than I was comfortable with. "What does this have to do with anything?"

Coyote laughed and spread his arms wide, spinning around madly. "You're looking at it, Mister Wolf! This, right here, this is chaos."

"That can't be right," Aiko interrupted. She seemed to be following along a lot better than I was. "Infinite randomness can produce *anything*. This is just a bunch of lights moving in a sort of random way."

Coyote smirked. "At least *somebody's* paying attention. And you're right, this ain't really *chaos*, per se. I'm toning it down for you two quite a bit. You ain't up to lookin' at the real deal. From in here it should just be a touch uncomfortable, but you don't want to go stickin' anything out of my bubble. That stuff could turn you into anything, and the chances of that 'anything' being *you* are pretty slim."

My head was definitely hurting now. "Not to rush you or anything, Coyote, but just what does this have to do with what Loki's got me doing?"

"Ah," he said with a satisfied smile. "Finally you ask a smart question. That's going to take some explaining. This is the bit that Loki don't want you two hearing about." He looked at each of us in turn, and he was suddenly not smiling at all. "I don't reckon I need to tell you," he said, his voice gone very flat, "that this ain't the sort of thing you ought to share with all your friends. I can't say as I know what'll happen to you if you were to talk about it, but I wouldn't bet on your surviving the experience. Savvy?"

"Quite," I said sourly. I couldn't say I was particularly happy about it—as death threats go, it was far from the best I'd received—but I wasn't planning on ignoring him, either. When a being like Coyote gives you an ultimatum and implies that Loki is backing it too, well, it would take a moron of astronomical proportions not to pay attention.

I've met a couple of people like that. They have a tendency to die in horrible ways.

"Savvy," Aiko said, still watching the lightshow rather than Coyote. "Hurry it up already."

He snorted. "I like you. So. This," he gestured broadly at the chaos around us, "this is reality. You could think of it as the bedrock everything else is embedded in. Earth, the Otherside, everything you've ever encountered, we made it out of this."

"Who's 'we?'" I asked promptly.

"I'm getting there," he said testily. "See, the chaos is old. Eternal, really. Now, what I was saying about infinite chaos producing order? That ain't just a hypothetical."

I was starting to understand what he was getting at. "Are you saying," I asked slowly, "that you came from this?" I gestured vaguely at the chaos surrounding us.

Coyote smiled toothily. "Ah, he's getting there. Yeah, I was there for this. Like I said, this stuff's eternal. Now, if something's infinite, eternal, and infinitely random, eventually it'll produce *everything*, including things capable of manipulating the randomness."

"Is that where gods come from?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not really. I mean, in principle, yes, but....well, look at the Olympians. Sure, they *came* from chaos, but that was, like, a hundred generations back or something. Most of 'em, I guarantee you they've never even seen it with their own eyes."

"But you were here," Aiko said suddenly. "And somehow I doubt you were alone. How many of you are there?"

Coyote shrugged again. "Twenty or thirty," he said. I was pretty sure he was telling the truth, and entirely sure he knew the exact number. "Really, though, there's only two you need to worry about. Me, and Loki."

"Wait a second," I interrupted. "Are you saying that Loki spontaneously generated out of *this*?" That was a terrifying concept. I mean, I'd always known Loki was nine kinds of bad news, but I'd never even imagined something on this scale.

"Um," he said. "Not exactly. Most of us didn't create ourselves. *I* did, obviously, but Loki can hardly hope to compete with me. No, Ymir made him. But he's old enough to have developed out here, so in that sense, yes."

"Damn."

"Yup," Coyote agreed happily.

"Okay," Aiko said, "I like making fun of Winter's poor decisions as much as anyone, but you still haven't actually, you know, found a point."

"I'm getting there," he snapped. "Shit and onions, you people really have no patience at all, you know that? Fine, you know what, screw it. Short version. We made the world out of this, because we're the fucking *gods* and we get shit done. We made you sons of bitches to put in the world, because we were bored. If you let what's out here into what's in there, shit happens and it's hard to put back together afterwards. There, you happy?"

I blinked. I'd seen a lot of things, but a god having a tantrum was a new one. "So...are you saying that someone's bringing this chaos into the world, and that's what Loki wants me to deal with?" I hazarded.

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"Finally he gets it," Coyote said, sounding distinctly exasperated. "And yes, that's what I'm saying. It isn't quite that direct, though. There are...*things* out here that want to destroy what we made. They can't get in very easily on their own, but occasionally someone's stupid enough to open a door. *That's* what's going on in your town."

"Okay," I said. It was bizarre and inexplicable as hell, but that was nothing new. "So why do they want to destroy things?"

He shrugged. "I don't rightly know. I don't reckon anyone does, really," he said. I noted with some amusement that, with the return of his good temper, his hokey accent was firmly in place again. "You gotta realize, Mister Wolf, these things ain't like us. Me and my like, we made you, so you got some stuff in common with us. These things took a different choice way back when. We don't even share the same basic concepts with them."

"So what you're saying here," Aiko said, "is that someone randomly decided to summon an ancient, eldritch horror from beyond the bounds of space and time?"

"You do seem to have an admirable grasp of the situation, yes."

"Sounds like fun. Maybe we should hang out sometime." Aiko paused, her expression suggesting that something unsettling had just occurred to her. "So," she said a moment later. "If they're summoning those things from here, that suggests that there are more of them out here."

"Yep."

"What happens if one of them finds us?" she asked. "Are they, like, a threat to you?"

Coyote scoffed. "To me? Don't be ridiculous. Of all the gods, I am clearly superior. The strongest and bravest, the quickest and cleverest. The only way the likes of them could injure me would be for me to hurt myself laughing at the ingenuity with which I defeated them." He paused. "You, on the other hand, might not fare so well."

Aiko looked like she was seriously considering the pleasures of deicide. "Suddenly," she said, "I understand why people always seem so upset when I do stupid, random things without thinking about collateral damage."

"And with that in mind," I interjected before Coyote could reply, "could we continue this conversation in a locale with slightly fewer rampaging monsters?"

"Pussy. Fine, close your eyes."

I closed my eyes. Aiko asked, "Why do we have to close our eyes?"

"We really don't have time for a metaphysics lesson," Coyote sighed. "Now stop being difficult and close your damn eyes."

Chapter Five

Astonishingly, we were still alive when I opened my eyes again. We appeared to be in Colorado Springs again, right where we'd left from, rather than a random desert on another continent. And Coyote was still present. All things considered, it was quite the unexpected hat trick.

"Okay," I said, once I'd adjusted to not feeling or seeing creepy, bizarre things. "There's something from outside of the world running amok in town, and it'll be bad if it stays here. Okay. I can deal with that. What happens if I don't find it?"

Coyote glanced at me, then started walking down the street again. "It would be good if that didn't happen," he said, his voice unwontedly serious.

"What happens, Coyote?"

He sighed. "Whoever summoned it, they did it thinking it would give them power. That'll work, but it can't last. Sooner or later, something's gonna break, and it ain't gonna be the thing from the outside. It'll get loose, and when it does things will be bad." There was a heavy, ominous pause. "Loki ain't gonna let that happen."

Something about that phrase was deeply worrying to me. If it were that simple, Loki would never have hired me to find the person in the first place. "How would he stop it, exactly?" I asked.

Coyote glanced sidelong at me and smiled mirthlessly. "You ever heard of Pompeii?" he asked.

"Wait a second," Aiko asked. "He *set off a volcano on them*?"

"That one was Shiva's work. But yeah, that's the gist of it." Coyote shrugged. "We've been trying to stay out of things on earth lately, 'cause it's kinda fun to watch you bastards fumble around without us. So he'll probably try to make it look like an accident. No volcanoes here and it ain't by the ocean, which makes it a little harder. He'll probably do it as an earthquake or a fire or something. Maybe a bomb, those are popular right now."

"If I don't catch them within a week," I said weakly, "Loki's going to destroy the city?"

"He gave you a week? Damn, that's more than I was guessing. Oh," Coyote said as an afterthought, "and yep, that's the score. He'll let a few people get away, but we like to be thorough with this sort of thing. Can't take chances with things from outside. They don't play by the rules."

"No pressure or anything," I muttered.

"That's the spirit!"

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We walked for a few minutes in silence. I was trying to process the sheer magnitude of what I'd just heard. I think Aiko was doing something similar; she could be destructive, but killing half a million people to deal with one fool was in another realm entirely.

Coyote, presumably, was just going for a walk.

"Okay," I said finally. "I think I've got my head wrapped around that. So can I ask you one more question?"

"Well," Coyote said slowly, "that's a tricky one. I mean, I *could* pull your tongue out. But that would remove a lot of your charm, and I can't think of another way to *stop* you. So in that sense, yes, I suppose you can."

"Why are you telling us this?"

"We had a deal," he said offhandedly.

I snorted. "Yeah, right. Because casually employing a relative is totally worth as much as the deepest secrets of the universe. Oh, and you couldn't find any more prestigious, rewarding jobs to bribe her way into. Right, of course."

"You're not very trusting."

Aiko broke out laughing. "Holy shit, Winter, we've found the god of understatement."

"Right," I said sourly. "Come on, Coyote, stop trying to change the subject."

He sighed. "You realize that I have a vested interest in this world, right? I *like* this world. I don't want to see it damaged any more than Loki does."

I rolled my eyes. "How dim do you think I am? You told us *way* more than was necessary to do the job."

"Fine!" he snapped. "I owed it to your mother. You happy now?"

I groaned. "She was screwing you too?" I said disbelievingly.

"Yeah, that was a fun few nights. She wasn't as hot as the succubus, but ten times the creativity, and let me tell you, that counts for a hell of a lot."

Lovely. That brought her count up to several dozen werewolves, at least five faeries, a vampire, three literal wolves (one of which was actually descended from the Fenris Wolf, but she hadn't known that at the time, so I thought it scored as a wolf), and two gods. "Isn't there *anyone* who hasn't had sex with my mother?" I asked aloud.

"I haven't," Aiko offered.

"Actually," Coyote interjected dryly, "I wouldn't say that if I were you."

"What?"

Coyote nodded. "Oh, yeah. You were definitely at that party. This would have been, oh, around thirty years ago. It was a Daylight Court gig. You came with a changeling and then ended up stabbing him in the liver." He chuckled. "Good times."

"Wait a second. *That* werewolf was Winter's mom?"

"Yep."

"Well, shit," Aiko said after a few moments. "I guess I did have sex with your mother once."

"Oh, man," Coyote said, chuckling. "Talk about awkward. Man, the looks on your faces right now are *priceless*."

I glared at him. "Speaking of which," I growled, "I think this conversation has wandered rather far from anything resembling relevance, and I'm on a rather tight schedule. So unless you have something to say worth hearing, please piss off."

Coyote grinned and swept into a low, mocking bow, holding his cowboy hat in front of him. It appeared to have sprouted a peacock feather at some point. "Sayonara," he said cheerfully as he straightened up, tossing his hat casually through the air.

It landed on my head, in front of my eyes. By the time I'd gotten it off, Coyote was gone.

"So," Aiko said as we made our way back to the house. "Um. This is really awkward, you know?" She was quiet for a few steps. "I had no idea that was your mom. I would have told you if I had."

I sighed. "Aiko, as nontraditional as it is, let's think this one through before we go jumping to conclusions, okay? First off," I said, marking it off on my fingers, "the only source for this is Coyote. It's a plausible story, sure, but it's also plausible that he's just making it up to screw with us. Second, my mother had sex with anything that moved, up to and including a raccoon. A significant proportion of the people I've met have screwed her. I'm pretty much used to the awkwardness."

"Wait a second," she said. "*A raccoon? How?*"

"I try not to think about it too much. Oh," I added as an afterthought. "Third, and most importantly, I love you. For your sake, I would set the world on fire and dance in the ashes. Next to that, what happened at a party before I was born means very little to me."

Aiko was silent for a long moment. "You know," she said finally, "I think that's the most romantic thing I've ever heard you say. A little heavier on psycho-killer than adorable, but romantic."

"Too much?"

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She shrugged. "Hey, I like psycho. Psycho's a lot of fun." A few seconds later, she grinned. "So were you serious about setting the world on fire? Because that would be a pretty cool show."

I sighed. "Aaaaand the mood is dead. You made it longer than I expected, honestly." I didn't say anything for a few steps. "More seriously," I said quietly, "what did you think of Coyote's story?"

She shrugged again. "Believable, I guess. Really doesn't matter much to me. Sure it's cool to talk to somebody who was there when the world was made, but it'll never matter for the likes of us." She paused. "Also, Coyote's a jackass and I wouldn't trust him to give me the time of day without lying just for the hell of it. So there's that."

I snorted. "Yeah, that's about what I thought. If he's serious about Loki destroying the city, though...." I shook my head. "That's kind of hard to grasp."

"You're backsliding towards adorable now," Aiko informed me. "I've always thought it was really cute the way you take responsibility for, like, everything. I don't see that it matters any, though. You were already committed to finding the guy. The only thing that's changed is that we know to get out of Dodge if it doesn't look like it's working."

"True enough," I admitted. "But it does raise the stakes. I might take a few measures I wouldn't have considered otherwise."

"Calling in favors?" she guessed.

I grimaced. "Yeah. Maybe even giving a few away, much as I hate the idea." I was quiet for a moment. "I think I'm going up on the mountain first," I said eventually.

Aiko looked like she'd bitten an onion, and then discovered it was rotten. "Makes sense," she admitted reluctantly. "Probably better if I stay at home for that one. Kitsune tend not to get along with tengu very well."

"Last I heard your cousin was still working for them," I pointed out.

"True. But then Kimiko's got a stick so far up her ass she's most of the way to a birdbrain herself. They probably get along fine."

I laughed. "Good point. I'll see you when I get back, then. Try not to blow anything up."

She sniffed. "You never let me do anything fun."

Of the two groups I share dominion over the city with, I much prefer the tengu. Part of that, I can't deny, is prejudice; I don't like vampires, and nothing Katrin has done has given me reason to change that attitude. More of it, though, is that Kikuchi Kazuhiro takes a much more hands-off attitude towards dealing with me. As far as he's concerned, the city's mine and the mountain's his, and that's all

that need be said. It cuts down on my roaming territory, because I don't go onto the Peak without a good reason anymore. But I vastly prefer that to my constant, petty power struggles with Katrin.

It was late morning when I parked the car at the base of the mountain and started up the trail. By agreement, people on the official trail up the mountain had safe passage. I had insisted upon that when Kikuchi and I first made our deal, but I think the tengu agreed more for his own convenience than anything. Pikes Peak gets a fair number of visitors, and if he had to vet all of them individually it would drive him crazy.

I hiked up the trail for about an hour. It wasn't terribly difficult—I'm in excellent condition, and it was a groomed path. Heck, I wasn't even carrying a pack. It was getting pretty hot out, though, and I was wearing a long cloak over a suit of armor. Now, my armor has a great many beneficial qualities, and I value it highly. But no one's ever accused it of being excessively breathable. So by the time I decided I'd gone far enough, I was sweaty, irritable, and resentful of the time I'd lost.

Finally, once I was a good distance up into the trees, I turned off the beaten path along a game trail. It was narrow and indistinct and, most importantly, empty. Most of the relatively few people that came this far didn't leave the path, and prey animals tend to avoid me. More so than normal people, even. I saw some birds and a couple of squirrels, but nothing larger.

I ambled along that trail for a while, in no particular hurry. I was decidedly on their turf now; the tengu wouldn't take long to find me.

Less than ten minutes later a fog came up. It was a strange, distinctly unnatural weather phenomenon. To the sides it was a dense curtain, obscuring all but the most shadowy glimpses of the forest around me. The trees themselves loomed out of the fog in a way reminiscent of a horror movie, all skeletal branches and reaching twigs. Straight ahead, though, the fog was more of a pale mist, drifting idly across the path, soft and inviting without revealing anything more than twenty feet ahead.

I glanced backwards, once. The fog was thicker there, a wall of white no more than five feet from my back. It moved with me, at a steady walking pace. I considered stopping, to see if it would continue moving and swallow me up.

Something told me that wouldn't be a very smart thing to do.

There was no birdsong now. No sign of life at all.

I shrugged and kept walking.

A few minutes later, a pair of tengu loomed up out of the mist, one standing just to either side of the trail. They were strange-looking creatures, a little shorter than a man with limbs slightly too long for their bodies. They were covered with corvine feathers from head to toe, and disdained any other garment. Long black beaks sprouted from their faces where a nose would be on a human, between large, gunmetal-grey eyes. Other than that, they had no distinguishing features. Presumably another tengu would know the difference, but to my uneducated eyes the two were identical.

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Oh yeah, and they were both holding a plain, undecorated katana. It looked extremely casual, almost more like a fashion accessory than a weapon, but I wasn't fooled. I'd seen tengu fight before, and while presumably these guys weren't on a par with Kikuchi, they were still extremely dangerous. I was probably stronger than either of them, and Tyrfing was more than a match for most any sword. But tengu could be blindingly fast, they probably had at least a century of experience on me, and we were on their turf. In a fight, I wasn't sure I could handle either of them. Both would take me to pieces.

Not to mention whatever might be out in the fog that I hadn't seen.

"Halt," said tengu on the left. Its voice was harsh, closer to a raven's croak than a human voice. "Identify yourself." It sounded more bored than anything, and looked at me with a casual condescension that transcended species barriers.

Considering that I was in a strange place, probably surrounded by...not enemies, exactly, but certainly not friends...and I'd already determined that any trouble was extremely likely to end in my messy death, you'd think that I was a little nervous. And you'd be right, albeit guilty of criminal understatement.

But this was a make-or-break moment. How I dealt with the gatekeepers would determine how the tengu perceived me.

Winter Wolf, perpetually broke carpenter, would have liked to be polite, even diffident, and avoid causing a scene. He would have liked to keep things civil, not assert any claim of dominance, and generally be a nice guy.

Winter Wolf, jarl, didn't have that option.

"I am Winter Wolf-Born," I said, faking a confidence I didn't in the slightest feel. "Jarl of Colorado Springs, here to see Kikuchi Kazuhiro, dai-tengu."

The tengu on the right scowled at me. It had a pretty good scowl. "We have not been given instruction to conduct you to our lord," it said.

I raised one eyebrow (a trick which took forever to figure out, by the way). "Do you propose to stop me?" I asked, as deliberately nonchalant as I could manage. They could, of course—even if they believed every ridiculously overhyped story I'd heard about my capabilities, I was pretty sure they could still figure out who had the advantage here. But it would be an action with some fairly serious political fallout, and these guys were just minions. I was gambling that they would rather pass the buck than take the possible backlash for this decision themselves.

I felt bad for ruining their day like this. But as far as they knew, I had a heart of ice.

Twenty minutes later, I walked into a small clearing, the edges of which were shrouded in fog. The two tengu were still flanking me, but their attitudes of confused deference made it seem more like

an honor guard than an armed escort. Neither of them seemed entirely clear on how they'd wound up doing what I said rather than the other way round, and they were clearly not happy with this state of affairs.

Kikuchi was lounging in the center of the clearing in a throne seemingly carved out of an enormous tree. Or possibly grown; I was pretty sure the tree was alive.

Well, I hoped it was Kikuchi, anyway. He was wearing armor of a style similar to mine, and I hadn't seen another tengu in that ensemble. But given how much difficulty I had telling tengu apart, it could have been an impostor and I would have never known the difference.

I bowed deeply at the edge of the clearing. "Dai-tengu."

Kikuchi looked at me for a long moment, his expression alien and unreadable, then nodded. "Jarl." He looked at the other tengu. "Leave us."

They hastened to comply, leaving me alone with their boss. Except, of course, for all of the hidden watchers who, I was still convinced, were waiting out in the fog to pounce at my first wrong step.

That wasn't really Kikuchi's style, I was pretty confident. But I usually find that it pays to assume that everyone is secretly plotting to kill you until proven otherwise.

"Winter," Kikuchi said, sounding much more pleasant now that the witnesses were gone. "You were a little harsh on my people."

I didn't bother asking how he knew that. In my experience, asking how a powerful person on the spooky side of things knows something is pretty much never a fruitful avenue of inquiry. Besides, I was in his house. It was safe to assume that nothing much happened here without Kikuchi knowing about it.

So, rather than play dumb, I just shrugged. "It seemed the most efficient way to do things," I said honestly. "And the matter I have to talk with you about is too urgent to permit much politeness."

Kikuchi stared at me for a long moment, and I got the distinct impression that he wasn't happy. At all. "When you say that," he said at last, "I get a very bad feeling. Why is that?"

"Because you've met me?" I suggested.

Kikuchi seemed to actually consider it. "That may be it," he said at last, very seriously. "What is your problem?"

This was the tricky part. I didn't for a moment think that Coyote had been joking when he threatened me with death and dismemberment if I shared the secrets he'd told me. Telling Kikuchi what was really going on was, therefore, out of the question. At the same time, though, I didn't want to lie to him. There was a very good chance he would catch me if I outright lied, and doing so in this setting was rude enough that I couldn't predict what the consequences of such an action might be. Getting around both of those problems was going to require some quick talking.

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"It has recently come to my attention," I said carefully, keeping my tone as deferent as I knew how, "that a dangerous entity has been summoned into my city. The presence of this entity has been attracting...unfavorable attention from very high places."

Kikuchi treated me to a remarkably cold look. "Are you implying," he said, enunciating very clearly, "that I have broken our treaty?"

"What?" I said stupidly, genuinely surprised that he would get that message out of what I'd said. Then I replayed the past several minutes in my head and wanted to slap myself. In retrospect, it probably would have been a little smarter not to approach the topic quite like this.

"Honored dai-tengu," I said, laying the submissive attitude on even thicker, "I would never question your integrity in that manner. Indeed, the thought had not even occurred to me; I would as soon imagine the sun failing to rise as you breaking your given word." When in doubt, ridiculous flattery is always a good bet for damage control.

The tengu looked at least slightly mollified. "In that case," he said, leaning back in his living throne, "why have you come to tell me this?"

I tried to think of a polite, roundabout way to get my point across. Then I sighed. As usual, the only thing my attempts at polite diplomacy had succeeded in was digging me into a nice, slick-sided hole. Personally, I blame so much time spent around werewolves as a child. Granted werewolves have plenty of political games of their own, but generally speaking they're pretty straightforward. It was poor preparation for clever word games and subtle double meanings.

"Look," I said, abandoning etiquette entirely. "It might be in your best interest to care about this particular event. I'm not trying to threaten you, or anything like that. I'm just sharing some information that I think you might find helpful. Loki wants this situation dealt with, posthaste. He gave me a short deadline, and I have it on good authority that if I don't meet it my city is going up in flames, probably literally. I don't want to presume, but it seemed to me that this was something you would want to know about."

Kikuchi spent a few moments absorbing that. He didn't seem upset at my bluntness, at least, which was a relief. "And you're confident of this?" he asked at last, his voice noncommittal. That's one of the reasons I tend to avoid Kikuchi; dude is *incredibly* hard to read.

I took a moment to consider the question. "Loki isn't the most trustworthy of gods," I said eventually. "But to the furthest of my knowledge, he's never actually *lied* to me, either. And some of his actions this time...." I shook my head. "No, I don't think Loki is fabricating this. And I don't in the least doubt his willingness to destroy the city, if that's what it takes to resolve the problem."

"I see," Kikuchi said. I still couldn't get a solid read on what he was thinking. "How much information do you have on this...entity?"

"I know that it was summoned into this world by a deliberate action," I said, carefully not mentioning where it was summoned *from*. "And I know that it's powerful enough to worry gods. Beyond that, I have no information on its capabilities."

"It was summoned," Kikuchi said, latching onto that detail like a pit bull with a particularly tasty bone. "Do you know who summoned it?"

"I know that it was someone in the city," I said, shrugging. "Beyond that your guess is as good as mine."

Kikuchi frowned, an expression which was much more *intense* on a tengu's face than a human's. "I see. It would seem that it is in my best interest to assist in investigating this matter." He nodded firmly. "I will instruct my kin to help you identify the guilty party," he said, in the manner of a king graciously bestowing aid upon his least loyal peasant. "And send a representative to facilitate coordination of our efforts."

I bowed deeply. "Thank you, dai-tengu. I will likewise inform you if I discover any information relevant to the investigation. With luck this problem can be resolved quickly and without harm."

Kikuchi nodded decisively. "It is settled, then. I will not delay you from this urgent task any further." He waved one hand casually, and the fog poured in with such speed and inevitability that I was, for one brief moment, vaguely surprised that it didn't make a sound like a crashing wave as it rolled over my head.

Chapter Six

When the fog cleared and I could see, I was back in my world, on the slope of the mountain. The good news was that I either hadn't actually been on the Otherside at all, or else Kikuchi had access to a much smoother means of transition than I was accustomed to. There was no blackout involved that I could detect, and no interval of mind-numbing unpleasantness at all.

The bad news was that I was on the wrong *side* of the mountain. It took me a couple minutes to confirm, but I'd been hiking those forests for most of my adult life, and I'd run through them as a wolf most full moons for the past three years. It's safe to say that I knew that mountain as well as anyone. Within a few minutes I was pretty confident of my general location, and it was most of the way around the mountain from where I'd started.

It helped that I could just ask the hawk soaring overhead to let me borrow his eyes for a few seconds, of course. That's what is referred to, in certain orienteering circles, as an "unfair advantage." But I'm reasonably confident I *could* have figured it out without the bird's help. I just didn't see the point.

I hadn't walked anything like far enough along that path to come this far, which meant that something screwy had happened with location in the mist. If that whole interaction really *had* taken place on the Otherside, that made perfect sense. I wasn't sure whether Kikuchi had sent me back to this particular location deliberately, or it was just the default exit point.

I was inclined to the former. Kikuchi and I get along well enough, but he has a proud streak a mile wide and an utterly inflexible sense of honor, defined in a vaguely samurai-ish way. He was legally my equal and socially my superior, and even the slight presumptions I'd made in how I approached him were likely to have consequences. I was guessing this particular inconvenience was just a subtle reminder that there were boundaries I would be wise not to cross.

I would like to think that, in the face of a serious problem, people wouldn't play stupid games like that. But c'mon. Really. Even a passing acquaintance with human nature should tell you how naive *that* hope was. Kikuchi wasn't human, but from what I'd seen tengu nature was even *worse* for that, so that wasn't a terribly important distinction.

Unfortunately, it did leave me in something of an awkward position. I needed to be back in the city immediately, if not sooner; I had a lot of balls in the air right now, and any of them were liable to crash to the ground at any moment, with potentially catastrophic results. There was nothing to be done about it, though, so I shrugged and started working on opening a portal to the Otherside. I'd been getting quite a bit faster at that, and it should only take me half an hour to get back. It wouldn't be *fun*, but it was doable.

And then I stopped. The Otherside was the *fastest* way back, that was pretty undeniable. But, now that I'd had Coyote's tour of the chaos underlying reality, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I had a

strong suspicion that all of this time I'd been using those portals, I'd been tunneling through *that*. Having just experienced firsthand the profoundly disturbing, alien nature of that stuff, I wasn't eager to go back any time soon. Not to mention the godlike monsters wandering the void waiting to destroy things.

Granted, I'd always suspected that there was some hidden danger involved in Otherside travel, in addition to the very clear dangers I'd already known about. And I'd always known that the sheer fish-out-of-water awfulness of the experience had to be due to *something*. But there was an enormous difference between knowing that, and *seeing* it.

I sighed, then shrugged again. If I couldn't bring myself to do it, I couldn't; there wasn't much point beating myself up over it. Besides, doing any kind of magic when you aren't fully behind what you're doing is chancy, and when it came to the Otherside I wanted to risk that less than ever.

I thought for a moment, then stripped out of my armor and bundled it up in my cloak. The armor had been designed to fit together compactly, and the shadows that made up my cloak were extremely malleable; the resulting package was a little smaller than a backpack.

I took my leather bracelet off, put my rings on it, and then knotted it around my neck like the world's strangest necklace. Then I laid down on the ground and started to change.

Shapechanging is a fairly common art, as such things go, and there are a lot of ways to go about it. Shapeshifters can do it, of course, and so can a handful of other human mages, but it's a pretty rare gift for humans. When it comes to nonhumans, though, the list is a mile long. Kitsune can all shift from human form to that of a fox at will, and some of the older ones go far beyond that. Higher-ranking tengu can pass for human. So can most jötnar, and a few of them have other shapes, most of which are predatory in nature. I don't know for sure whether vampires can or not, but it's a common enough part of the mythos that I wouldn't feel comfortable ruling it out.

Then again, if you attribute every power to vampires that's ascribed to them in various myths, it becomes rather difficult to understand why they aren't ruling the world outright.

In any case, I've always felt that even a cursory examination of all these myths reveals a profound injustice in the universe. Of all the shapechangers in the world, werewolves are the most famous. You talk to somebody about therianthropic metamorphosis and (on the off chance they understand you) they think werewolves. They dominate the field so thoroughly that people use "lycanthrope" to refer to any kind of shapechanging, when the word pretty much literally means wolf-man.

And yet, out of all the shapechangers I've encountered, werewolves have by far the shittiest transformation process.

Most of the people who change from one form to another do so painlessly. Aiko takes less time to turn from fox to human or back than she does to blink, and the only sensation involved is a mild, almost pleasant tingling, a bit like the pins-and-needles of a limb that hasn't quite fallen asleep. (Don't ask how I know that. Seriously, don't.) All of the housecarls can melt from human to giant so smoothly

that you don't even notice it at the time. Hell, even Kris can turn into a hawk fast enough to get all the lift she needs to take off from jumping as a human.

Werewolves, on the other hand, get to experience the joys of bones breaking, muscles tearing, and skin ripping, before it all comes back together and heals in a different form. The process is painful, frequently messy (blood is pretty common, and urine is involved more often than anyone wants to admit), and extremely unsettling to witness. Not everyone throws up the first time they see a werewolf change, but it's a common enough reaction that nobody's surprised if you do.

Oh, and just to add that little bit of spice, the process takes anywhere from five to thirty minutes. Generally speaking the more practice you've had, the faster you go through it. Experienced werewolves average somewhere around ten minutes, and they can make it faster if they want to. They have to *really* want to, though, because accelerating the change like that takes it from extremely unpleasant to outright excruciating.

I was experienced, and I was in a serious rush. "Excruciating" just wasn't all that scary for me, anyway. When you've actually *been* crucified, it takes a lot to make you flinch.

I gave myself a couple of minutes, on the other end, to recover, and then heaved myself to my feet. My knees made an unpleasant sound as I did, somewhere between a crunch and a squelch, as the last of the cartilage clicked into place, and a sharp jolt of pain went through my legs. The joints are always the worst part of the change, at least for me. I've talked to werewolves who don't have any trouble with them, but for some reason the bones in my legs tend not to articulate quite right until I put weight on them.

I took a few slow, cautious steps, giving myself plenty of time to adjust. I spend a lot more time on two legs than four, and it always takes a bit to get used to it again. As I paced I caught a glimpse of myself in the small stream running through the spot of forest where the tengu had dumped me, and had to chuckle internally. The image of a werewolf delicately mincing around with a bunch of rings hanging off of his leather collar was too amusing to pass up on.

Granted, it did not make me look cute or adorable. I look a little less creepy as a wolf than a human, unlike most werewolves, but that isn't saying all that much. At two hundred pounds and small change I made any actual wolf look pretty small, and I had claws that could slice open a grizzly in one stroke. Add in dark grey fur and vivid amber eyes, and I look almost as scary as Snowflake. It probably doesn't help that, like Snowflake, I wear the marks of violence openly on my body. I was missing a couple of teeth and I had scars across a good portion of my skin. Better yet was the deep stab wound pouring blood all over one thigh.

Wait a second. I hadn't been stabbed recently. I mean, that seemed like the sort of thing I'd remember, and I should have been able to feel it.

I blinked several times, and looked at myself both in and out of the water. It was no use. I didn't see any evidence of a wound, and I didn't smell blood. On the other hand, I also couldn't convince myself I hadn't seen it, which pretty much just left the conclusion that I was going nuts.

That wasn't a comfortable thought. I've done crazy. I don't want to do it again.

On the other hand, this really wasn't the time to deal with it. So I shrugged and walked over to my bundle of armor. It took a little bit of finagling, but I eventually got it onto my back and convinced my cloak to tie itself on. I could have just held it in my mouth, of course, but this was much more convenient. It didn't throw my balance off, and it left my teeth free for anyone stupid enough to get in my way.

I checked that everything was stable, and then I took off.

A werewolf can really haul ass when he's motivated.

As a human, I'm roughly on a par with a decent sprinter. As a wolf I'm quite a bit beyond that. On familiar ground, I estimated that my top speed was somewhere in the vicinity of fifty miles per hour. Obviously I wasn't going that fast the whole time—there are these things called trees—but it was still a pretty damn quick trip.

Of course, I lost most of that time on the other end. A huge, scary looking canid attracts a little too much of the wrong sort of attention in the city, so I had to change back when I reached the edge of the forest. But I'd still cut off quite a bit of time. It took me about ten minutes for both changes and another ten minutes to actually run through the forest, so I was moving almost as fast as if I'd gone through the Otherside.

But it still took time, and I resented every minute wasted right now. Plus, once I was done with that, I still had to drive back into the city, which ate up more time. All told it was getting close to noon when I parked the car at Pryce's and walked the rest of the way to the mansion.

"Hey, Wolf," a familiar voice called from across the street as I started to open the door. I turned and saw a similarly familiar face.

Jackal hadn't changed much. She looked like a girl in her late teens or early twenties, dressed in the castoffs from a used-clothing store. Her features were harsh and sharp, almost emaciated, with eyes the color of long-cold ashes.

She was currently flanked by two people whose attitudes made it very clear that they were present as minions. One of them, a rawboned guy who looked like he was about sixteen, I knew. His name was Wishbone, or at least that was what he preferred to be called. I don't think any of Jackal's gang uses their real names—if they even *have* names; I'm honestly not sure.

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I might have pegged the other guy as being as old as twenty-five, if he hadn't been with Jackal. He didn't fit in with the others. Jackal looked and smelled like she slept in doorways, and Wishbone would fit in quite well with a group of Goths. The new guy, by contrast, would fit in quite well with a group of professional athletes. He was better than six feet tall, and I was guessing he could lift me off the ground with one arm. He had very dark skin and startlingly green eyes, and his bald scalp was so shiny I wondered if he polished it.

More than anything, though, what distinguished them from each other was their respective attitudes. Jackal carried herself like a starved rat, all quick movements and furtive glances. You got the impression that she was ready at any second to run, and if you cornered her she'd bite. Wishbone, on the other hand, was perpetually hunched as though anticipating a blow. He looked out at the world with the thousand-yard stare of someone who'd seen more shit than anyone should have to, and had long since abandoned any hope of a merciful God.

It would be hard to find someone more diametrically opposed in attitude than the third guy with them. He had the air of someone accustomed to getting his own way. I got the distinct impression, looking at him, that he would never fumble a catch or stumble on his own feet, and in a disaster people would naturally look to him for leadership. The dude had an aura of confidence so thick I could smell it.

"I don't know you," I said, staring at the huge guy. I didn't even pretend it was a friendly stare.

He smiled, his teeth startlingly white against his dark skin. There were quite a few missing. "I'm Moose," he said, his voice surprisingly high. He didn't sound like he'd been breathing helium or anything like that, but you would expect a guy built like that to sound like a bass drum, and Moose was closer to a snare.

"What you want, Wolf?" Jackal rasped before I could reply. As usual, she sounded like there was something seriously wrong with her vocal cords.

"You owe me a favor," I said bluntly.

She narrowed her eyes and nodded once, sharply. "You calling it in?"

I sighed. "Yeah."

She grunted. "Shit."

And that's what I like about dealing with Jackal. Sure, she's a vicious thug and her gang had tried to kill me in the past over an extremely stupid misunderstanding. But at least I didn't have to worry about political niceties with her crew.

"I haven't even told you what it is yet," I pointed out. "It seems a little rude to be complaining already."

Jackal snorted. "You're trouble, Wolf. You're calling in favors, that means you're in deep shit, and when you get into shit there's enough to go around." She glared at me. "I don't got all day, Wolf. Spit it out or move on."

"Gosh thanks," I said sourly. "I want your help with an investigation. Information only."

"Who?"

"If I knew that," I said dryly, "I wouldn't be calling in favors, would I?" I shrugged. "Someone's been summoning a monster into town. I want anything you can dig up on it. Preferably who's responsible, but any info on location, motive, pretty much anything you can get me will help."

"Vague much?" she asked.

"Trust me, I know just how you feel."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. You got anything on what this 'monster' is?"

"Suffice to say," I said carefully, "that I know what it is, and you don't want to. If you think *I'm* trouble, you don't even want to touch that topic."

"Great. I'm guessing there's a deadline involved?"

"Good guess. You have until Tuesday night. If this isn't resolved by then, I recommend you get out of town and hide somewhere far away until things settle out." Technically Loki had given me until dawn on Wednesday, but I had no intention of waiting that long. I figured that if I hadn't come up with an answer by Tuesday, I'd better just start running, and hope that he didn't decide to hunt me down.

"Fine," Jackal said after a moment. "We're even after this, Wolf." She turned and left without another word, followed closely by her minions. I noted with some amusement that Wishbone hadn't said anything the entire time, and Moose had only spoken to introduce himself. Jackal might not be the most visually impressive person I'd seen, but her gang obeyed her without question.

Not that I could really blame them for that. I'd seen Jackal in action. She fought like a stray cat—lots of hissing and sharp pointy things, without a moment's hesitation. I was pretty sure I could beat her in a straight-up fight, but I wouldn't walk away unscathed.

I didn't really expect her people to be much use. They had zilch in the way of local contacts, and from what I'd seen of their operation they had the investigative competence of a retarded ferret. But their help was cheap, and at this point I was getting desperate enough to take what I could get.

"Took you long enough," Aiko said when I walked in. She was sitting on the floor of the entryway playing cho-han with the werewolves. If you've never played cho-han, don't. It's a Japanese dice game intended primarily for people who think roulette affords too much opportunity to control your fate and use cunning stratagems. The basic idea is that one person rolls a pair of dice, and then you bet on

whether the total is odd or even. The only thing cho-han is good for is losing a great deal of money very quickly. (It's possible to win a great deal of money very quickly instead, but if you do the Yakuza sitting next to you will probably remove several of your fingers for cheating.)

Needless to say, Aiko enjoys it a great deal. Kyra and Anna both appeared to be down a fair chunk of change, probably because Aiko cheats. I've never gotten entirely clear on all the *ways* she cheats, but it's usually a safe bet that any game she's playing is rigged.

"You could have left," I pointed out. "I'm sure you could come up with something to do."

She snorted. "Sh'yeah, right. And what would you have done when we weren't here when you got back?"

"I probably would have done something rash and violent," I admitted.

"Thought so," Aiko said. She lifted the dice cup and grinned. "Four. Pay up."

Kyra shook her head and pushed a stack of chips over. "Those dice have come up even five times in a row," she grumbled.

"They're *your* dice," the kitsune pointed out. "So what's the word? The birdbrains willing to talk?"

"Kikuchi agreed to help, very reluctantly, on the condition that we put up with one of his people breathing down our necks. And then he dumped me in the forest on the other side of the mountain."

"How typically tengu of him. So what took so long?"

"I had to run back here," I said sourly.

"No offense or anything," Anna said, "but that was fairly obvious. You reek."

Aiko pursed her lips. "Yeah, he does smell a bit yiff, doesn't he?"

Anna started giggling. Kyra looked confused. "Don't you mean whiff?"

Aiko snorted. "No. No I don't."

Kyra looked back and forth between them and sighed. "I don't want to know, do I?"

"No," Anna said, still laughing. "No, you *really* don't."

And thus the battered corpse of my dignity took another boot to the face. "I'm going to go take a shower," I said. "Let me know if anyone tries to blow the building up or something."

Timing is a funny thing. When you're trying to arrange it, setting up intricate timing is impossible. The logistics of something as simple as a bake sale are mind-bogglingly difficult. Trying to coordinate a major assault requires hundreds of people working overtime, and the result is still a haphazard mess of garbled orders, confused mistakes, and people getting in each other's way.

And yet, somehow, when a random accident happens, it *always* manages to happen at, like, the worst possible time. It's practically a law of the universe. It's irritating as hell, but also strangely liberating. When you recognize the pattern, you don't have to be surprised anymore. That takes a lot of the sting out of it.

It also means that you don't waste much time when it happens. In a lot of ways, that's why I'm still alive. It's not that I'm spectacularly good at surviving the worst-case scenario. It's that I go to ridiculous lengths to ensure that the worst-case scenario isn't *that* bad, and when it happens I don't lose any time. Sometimes, when things go to shit, it's more important to act *fast* than to act *right*.

And that's how I found myself standing on the staircase, mostly naked and dripping wet, while I watched the single most terrifying...*thing* I'd ever seen go to town.

It's sort of hard to describe. There's no real biological analogue for what it looked like. It was maybe eight feet tall and vaguely spherical, but even that was hard to pin down—it swelled and contracted constantly, in all directions, seemingly at random. Visually, the closest analogue I can think of is a jellyfish. It had the same fluid, amorphous shape, but lacked even that much of a central organization. It was constantly extruding new limbs and retracting old ones, but the number seemed to stay relatively stable at around twenty. Each of them was relatively short, no more than three feet or so, and mostly they were coiled up near the center of it.

Of course, that still left it with half a dozen three foot long tentacles, which was a bit of a daunting proposition in a fight.

Not that I was planning on fighting it, because there was one more, very important characteristic I noticed about the thing. Namely, the entire thing was black. Not dark-skinned black, or even ink-black. No, this was the blackness of a cloudy night without a moon, of the cold and infinite void between the stars, a blackness so deep your eyes couldn't focus on it.

The same blackness, in other words, that I saw every time I looked in a portal to the Otherside. The exact same blackness that Coyote had shown us, lacking only the mad swirls of light.

Everywhere its tentacles passed, they left streaks of that same no-color. Even in the middle of the air. And those streaks were spreading, rapidly.

Well, that settled it. This was definitely the thing that I was supposed to be dealing with, and that meant that staying here was suicide. I'm occasionally rash, no doubt about it, but sooner or later even I recognize that something's a dumb idea. This was one of them. No, the only way to deal with this was to run away.

Of course, it was between me and the door. That created some issues.

I'd moved fast, and it had only been a few seconds since it busted in the front door. It didn't appear to be moving very quickly—not even at a fast walk—which left me a couple of seconds before it advanced far enough into the room to cut me off from the rest of the building. That doesn't sound like much, because it isn't, but it was enough for me to consider my next course of action.

Priority one was getting out of the building. It would probably still chase us, but there were a lot fewer obstacles outside, and we could obtain a vehicle. We had a much better chance of evading it outside. And if not, well, there wasn't jack shit I could do about it anyway, so might as well ignore that possibility.

That meant that the first thing I had to do was find everyone else. Assuming no one had left the building, there were six of us in here—Aiko, Snowflake, Alexis, the two werewolves, and me. All of them would presumably have heard this thing crash through the door, but none of them were in sight, so I had to presume that they didn't yet realize the danger.

I hopped the railing and fell to the ground, maybe fifteen feet from the monster. I'd decided to try the kitchen first—that was usually a good bet to find Alexis, and everyone else might be in there with her. Failing that, it had access to the garden, which was the closest thing to open space in the mansion. If there was anywhere I could evade it, it would be in the garden. I didn't think I would be able to outwait the thing—the way those streaks of blackness had been spreading worried the hell out of me—but every little bit helped.

That decision made, I promptly took off at a sprint for the kitchen door. Then I just as promptly fell on my ass when my wet feet slipped on the marble floor.

The good news is that I managed to scramble back to my feet with ten feet left between me and the monster.

The bad news is that, as it turns out, those tentacles could stretch.

I never saw it coming. My back was turned, and all my attention was on legging it. I was brought up short, though, when I felt something wrap around my left forearm. It was *cold*, so bitterly cold that it instantly started aching. I would have expected it to be slimy, but it was instead totally dry—which, somehow, made it feel even worse, almost reptilian.

I didn't even think, just wrenched my arm away. There was almost no resistance; my arm slid through the coils without pausing, and I yanked my hand out without difficulty. I staggered a little, expecting more of a fight, and then kept moving. My left arm was numb from the elbow down, from the cold or something else, but I could run and that was what was important right now.

I didn't slip again, fortunately, and made it to the kitchen without being caught by another tentacle. I slammed the door shut behind myself—I didn't expect it to do much good but, at this point, I'd have tried pretty much anything—and then turned to survey the scene.

Alexis was in the kitchen, as I'd hoped, as was Snowflake. They were both clearly aware that shit was going down. My cousin had grabbed her staff and the husky was pacing back and forth, baring her steel teeth and growling.

They were also both staring at me with evident surprise. This may be because it isn't every day a panicky guy wearing nothing but a largely insubstantial cloak and carrying a sword runs into the room, slams the door, and looks around frantically. But hey, maybe that's just been my experience.

"Where are the others?" I demanded before either of them could ask what the hell was going on.

The armory, Snowflake said immediately. Aiko was getting ready to go. Kyra and Anna went with her.

Shit. The armory was in the basement, which meant that getting back out was likely to be difficult or impossible. It also meant that getting there in the first place was going to be difficult, since the monster must have advanced past the stairs by now.

None of which mattered. I wasn't leaving them here. That wasn't an option.

Besides, nothing we did at this point could really make the odds longer in any meaningful way. At least this way we'd all get to die together in one big, heartwarmingly sentimental scene.

Fortunately, I plan ahead. I'd always known that having only two spiral staircases, both near the entrance, was a potentially very dangerous feature. I couldn't actually *do* anything about it, granted, but that wasn't as important as you might think. Somehow, and I can't pretend to understand this, when there was a feature I wanted, the mansion always seemed to add it. I'm not sure what the story was with that. Honestly, there were so many kinds of crazy weird magic shit involved in that mansion, I didn't even try to pretend to understand what was going on with it.

"Come on," I shouted, running out through the kitchen into the garden. I didn't really need to shout—whatever the thing was doing, it didn't seem to make much noise—but there are some moments where talking in a normal tone of voice just doesn't feel right.

They followed closely on my heels. Well, honestly, the only reason they were still behind me was that they weren't sure where we were going. Snowflake is way faster than I am, and Alexis is in pretty good shape. Ordinarily I would still have been a lot faster than my cousin, but I was still barefoot.

"What's going on?" Alexis shouted. Well, at least I wasn't the only one.

"Just run!" I said, turning down a narrow side path. It wasn't *hidden*, exactly, but the opening was between a dense hedge and a row of cypresses, and it was really easy to overlook if you didn't know it was there. I ran down that, miraculously managing not to sprain my ankle in a ridiculously embarrassing way, until I spotted a thin spot in the hedge.

Again, it wasn't much. It looked almost exactly the same as the rest of the hedge, but if you pulled the surface layers away there was an archway. Normally I gently tugged the floral curtain away, slipped through, and made sure it was back in place behind me. Currently I wasn't in the mood, so instead I slashed through the center of it with Tyrfing and then just barged through. It was a lot faster, albeit painful and awkward—those hedges were nasty, and I took some scratches in places that *really* weren't meant to be scratched.

If I got really lucky, I might have a chance to be annoyed by that.

On the other side was a tiny clearing, barely big enough for a half-dozen friendly people to stand in. The only feature was a massive trapdoor. It looked like something out of an extremely low-budget fantasy movie, a slab of stone the size and shape of a seven foot door. It was glossy black and unmarked, except for a stylized snowflake design in the center of the door in what looked like mercury.

The mansion also has something of a flair for the dramatic.

You would expect a piece of stone that size to weigh a ton, and if it were really stone I expect that it would. It had a density closer to pine, though, and I grabbed the steel ring with my right hand and threw it open easily. This revealed a narrow, pitch-black staircase lined with expertly cut stone. I threw myself down it without hesitation. Alexis and Snowflake, who were starting to pick up on how extreme my urgency was by now, followed at a brisk pace.

I did manage to outpace them on the stairs. Unfortunately, that was only because my feet went out from under me again and I mostly ended up bouncing down them. I didn't break anything, but I picked up a few more bruises, and I was pretty sure I'd sprained my right wrist. Between that and the numbness I was still feeling in my left arm, it was going to be inconvenient if I had to do anything precise with my hands in the near future.

This was getting ridiculous. It was a good thing I wasn't planning on fighting the monster, because at the rate I was going I'd be crippled by the time I saw it again. How was it possible for someone to be an absolute badass capable of cutting through hordes of minions, and yet almost get taken out running around the house?

Pushing such thoughts from my head with only minor difficulty, I got to my feet and opened the door at the bottom of the staircase, a much more normal door than the one at the top. It opened up into my laboratory, a large, plain room that was all white marble and stainless steel. It was probably ridiculously expensive, but it always reminded me more of a high-class bathroom than anything.

I have no idea how that works. I mean, I measured it all out once, and by all rights the bottom of the staircase should be about fifty feet out into the garden. The lab wasn't even close to it. Linear distances just aren't all that reliable on the Otherside.

"Winter," Alexis panted as she stepped through the doorway, herded by an extremely impatient Snowflake. The husky had probably picked up most of what was happening from my mind, and she was at least as panicky as I was. "Hold up a second."

"There's no *time*," I said. I was also breathing a little hard, although not nearly as much so as my cousin. I've always gotten more in the way of endurance than anything from the werewolf schtick.

"Don't you at least want to get Legion?" she asked. "If things are all that bad, you know."

Oh. Right. That was a good point. I had a ton of valuable stuff in this lab, some of which was absurdly expensive, but ultimately it was all replaceable. Legion wasn't. The demon wasn't a friend, exactly, but he'd gotten me out of some nasty scrapes and to abandon him now would be a foolish waste of resources. Also, somewhat unethical. He might be a bastard, but that was a bit much.

I ran over and grabbed the skeleton Legion used as a vessel. He was capable of movement—hell, when he got going none of us could keep up with him—but it took him a couple of minutes to wake up and that was time we didn't have. So for now I just tossed the skeleton over my shoulder and kept moving.

Uh, Winter? Snowflake said. She sounded afraid, which was pretty unsettling; Snowflake's smart enough to be scared of a lot of stuff, but usually she masks it with bravado. *The walls are...bending. Is this supposed to happen?*

I looked at the walls. They were bending. I can't really explain it, and even looking at it gave me an instant headache. It was a bit like at a stereoscopic image that wasn't quite aligned right, or a really freaky optical illusion. When I looked at any point on the wall, everything was linear and where it should be. But out of the corner of my eye, they looked stretched and warped, like they were flirting with non-Euclidean geometries.

The scary part was that, once I saw it, I realized that it wasn't just the walls. It was easiest to see on the walls, but that was just because they were large enough for the subtle effect to show up. Once I knew what to look for, I saw it in everything in the room, like the space in the room was being twisted.

"Oh fuck," I said. "Run!"

The laboratory was a large room. I took about five seconds to cross it. As I was turning the handle on the door, there was a large crash behind me—the sort of sound you might hear if, for instance, a large slab of something that wasn't really stone had just broken through a sturdy wooden door and shattered on a marble floor.

Needless to say, I didn't turn around to see if that was really what it was. The monster shouldn't have been able to fit down the staircase, but I had no faith that it would be limited by that. Hell, it could probably just carve a tunnel down through the ground.

The hallway between the lab and the armory was less than twenty feet long. The warped space must have been getting worse, though, because after ten seconds of sprinting I was less than halfway across. Alexis and Snowflake both passed me easily, not even seeming to see me on their way by. Then, between one step and the next, I started moving so fast that I crossed the other half of the hall and slammed face first into the door on the other end.

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It turns out ramming a bronze doorknob into your abdomen at high speed and then breaking your nose on a hardwood door hurts a little bit. In combination with my numerous cuts and bruises, sprained wrist, and numb arm, I was really starting to feel a little bit upset. Even for me, this streak of bad luck was getting absurd.

I reached for the doorknob, and only then realized that I was still carrying Tyrfin, and it wasn't sheathed. No wonder I was breaking myself into bits here. Hell, the only surprising thing was that I hadn't stabbed myself falling down the stairs.

Under other circumstances, I probably would have felt embarrassed at having made such a stupid mistake. Fortunately, I was currently a little bit too busy with raw panic, so I just sheathed the sword and opened the door. The weird space-twisting shenanigans seemed to have balanced out, and I ended up walking through about two steps in front of the others.

Kyra was standing directly on the other side pointing a shotgun at the door. That was an entirely intelligent thing to do, and frankly in the event of a home invasion by an unknown force it was probably the smartest choice she could have made.

I just wish she hadn't pulled the trigger when I opened the door.

Kyra isn't really all that great with guns in general, and I might have hoped that her terrible aim would have worked in my favor for once. This being my day for shitty luck, that didn't happen. I took most of a load of buckshot to the left side of my torso and arm.

It hurt.

"Winter?" Kyra said. "Oh, shit. What did I just do?"

I staggered into the room and started to fall. Aiko, who was standing just inside decked out in full armor, caught me and lowered me slowly to the floor. "How bad is it?" she asked urgently, as Snowflake and Alexis moved inside. Neither of them seemed quite sure what had just happened.

"Ow," I whispered. "Run."

"Is it the thing Coyote was talking about?" she asked. Her voice sounded strange, parts pitched high and parts low. It sounded slightly out of sync with itself, like listening to the same song twice at once with one iteration a beat ahead of the other.

"Yes. *Run.*"

"Oh, shit," she breathed. For a second the kitsune looked scared, terribly overwhelmed and out of her depth.

Then something frightening happened. She stood up, a mad devil-may-care grin on her face. I'd seen that expression before, and it never boded well. "Fuck it," she said. "I can't really make this *worse*,

can I?" She looked at my cousin, who was standing by the door looking stunned. "Shut the door," she barked. Alexis jumped, then obeyed.

Aiko walked around the room, muttering to herself. She tugged one gauntlet off and tossed it carelessly to the ground, and drew her tanto with her other hand. A quick movement later and she was bleeding freely from a shallow cut along the back of her hand, still muttering in what sounded like Japanese. Or whatever version thereof kitsune use, anyway; Aiko actively avoids any kind of discussion about her species, but I'm pretty sure they don't speak modern Japanese.

As she moved I felt the magic she was working. It was *big*, easily the most power I'd ever seen her use by an order of magnitude, and smelled so strongly of fox and spice that it overwhelmed the scent of blood.

I had no idea what she was doing. It felt almost like opening an Otherside portal, but bigger, deeper, vastly more complex and not nearly as localized. I wouldn't have had a prayer of pulling something like that off, but Aiko was a lot more comfortable with that sort of thing.

I also noticed something strange. I could feel, now that I was pretty much obligated to calm down and stop running around like a chicken with its head cut off, what the presence of Coyote's god-level abomination was doing to the fabric of space. Actually, that isn't quite right; I'd noticed it warping space, but now that I had a chance to actually think about it I was pretty sure that was just a symptom of a larger thing going on. I thought that it was doing something on a basic level to the Otherside domain that housed this mansion.

Now that I thought about it, that made a lot of sense. If what Coyote had said was true, this thing was pretty much an embodiment of entropy. Between that and the streaks of chaos that it had left in its wake, I was starting to suspect that it was breaking down the orderly rules which set this domain apart from the chaos which Coyote had implied it was made from. It only made sense that that would bring with it a collapse in the rules governing the spatial relation of objects.

Whatever, the point is that I could feel it, in some way that I couldn't quite define but was absolutely sure of. And I could feel how that instability was feeding into whatever Aiko was doing. I wasn't sure whether it was intentional, but I could tell that whatever the thing was doing to the world, it was amplifying the effects of her magic. Whatever that was supposed to do.

I hate not understanding what's going on.

Maybe ten seconds after she started, her spell came to a crescendo. It wasn't that much stronger than what she'd been doing, but it seemed to trigger another release of power, one that was vastly greater than anything I'd been anticipating. It washed over me with all the irresistibility of the tides, and brought a curtain of blackness in its wake.

Night-night.

Chapter Seven

I usually wake up fairly quickly, likely as a side-effect of the paranoia engrained by repeated assassination attempts. But this time, it was a slow, drawn-out process. It felt like I was pulling layers and layers of cobwebs off of my brain, until finally the last one came free and everything snapped into focus and I opened my eyes.

I was floating in the middle of complete emptiness. There was nothing but white in all directions, stretching off into the distance. I felt vaguely weightless, as though I were floating in a pool of warm water. There was no surface under my feet, and even the concepts of "up" and "down" didn't seem to apply. In the absence of noticeable gravity, forward was just whatever direction I happened to be facing.

It was very quiet, very soothing. The light, which had no discernable source, was a little bit too bright, but not painful. The only scent I could detect was a slight odor of wolf and ice, not unlike my own magic.

I floated there in the light for a few minutes, not thinking of anything in particular. It felt strangely restful here. I became aware, in that dreamlike way where you realize that you knew something all along, that I couldn't feel any of the injuries I'd sustained trying to escape from the mansion. I was dressed in loose, comfortable clothing, with my cloak of shadows wrapped around me like a shroud. It was the only thing in sight that wasn't white.

An indefinable length of time later, I heard the first sound other than my own heartbeat since I'd woken up. It was a sort of tapping noise, perfectly regular, coming from behind me. It took a few seconds to recognize it as approaching footsteps. I wasn't sure how to turn and couldn't work up the motivation to try, so I just waited as the noise approached. Somehow I was sure that there was nothing to be afraid of in this place.

There was no real transition between that and seeing the source of the noise in front of me. It was Loki, of course, back in what I thought of as his usual form, of a tall, blond Nordic man. He turned to face me and I saw that his eyes were whirling chaos in orange and emerald, like a wildfire in a bottle. He was dressed all in dusty black, wearing a single gold ring and a sprig of mistletoe pinned to his shirt. He nodded in my direction. "Good morning, Winter," he said. There was no trace of humor about him.

"Loki," I said. "Am I dead?"

He snorted. "Death is a flexible concept," he said. "Even your doctors recognize that. So by some definitions, yes, you died back there. But in any meaningful sense? No, in spite of your best efforts, you're still alive."

"Oh. So what's with...." I gestured vaguely at my surroundings. "This."

He shrugged. "You aren't really awake. This was simpler than actually making a setting for our conversation."

Lovely. It wasn't good enough that Loki's bullshit had taken over my life, now he had to invade my dreams too. Just *lovely*.

The god leaned back and crossed his feet as though leaning against a wall. Predictably, the empty space proved quite happy to hold him up, in defiance of all logic. "Coyote told you," he said. It wasn't a question.

I didn't bother pretending confusion. "Yeah," I said. "How did you know?"

"It wasn't difficult," Loki said dryly. He sighed. "That dog will be the death of me. Cunning, but he's always been impatient. I can't tell you how many of my plans he's disrupted."

"I don't get it. Why didn't you want me to know what was going on?"

"Did you in any way need to know that to do your job?" he asked me.

"Well, no—"

"Does it in any way help you to find the entity you're looking for, or do anything about it if you find it?"

"No," I admitted.

"That's why. Wasting time I don't have explaining secrets you don't need to know about topics you can't understand doesn't strike me as particularly worthwhile."

"I guess that makes sense."

He rolled his eyes, the motion adding a new spin to the whirling colors within. "Thank you. Truly, I don't know how I could cope without your approval." He gestured sharply. "Enough. What progress have you made?"

"Little," I admitted. "I've got a bunch of people looking, but as far as I know none of them have come up with anything."

"You haven't narrowed your pool at all?" Loki asked.

"Not yet."

He looked displeased. "You're running low on time to still be saying that," he said warningly.

"It's only been one day," I protested. "Besides, I at least know I'm on the right track."

"How so?"

I shrugged. "They bothered to send their überdemon after me. From what Coyote said, it doesn't sound like they'd do that without a reason, which means they must think I pose some sort of threat."

"That's reasonable," he admitted after a moment. "Although not necessarily true. You're currently a symbol of order and authority in the city. Anyone wanting to destabilize the area could do worse than removing you."

"Oh. Good point." I hadn't thought of that angle at all, probably because I didn't think of myself as an authority figure.

"In any case," Loki said, turning and walking away from me, "it sounds like you have things in hand. You know the stakes now, so I don't expect I need to remind you of the urgency involved." He raised one hand and snapped his fingers casually, and the world went black again.

The next time I woke up was a little more like what I'd been expecting. Which is to say, it hurt. A lot. I couldn't really pick out specific pains to focus on; there were just too many to choose from. I opened my eyes and tried to sit up, and immediately regretted doing so.

"You're awake," Kyra said. It sounded like she was somewhere in front of me. I couldn't see her—or much anything else aside from the ceiling, really. I was lying on my back, with my head pillowed on something soft.

"Yeah. What happened?" Talking hurt more than I'd expected, mostly in my abdomen.

"Hell if I know," the werewolf said. "Aiko did her thing, and then you guys all passed out. The dog said it was some sort of magic backlash or something. Anna was awake for a while, but she's sleeping now."

"How long ago was this?"

"Nine, ten hours?" she guessed. "Long enough to start going stir-crazy. I tried to get a look around, but the doors won't open."

"I've been out *ten hours*?"

"Yep. Did you know your dog cheats at cards?" Kyra sounded rather impressed by that. "I'm not sure how. I mean, I'm the one shuffling. How is she cheating?"

I chuckled. It hurt. "She's been taking lessons from Aiko." A moment later, I finally asked the question I'd been dreading. "How bad off am I?"

There was a short, ominous silence. "Pretty bad," Kyra said at last. "You took most of the shot to the chest. I'm really sorry about that, by the way. Shit was getting weird and I had no idea what was going on, and I panicked."

"S'okay," I mumbled. "It was the smart thing to do."

She cleared her throat. "Right, well. There was one pellet in your shoulder and one in your abdomen. They were both pretty shallow, so I dug them out and disinfected them." Usually that was a really bad idea—most people actually heal *better* if you don't get the bullet out of them—but I'd had so many encounters with bullets and assorted bits of shrapnel that if I left all of it in I'd rattle. I didn't really need to worry about it making infection more likely, or worsening the damage a little. "A couple hit you in the arm, too," Kyra continued. "But they went straight through." She shrugged. "Not that those'll really matter, on top of everything else."

"Um. On top of what else, exactly?"

There was another ominous pause. "You don't remember that?"

I was starting to get a sick little feeling in my stomach. "Remember what?"

"Okay," she said after another pause. "This is, like...wow. Don't freak out on me, okay? Hang on a second." She stepped into my view a moment later, looming over me with a worried expression on her face.

She picked me up, very delicately, and rearranged me so that I was leaning against the wall, propped up on a pile of blankets. We kept a ton of them in the armory, along with a bunch of sleeping bags and cold-weather gear. Not for any particular reason; I'm just obsessive about disaster prep.

If you've ever tried to do something like that, you can appreciate what a statement that was about how strong Kyra was. It's actually pretty hard to move someone around when they aren't capable of cooperating. It didn't strain her in the least. Lycanthropy has its perks. She'd always gotten more in the way of raw strength out of the deal than I did.

At that point I got my first good look at myself since I'd woken up. I didn't look so good. My torso was covered in blood. It would probably have made me look like a badass, except that it was mostly dried already and as a result, rather than terrifying war paint, it just looked like sticky, vaguely unsavory brown stuff. What wasn't bloody was bruised, a delightful mottling of purples and greens, with narrow red lines crisscrossing it from the thorns of the hedge.

It wasn't a good sign that I was still covered in bruises and scratches. Ordinarily, I should have been able to heal those almost completely in ten hours. The fact that I hadn't meant that my body had bigger fish to fry, and had chosen to leave the cosmetic injuries alone until more serious problems were dealt with.

I could see all this because I was naked. My cloak was what I'd been using as a pillow, and it would have been extremely foolish to try and put anything else on me, given that I was injured and unconscious. Kyra didn't seem to care, in any case. That might have been because she was so absolutely focused on the crisis in front of us, but probably had more to do with the fact that she wasn't even slightly attracted to men.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

All of which was pretty much just background noise in my head, because I also saw something much more important. Namely, my left arm looked like something out of a horror film.

From the elbow down, most of my skin was missing. There were patches left, tattered and ragged, but they served only to emphasize the raw redness of the exposed flesh. What skin remained looked pale and stiff, almost waxy. The muscle had been eaten away in places, deep enough that I could see white bone through the fibers.

More than slightly afraid, I looked down my arm at my left hand.

I didn't have much of one anymore. My smallest finger was completely gone, and the ring finger ended just after the second knuckle. The other side of my hand hadn't been affected quite as badly, but I was still missing a chunk of the thumb, and the tip of my index finger had been lopped off neatly just behind the nail. The skin had been peeled from my hand entirely, and I could see bones and tendons through the muscles.

I was suddenly very glad that my arm was still numb.

"Wow," I said, feeling more than slightly ill. I was accustomed to pain and I'd taken a hell of a lot of damage over the years, but this was a new level for me. "How'd that happen?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," she said. "It was like that when you walked in."

"I guess it was when that thing grabbed me," I said, staring at the bone peeking through the shreds of muscle in my forearm. It was nauseating, but in a distant, disconnected way. I couldn't seem to grasp, on a visceral level, that it belonged to *me*. "Why isn't it bleeding?"

"I think it's frozen," she said, walking back to where she'd been sitting when I woke up. "It feels really cold, and the skin looks frostbitten."

"Huh," I said, reaching over and delicately prodding it with my other hand. Kyra was right; I hadn't noticed it until now, but the tissue felt stiff, like half-frozen meat. Now that I looked at it more closely, I saw that there was actually a fine coating of frost on the remaining skin.

I didn't think that was because of the thing peeling the flesh from my arm. It bore too much resemblance to other times my body had frozen a wound to prevent it from bleeding. Usually unintentionally; I didn't have all that fine of a control over the jotun stuff, and this particular trick definitely came from the frost giant side of my heritage.

Of course, none of those injuries had been anything like as serious or extensive as this. Usually the cold seemed to accelerate my healing, but I wasn't at all sure if that would be the case this time. Half my arm was frozen most of the way to the bone. I'm not a medical professional, but I'm pretty sure that when you get frostbite that deep, it doesn't go well.

"So how do we get out of here?" Kyra asked, sitting down and picking up a hand of cards. Snowflake, who was lounging on the floor nearby, glanced at them and then indicated which one should be discarded. Her lack of opposable thumbs necessitates certain adaptations when playing games.

The husky hadn't said anything since I'd woken up. I could feel her emotions, though, simmering steadily at the back of my mind. There was concern there, and worry, and under that a cold, ferocious rage. Snowflake has even more protective tendencies than I do, and when someone threatens her people she tends to skip straight to the ultraviolence phase of the negotiations.

"I have no clue," I said, leaning back against the blankets. "I don't even know where 'here' is."

"Guess we have to wait for Aiko to wake up, then," Kyra said. She didn't sound particularly surprised. "You want something to eat? The dog showed me a pretty good stash in one of the closets."

"Yeah, please." I wasn't particularly hungry, but I knew it was the smart thing to do. Food would accelerate the healing process.

By the time I finished chugging a can of lukewarm chicken soup, I was starting to feel tired again. Sleep was the other thing that any good werewolf knew was good for healing, so I didn't bother fighting it, just nestled deeper into the mound of blankets and draped a fold of my cloak over my face to block out the light. I fell asleep to the sound of Kyra and Snowflake playing cards.

The next time I woke up, it was a significantly easier process. I still hurt all over, and it was painful to move or breathe, but I felt better than before. The holes in my chest seemed to be mostly healed, and most of the scratches were healing up. I'd also regained some feeling in my left arm, which was more than bad enough to make up for it, but I decided I'd look on the bright side of things.

I pushed myself delicately upright, the cloak falling from my face. Everyone else was awake already, and were sitting in a loose ring in the middle of the room playing poker.

"You awake?" Aiko said when I moved.

"Yeah," I said redundantly. She was sitting facing me, so she pretty obviously knew that I was. "You look like hell." She did, too; I'd seen corpses that didn't look as hard-used as Aiko did right now. She had a naturally narrow face, but at the moment it looked downright gaunt. Her cheeks and eyes were sunken, and her skin had a pale, sallow cast to it. She was propped up on a pile of blankets every bit as substantial as mine.

She snorted. "Said the guy with one arm. It took a little more out of me than I expected."

"What was 'it?'" That had been bothering me since I first woke up. I had absolutely no idea what she'd done to get us away from the world-destroying monster.

"I pulled us out of there. This," she gestured at the walls, "is now the tiniest free-floating domain on the Otherside."

I blinked. "You can do that?" I'd known that it was possible to create an Otherside domain—Alexander had occasionally talked about the mechanics of it—but I wouldn't have guessed Aiko was capable of something like that. It was an incredibly complex bit of magic, and took a hell of a lot of power.

"It took a few months of work." She saw my expression and laughed. "Come on, Winter. You're not the only one who can be prepared. I always figured we'd need an emergency exit at some point."

"Can that thing follow us here?" Kyra asked.

Aiko shrugged. "It shouldn't be possible. A domain like this doesn't have a fixed position. We probably ought to leave anyway, now that you're awake."

"Are you up for that?"

"I'd better be," she said. "I'm not good enough to keep this thing stable for very long." She hesitated. "It might be better if you drive. I don't think I've got enough left in me."

I thought about opening an Otherside portal in my current condition. It didn't sound like much fun. I could probably do it—my exhaustion was mostly physical—but I didn't think any of us would enjoy it much. "I guess," I said doubtfully. "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

"I'll do it," Alexis interjected. I'm not sure who was most surprised by that. I was guessing me—I'd kinda forgotten she was even there, something I had a regrettable tendency to do—but judging by her expression it might have been Alexis herself.

Aiko looked at me, her expression dubious. I shrugged. Alexis had never driven on something like this, but she'd opened portals before, and she knew the theory. "Probably a better idea than either of us doing it," I said.

Alexis took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. I'll start getting ready."

Aiko didn't seem to think we'd be able to get back here once we left, so we took stock before we left. We'd lost a bunch of stuff with the mansion, but there was a small blessing in that we'd brought the armory with us. We were loaded down with guns, knives, and ammo, along with a sack of grenades and magical trinkets. I'd left my armor in the bedroom when I left, but Aiko still had hers, and I had my cloak. I also grabbed Tyrfing; it was as nearly indestructible as a sword could be, but I wasn't sure how it would handle being left in a collapsing Otherside domain. Between that and Legion, most of our really important resources were here.

About half an hour later, we were lined up in front of the door and ready to go. Aiko and I were both less than steady on our feet, but we would at least be able to get through the gate. I hoped so, anyway; the aftermath of being carried through would be unpleasant. Possibly amusing, but unpleasant.

Alexis was standing next to the door, her face set in an expression of intense concentration. A delicate web of magic hung in the air, scented with disinfectant and ozone. The odor of snow, a telltale sign of our shared jotun blood, was barely detectable; had I not known to look for it, I would never have noticed.

It had taken her pretty much all of those thirty minutes to get the portal set up. She'd messed up and had to start over twice, but even if she'd gotten everything right on the first try it would probably have taken a solid twenty minutes. I'm a little bit faster than that and Aiko's faster than me, but the best-case scenario even for her still took at least five or ten minutes. It was a complicated spell.

Finally, a few minutes later, the last of the structure snapped into place. Power rushed into it, fleshing out the skeleton she'd woven, and the portal snapped into place just in front of the doorway. Alexis staggered sideways and leaned heavily against the wall, her fists clenched at her side. She had more in the way of pure magical strength than I did, but holding a portal open was still fairly taxing.

I looked into the oval of pure, all-consuming darkness and shivered. I'd never liked these things, but that had nothing on the dread I felt now. I'd stood in the center of the chaos these things led through, and lost a good chunk of my arm to it. I'd always suspected that this was one of the times that ignorance was truly bliss, and I was right. The idea of walking into that was currently more frightening than facing down a horde of charging monsters.

I was supposed to be the first one through, though. So I set my teeth and shambled forward, bracing myself for what I was confident would be a particularly horrific crossing.

It didn't happen.

Usually my experience of an Otherside crossing is fairly consistent. There's an interval of mind-numbing unpleasantness, something which is simultaneously instantaneous and eternal, as though it transcends our usual definitions of time entirely. I've often tried to explain what it is about the event that's so awful, and never quite gotten there. It's just too alien to normal experience. After that I pass out, and then I wake up a few minutes later on the other end.

This time, I got something much more mundane. I shambled in one end of the portal, barely able to stay standing. Then there was a heartbeat of darkness. Painted in broad, twisting strokes over that were the same vividly colored patterns I'd seen in Coyote's bubble in the heart of chaos.

The next thing I knew I was stepping out the other side. I didn't lose consciousness. I didn't even lose my balance. Hell, I felt a little *better* than when I'd started the crossing.

I stumbled, caught off guard by the strangeness of the experience, and then stepped out of the way. I didn't want to follow up such an unexpectedly pleasant experience with getting run into from behind.

A moment later Aiko stepped out of the portal. It wasn't nearly as dramatic from this end; rather than a hole cut in the fabric of the world, there was just a vague blurriness to the air, not unlike the haze over asphalt on a hot day. It's a lot less noticeable, which occasionally comes in handy. It was still pretty startling to see Aiko suddenly walk out of it, stepping a couple of inches down onto the ground. Her expression of shock looked pretty much the same as I felt.

She looked around, clearly baffled, and then saw me standing upright and conscious. "Did you just see...." She trailed off, clearly not wanting to mention Coyote's top secret bullshit. There was no one in position to hear it, but when a god gives you a nondisclosure agreement backed with a fate-worse-than-death sentence, you take it seriously.

"Yeah," I said. "Move out of the way before they come through."

She did so, standing next to me several feet away from the portal opening. Over the next few seconds the others exited the portal. Kyra and Snowflake came first, followed by Anna. Alexis brought up the rear, the portal fading a few seconds later. In all cases the pattern was the exact same; they walked out, their eyes firmly closed, and took a few shambling steps in a random direction. Then they fell over. It was interesting to watch; they seemed practically comatose, but all of them fell in a carefully controlled way, one they clearly had some control over.

"So do we mention this?" Aiko asked, staring at the various unconscious bodies with an expression of bewilderment.

"The portal thing?" I said. "I dunno. I'm not sure how to explain that without touching on the stuff we aren't supposed to talk about."

"Good point. So you think we just leave it for now?"

I shrugged, wincing slightly. "Yeah, I think that's the best idea. We always wake up first anyway."

"True." She paused, and a moment later she looked at me with a concerned expression. "Uh, Winter? Your arm is bleeding."

"It is?" I looked at it, and saw that there was indeed quite a bit of blood leaking out. "It is. Shit."

"At least it isn't frozen anymore," she pointed out.

"I would have liked for it to wait until we were somewhere a little more convenient than this," I muttered, wrapping my cloak tightly around the wound with an idle thought. It wasn't a great bandage—I hadn't designed it with absorbance in mind—but I'd used it for the purpose before and it would do well enough for the time being. It dumped the contents of my pockets on the ground, but I figured that was preferable to losing any more blood than was strictly necessary.

It took maybe three or four minutes for Snowflake to wake up. She stood up, shook herself once, and then slumped on the ground in mute but eloquent unhappiness.

Under other circumstances, it probably would have been suspicious that Aiko and I weren't suffering similarly. Fortunately, at the moment, we were both in a sorry enough state that I doubted anyone would notice the difference.

A couple of minutes later the others woke up, within about thirty seconds of each other. Alexis promptly vomited at the base of the wall, while Kyra held her head in a manner reminiscent of an extraordinarily bad hangover.

"Could we get this show on the road?" I said quietly.

Kyra still winced, and raised her head just enough to glare at me. "Give me a minute," she muttered darkly. "I feel like my eyes are about to start bleeding."

I cleared my throat. "Yes, well, my arm actually is bleeding. Quite a bit, in fact, and I'd like to get somewhere I can deal with it sooner rather than later."

She looked up, clearly alarmed, and seemed to notice my newly enhanced state of dishabille for the first time. "Aw, shit," she muttered, wincing. She pushed herself to her knees and started grabbing my stuff and shoving it into her backpack. "Fine. You can be a real pain in the neck, you know? Can you walk?"

I pushed myself to my feet. Then I staggered into the wall, tripped over my own feet, and faceplanted in my cousin's stomach acid.

Clearly this was not my day.

"Um," Anna interjected while I was pushing myself back to a seated position. "Did anyone else notice that it's not even sunset yet?"

"Yes," Kyra groaned, her eyes squeezed tightly against the light. "So what?"

"So it was noon when this whole thing started," the other werewolf pointed out. "We were stuck in there for over ten hours. It should be the middle of the night."

Oh, shit. "You get Internet on your phone, right? Can you look up the date?"

There was a brief, ominous pause. "It's Monday," she said after a moment.

"Shit," I muttered. We'd lost three days in there somewhere. It had been the Otherside, of course. There were all sorts of fables about people spending a few days over there and waking up a hundred years later. Fenris had linked the mansion to this world too tightly for those sorts of shenanigans to happen, but whatever Aiko had done to get us out of there had apparently broken the tether. "We need to get moving."

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"Right," Kyra said, casually picking me up and slinging me over one shoulder. "Where to?"

"Get to the car first," I sighed.

A few seconds after we emerged from the alley, Kyra froze. "Wow," she said, forgetting for once to act tough and hard-boiled.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to see what she was looking at. I wasn't terribly successful at this endeavor; this was a more than usually awkward position, and mostly all I got was a really good view of her back.

Rather than answer, she shifted around so that I could see. "Well, shit," I said after a moment.

I'd been pretty confident that the monster I was chasing had been responsible for that trashed apartment building. Now I was completely confident of it, because it had done a similar number on my old lab.

The extent of the destruction wasn't quite as large. None of the other buildings on the street seemed to have been affected. The pavement out front was cracked and broken, but by and large the collateral damage seemed pretty insignificant. Whatever that thing did, it didn't seem to generate any shrapnel, and there hadn't been a car for it to throw this time.

The house it had been after, on the other hand, was pretty much leveled. There was a pile of wreckage, although not as much as you'd expect, but that was all. It was pretty obvious that it would be cheaper to have the lot razed to dirt and rebuild from scratch than try to repair what was left.

"Something tells me we may not be going back there," I said.

Kyra snorted. "You think?" she said dryly, turning and walking in the opposite direction. "We don't want to get spotted by a spectator," she said, more loudly. "This ensemble's suspicious as hell."

"You the boss," Anna said. She sounded rather appallingly cheerful, all things considered. As the other werewolf moved into my line of sight, I saw that Aiko was also getting a ride. Hers looked a lot more comfortable than mine; the kitsune was cradled comfortably in front of Anna, while I was already getting a headache from hanging over Kyra's shoulder. Aiko flashed me a smirk and a rude gesture on the way by.

I sighed. This was so totally not my day. Or days, depending on how you looked at it.

Chapter Eight

"It's a Wal-Mart," Kyra said. She was driving, because allowing either Aiko or me behind the wheel right now would be enough to net you a Darwin Award.

"Yeah, that's right." I couldn't see—Aiko and I were in the cargo area of the SUV, because that was the most comfortable way to make everyone fit—but I'd given Kyra very precise directions.

"What are we doing at a Wal-Mart?" she wondered, parking the car.

"Watch and learn," I said smugly. I love it when I get to keep people in the dark about inconsequential plans. "Oh, and pull around back. I don't feel like walking."

Five minutes later, I was standing in front of the employee entrance while the others made sure no one was looking.

"I don't get it," Alexis said. "Why are we breaking into a Wal-Mart?"

"You're remarkably squeamish about breaking rules," I said, closing the door behind us. It had been locked, but that never really slowed me down much. "Besides, nobody pays attention to those 'Authorized Personnel Only' signs anyway."

"I don't mind breaking rules, I'd just rather there were a reason for it," she said tartly.

I chuckled. "Yeah, well, there is one," I said, leading the way down the maintenance hallway. It was pretty much the same as maintenance hallways everywhere—grey, soulless, and just wide enough to allow a pallet through. We walked down it a short ways and then stopped in front of a janitorial closet. I fiddled the lock open (using magic; I didn't feel like trying to work picks with my maimed hand at the moment) and then pulled it open with a flourish.

Most janitorial closets, regardless of where you happen to be, have similar contents. Bottles of various cleaners, for example, are a constant. Brooms, mops, buckets, trash cans, all of these are things you would expect to see there.

You would most likely not expect to see a sizable safe.

Everyone (with the exception of Aiko and Snowflake, who'd already known about this) stared at the safe with expressions ranging from dumbfounded to mildly disgusted. "Why do you have a stash *here*?" Kyra asked, sounding vaguely offended.

"Would you have thought to look for it here?" I asked.

She thought about it for a second. "Good point. How'd you get it in here?"

"Bribed the head of maintenance. Wal-Mart really doesn't pay their employees enough."

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Anna looked almost unnervingly interested. "Don't you worry that he'll steal from you?"

"Not really. It's pretty much impossible to break into this thing."

The werewolf looked confused. "He's got plenty of time to look at it. I don't know much about safecracking, but I'm pretty sure if you give someone long enough they can figure out the combination."

"Ha!" I said triumphantly to Aiko. "You see? I *told* you it would work!"

The kitsune rolled her eyes. "Yes, you're very clever."

"I don't get it," Anna said, clearly not sure what I was talking about.

"You remember I used to do some work as a locksmith, right?" I said, walking into the closet. Anna nodded. "Well, I made some modifications to this safe. There is no combination. The dial's just for show; it doesn't even connect to the locking mechanism."

"So how do you open it?"

I grinned. "Magic." The lock was controlled by a simple lever from the inside, easy for even the modest force I could generate with air magic to move. I made a slight effort, and the door clicked open.

Inside was a veritable plethora of odds and ends. I had two full changes of clothes, suitable for every weather from December to July, including shoes. Also present were a sizable medical kit, a pistol with ammunition, a couple of knives, a few stored spells, a coil of rope, a gallon of water, and enough rations to last one person a few days. The small bag hanging from the wall of the safe contained a couple thousand dollars in four currencies, several pieces of jewelry worth at least as much, and various hygiene essentials.

"Nice stash," Kyra said, staring at it. I think it was a little more than she was expecting.

"Thanks," I said. "I have quite a few of them set up."

"Wow," Anna said. "That seems a little paranoid."

Kyra broke out laughing. "No shit." She paused. "You haven't actually worked with Winter before, have you?"

"No. Is this normal?"

"This is actually pretty tame by Winter's standards," Aiko chipped in. "This one time we were doing wetwork for the Watchers. He had three different people tailing the guy working with us, at the same time. That's a pretty funny story, actually."

I tuned them out and got dressed. It was a little awkward, and I still felt rather vulnerable without my armor, but at least I wouldn't be arrested for public indecency. Then I heaved the medical kit out and dropped it on the floor with a thunk. It was about as big as a midsize toolbox, and weighed

more than ten pounds. "Would one of you mind giving me a hand with some bandages?" I asked, interrupting Aiko's story.

There was a moment of silence. Then Alexis rolled her eyes and walked over. "Why am I the one doing this?" she wondered out loud.

"You're probably the only one with any kind of medical training," I said, opening the kit. "Most werewolves don't bother, and Aiko's...well, Aiko."

"Good point."

My cousin didn't really have all that much first aid training, and most of that was of the "battlefield medicine" variety. The result was not very pretty, consisting of a bunch of gauze wrapped around my arm and then fastened with duct tape. I was mostly just looking for something to make sure I didn't start bleeding all over the place, though, and aesthetically it was still a better pick than exposed bone. That's really only a valid fashion choice on Halloween.

I threw my cloak over the top of it, covering the bandages. My bandaged hand was still visible, but there wasn't much I could do about that, and it wasn't nearly as distinctive as having bandages from the elbow down. Then I grabbed the money and a couple of the stored spells, put everything else back into the safe, and closed it again. As this little escapade had proven, it was worth having.

"Where next?" Kyra asked as we made our way back out through the maintenance hallway, locking it behind us. Nobody'd seen us, fortunately; I hadn't thought far enough ahead to have an excuse ready.

"I need to crash for a while," Aiko said. "Sorry and everything, but I'm not going to be standing much longer."

"The safe house is probably the best place," I said. "Actually, you should probably all go. I'll meet you there after I check up on a few things."

As predicted, this proclamation was followed by righteous indignation from pretty much everyone. "Look," I sighed after listening to it for a few moments. "I'm not getting in any fights. None of us is in condition for that right now. This is purely an information-gathering run. You go ahead to the safe house, and I'll be there within a few hours."

"And if you're not?" Kyra said dryly.

I snorted. "It probably means I'm dead, in which case you should take everyone you're fond of and hide out on another continent."

"At least take the dog with you," Aiko said. She looked even worse than when she'd woken up, and I didn't think she had more than ten minutes left in her before she was going to collapse.

"Not even I," I said dryly, "seriously thought I could convince her to stay away."

Stop one was the housecarls. I'd had all of the people I was badgering reporting in to them; hopefully, by now someone had come up with *something*. At this point, even an obscure clue would be a godsend.

I could have just called Sveinn. It would have been a lot more efficient than actually driving down there.

That would have meant standing still, though. I had no idea what kind of resources the person behind all this crap had access to, but I didn't think it was a coincidence that they'd waited until we were home to sic their monster on us. They clearly weren't omniscient, and the entity itself hadn't moved terribly quickly. As long as we were a moving target, I thought we had a pretty decent chance of staying ahead of it.

For much the same reason, I took a roundabout way down to the southern end of the city, moving as quickly as the armored truck could manage. Snowflake and I were both hyper-alert, staring frantically in every direction at once, but we didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Traffic was fairly heavy, as would be expected from the time of day, even on side roads. It was almost sunset, meaning that we had caught the very end of the after-work rush.

I didn't notice anyone tailing me, but that wasn't saying all that much. A modified Brinks truck is many things, but subtle isn't one of them. Any number of people could have been following me from enough of a distance that I wouldn't have noticed them.

When I pulled up, there were already vehicles parked outside of the house—other than our Lamborghini, I mean. That wasn't normal.

One of them was almost a perfect match for the SUV that Aiko and the rest had taken to the safe house. Black, with tinted windows, it was quite anonymous. I was pretty sure it was armored, but there was no real way to tell.

The other vehicle was about as far from anonymous as they come. A sleek motorcycle of Japanese design, it looked like it could break speed limits with impunity, because the cops wouldn't be able to catch it. It was painted a vivid raspberry, with polished chrome fittings. I wasn't competent to guess how much a bike like that would cost, but I had an uncomfortable feeling that, until recently, it would have been more than I was worth.

I had no idea who had driven either of those vehicles down here, or what they wanted.

I considered just driving away, but eventually decided it wasn't worth it. Whatever shit was brewing here, I probably couldn't avoid it forever. Better that I get some idea what was going on.

That decision made, we got out of the truck. I drew up what little dignity I currently had and marched to the door, Snowflake padding along at my side.

The tableau on the other sides was...well, not what I was expecting. To say the least.

To the right, my housecarls were arrayed in what wasn't *quite* a battle formation. Sveinn was in front, as I would have expected, flanked by Haki on one side and Kjaran on the other. Behind their sheer bulk, it was easy to miss Vigdis and Kyi standing behind them. Even Tindr was there, which was unusual; he's about as much use in a fight as a housecat, and doesn't tend to get involved in tense situations.

To my left was quite possibly the last person I would have expected to see. Short and slight, with features that showed a very clear Asian ancestry, she looked about as threatening as a rabbit next to the housecarls. That appearance was deceptive; I'd seen her fight, and while she wasn't a match for me she was still pretty damn good. Matsuda Kimiko was about my age, making her barely more than a child by kitsune standards, but she had a massive inferiority complex and her way of making up for it involved a great deal of violence.

And, last but most definitely not least, were two men standing directly in front of me. They looked vaguely like the stereotypical image of an FBI agent. Both of them were wearing sober suits and sunglasses, which was just ridiculous at this time of day. One of them had brown hair while the other was blonde, both cut short enough to be hard to grab in a fight, but other than that they could have been twins.

That wasn't a big deal. The Men in Black look, although not very pleasant aesthetically, was pretty standard for minions, and I wouldn't have been concerned to see it here, either. No, what concerned me was that both of them reeked of human magic.

I paused for a second when I saw all these people, none of whom I'd been expecting. Then I shrugged and shut the door. "Good evening," I said to no one in particular.

The mages turned to face me, their motions almost perfectly synchronized. "Good evening," Blondie said. "Are you Jarl Wolf?" His voice was brisk, clipped, and impersonal, with no accent that I could detect.

I grinned, causing both men to flinch slightly. I don't really have a friendly smile, and I expect that one was more psychotic than most. "Yes," I said. "And you might be?"

"My name is Hunter Ivanov," he said with a badly faked smile. "This is my partner, Klaus Neumann. We're here on behalf of the Guards, hoping that you might be able to answer a few questions for us."

Oh shit. "I presume you have some identification?" I stalled.

"Of course," he said smoothly. Both of them, with that same creepy synchronization, produced a small badge. Made of some reddish metal, they were shaped like starbursts, with a pair of crossed spears inset in gold. Both badges smelled of magic, sharp and biting.

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This was so not good. "I see," I said. "I will be happy to assist you, gentlemen. If you could give me a few minutes to conduct other business?"

"Certainly," Ivanov said. I was getting the distinct impression that Neumann preferred to say as little as he could get away with.

"Thank you," I said, stepping past them. "What can I do for you?" I said to Kimiko.

"Birdbrain says hello," she said. "And he's still looking."

I stared. "Kikuchi sent *you* as his representative?"

"Yeah."

I shook my head. Aiko was going to be *pissed*. And probably also laugh her head off. "Could you convey a message to him for me?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Sure."

"Thanks," I said, pulling a sheet of paper and a pen out of my cloak. Bracing the paper against the wall, I wrote a short note and handed it to her. Kimiko nodded and left, slipping between the two Guards as though they were utterly beneath her notice.

I had to admire the kitsune's poker face. Watching her, you would hardly have realized she could read the note over my shoulder as I wrote it, much less guess what it said. "Wonderful," I said, turning to Sveinn. "Do you have something to report?"

"*Já*," he said, producing a manila folder from...somewhere.

I took it and flipped it open, somewhat awkwardly. I'm used to having two functioning hands, and it's surprisingly difficult to do pretty much anything with just one. I skimmed the first couple of pages, nodded, and tucked it into my cloak.

"Thank you for your patience," I said, returning my attention to the two Guards. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"We understand that there have been some prohibited activities taking place in this area," Ivanov said carefully.

"Prohibited activities," I repeated, biting back a hysterical giggle. Yeah, that was one way to phrase it. "What, specifically, if I might ask?"

"We believe that a dangerous entity has been summoned, possibly repeatedly."

"Pardon me," I said, still smiling. "But isn't the investigation of affairs such as this the responsibility of the Watchers?"

"Typically, it would be," Ivanov countered, smiling right back at me. "However, interaction with other political bodies falls to us. As this activity has been taking place on territory you claim, that makes it our affair."

I frowned. "I see." I had a lot more credit built up with the Watchers; this was the first time I'd ever knowingly encountered a Guard. "Well, then. You're certainly free to investigate this matter, although I would appreciate it if you would keep me apprised of your findings."

Both of the Guards were smiling now. They reminded me a little of the expressions you see when you get rival werewolves in the same room—all teeth, no humor. "Why, certainly, jarl," Ivanov said with obviously false cheer. "In that case, we would be remiss not to inform you that we've noticed a peculiar trend among these incidents."

I was starting to get a really bad feeling about this. "And what might that be?"

"An oddly large number of them seem to involve your political rivals," Ivanov continued cheerily. "At first we thought it was impossible that such a *fine citizen* as yourself could be involved in something like this, but the numbers became so telling that we simply had to look. And, well, just imagine how we felt when we discovered that you actually have a known history of associating with demons, and fraternizing with known transgressors of the law!" He shook his head sadly. "Truly, Klaus, it's just painful to discover such unsavory history in a prominent citizen, isn't it?" Klaus nodded solemnly.

"Well," I stalled, hoping that I could come up with a solution. "I can see why you would want to talk to me, then."

Ivanov's smile was becoming more openly predatory now. "Do you, jarl? Perhaps you could tell us, then, why as soon as we decided to do so, you seem to have vanished? Indeed, for the past several days nobody seems to have seen you anywhere?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice, as though he were letting me in on a secret. "It's almost," he said softly, "like you've just been *so busy* you couldn't even take the time to attend to your normal business."

This was ridiculous. Here in about five minutes I was going to have two combat-trained mages trying to remove my liver, and there was no conceivable way I could win. I might be able to beat them—there were half a dozen violent jötnar in close range and itching to spill some blood on my behalf—but I couldn't do so without using lethal force, and that was a death sentence in the long run. If I killed two Guards who were already clearly suspicious of me, it wouldn't be long before the entire Conclave was after me. At that point, the only real question was how creative they would get before I died.

And then I noticed something wonderful. It's strange how much things can change in a short time. Just a few seconds earlier, if I'd seen the walls start to warp and felt a fierce, itching pain in my mutilated hand, I would have thought it was horribly bad news. Now, it felt like the best timed coincidence I'd had in years.

"Look," I said to the Guards. "We don't have much time, so shut up and pay attention. I'm not responsible for this mess. I've been trying to find the person who is, without much luck. They know it,

and they aren't happy about it. Their last shot at me took me out of action for a few days, which is why I haven't been around. Here in about a minute they're going to try again. All of us together can't even slow this thing down, believe me, and it won't care who you are." As I spoke, I made several complicated gestures with my functioning hand.

Sveinn gestured acknowledgment, a simple movement of a couple fingers. A moment later, Kyi slipped away from the group. I doubt the Guards noticed; Kyi is silent when she wants to be, and she has a real talent for fading into the background.

"You realize how pathetic that attempt was, right?" Ivanov said contemptuously.

"Frankly, I don't give a damn. At the moment, all I care about is not letting that thing peel any more of my skin off. I recommend you guys start running now." Snowflake and I turned and made for the door, not slowly.

I'd made it less than three steps when there was a loud, hollow *thump* from the center of the room. My left arm burst into fierce, tingling pain, and the room suddenly felt like a meat freezer.

Time to go.

I went from a hurried walk to a staggering sprint, Snowflake just in front of me. I didn't bother shutting the door behind us, and I heard shouting and heavy footfalls from behind us, before they were cut off by a loud crashing sound. Theoretically the housecarls would be scattering into the night by now. They'd been forewarned, and they were all fast enough that the monster probably wouldn't be able to catch any of them.

I couldn't really afford to worry about any of that right now. I was pretty sure it was after me.

I'd been planning on leaving in the same truck I drove in with; the ridiculously excessive protection would have felt pretty damn good right about now. Unfortunately, its many good qualities don't exactly include speed, and the acceleration is piss-poor.

That's why I'd told Kyi to start the Lamborghini instead.

Snowflake and I scrambled over each other to get in, frantic with terror. The end result found me sitting in the driver's seat with a husky sprawled across my lap, half-curved trying to fit herself into the car without taking the time to crawl any further in. Undignified, to say the least, but at the moment I absolutely did not give a shit. I slammed the door and stomped on the accelerator—which, given that this was a Lamborghini, was anything but poor. Less than five seconds after the monster appeared, we were burning rubber out the driveway.

Maybe two seconds after that, there was a *thump* and the weight of the car shifted to the rear somewhat. I glanced back, expecting the worst, only to see Klaus Neumann clinging to the rear bumper. Astonishingly, he was doing so with only one hand; his other arm was busy clutching Hunter Ivanov, who was staring back the way we'd come.

Wow, Snowflake said. We're already doing forty. How the hell'd they catch us? She paused. For that matter, how the hell is he holding on?

Beats me, I said, most of my attention focused on driving. I'm not a bad driver, but I'm also not usually navigating twisty roads one-handed at maximum speed, so I figured I should probably take it seriously. Open the passenger door for them.

Are you kidding? These guys were like two seconds from trying to kill you back there. I say dump 'em; the thing'll be doing us a favor to kill 'em.

Snowflake, I sighed. Come on. Please?

Fine, she sniffed. But only 'cause you said please. She started crawling across the seats, muttering vile imprecations in German as she went. German is a good language for imprecating; it has a lot of options.

Apparently Neumann had had the same idea I had, because as I watched he started pulling himself along the side of the vehicle. Considering that we were doing over fifty miles an hour by this point, there wasn't much in the way of handholds on the side of the car, and he still had a fairly large man clinging to his back, this was pretty damn impressive.

He reached the passenger door about the same time Snowflake managed to get it open—car door handles aren't really all that compatible with teeth. She barely managed to squirm out of the way as the two Guards tumbled in. Ivanov reached out and caught the door a moment later, pulling it shut. That cut the drag down pretty noticeably, which was good since I was almost to a main road where I would have to worry about traffic.

"Christ," Ivanov muttered, shifting around to try and fit with Neumann in the passenger seat. Neither of them was all that large, but it really wasn't meant to seat two. He crossed himself, glancing nervously over his shoulder. "What was that thing?"

Snowflake, who had just about wormed her way back onto my lap by this point, snorted. *He isn't the quickest on the uptake, is he?*

"Exactly what I told you it was," I said, ignoring her. Surprisingly, neither of the Guards reacted to her statement. Not that most people would—the vast majority of people can't hear Snowflake even if she tries to be heard—but I'd sort of come to expect clan mages to have weird abilities that I didn't understand.

Then again, one of them had just run fast enough to catch a sports car and shown off strength that was easily on par with a werewolf, despite being pure vanilla human. So maybe Guards just didn't cross-train in the espionage department.

"Why is it after you?"

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I started to answer, then almost lost control going around a corner. I got the car back under control more by luck than skill and snorted. "It sure isn't trying to deliver the mail," I said.

"Maybe a letter bomb," Ivanov agreed. "Are you sure it's safe to drive at this speed?"

"Do you *really* want me to slow down?" Before he could respond, I eased off the gas a little. "Don't worry," I said. "I'm pretty sure we're far enough already, as long as we don't stop."

"Good," the Guard said fervently. "I've seen a lot of shit in this work, but that thing's a new record."

"Agreed." We'd made it out of the maze of back roads surrounding the house, fortunately. Rush hour was almost over, and we could probably make good time on the way back north. At this point I figured the first priority was to get back to the others.

We were all quiet for a few moments. I was focused on not crashing into something at high speed—I mean, seriously, talk about an embarrassing way to die. Presumably everyone else was coming to grips with their recent brush with mortality. Excepting Neumann, who would probably have the same attitude of grim silence at a child's birthday party.

"You realize," Ivanov said after a few minutes, "that you're still the prime suspect for summoning that thing."

"Tell you what. You wait until we're somewhere relatively safe, and I will be glad to discuss it with you."

Ivanov opened his mouth to retort, probably with some heat. Then he paused and sighed. "Fair enough. You have somewhere in mind?"

I grinned. "Yeah, as it happens I do."

Chapter Nine

I walked in the front door of the safe house to find Kyra deeply engrossed in a passionate kiss with Kimiko. They both jumped when I shut the door, and turned to face the noise. Aiko, who seemed to be playing backgammon against Anna, chortled. The kitsune looked a great deal better, thankfully.

"Hi," I said. "Is there something I should know?"

"Not really," Kimiko said. "I only set this up to see the look on your face when you opened the door. Which was *priceless*, by the way."

I sighed. Of course. "The only surprising thing about that," I said, "is that you managed to convince Kyra to go along with it."

"She was actually fairly open to the idea. Although she did talk me out of putting a bucket of paint over the door."

"You know," I commented to no one in particular, moving further into the room, "I think I've figured something out." I sat down on one of the half-dozen or so camp chairs scattered around. It wasn't terribly comfortable, but I was pretty freaking tired and at the moment the idea of sitting down was pleasant enough that I didn't care all that much what it was on.

"What's that?" Alexis asked idly. My cousin was in another chair, reading a book about gardening, of all things.

"I've learned why there's usually only one kitsune in any given story. More than that and they incite even incarnations of the Buddha to homicidal rage, so the story never gets out."

"Cute," Kimiko said in the tone of voice normally reserved for slugs at least five inches in length. "Why did you ask me to meet you here?"

"I didn't want to talk in front of Tweedledee and Tweedledum here," I replied. "Which, for various reasons, is no longer a concern."

"Are you actively trying to alienate any possible allies?" Ivanov wondered out loud.

Aiko snorted and rolled the dice. "This is nothing," she said, moving one checker lazily forward to capture a blot. "If he were trying, there would be more bodies, and also something would probably be on fire."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," I sighed. "Is there any chance we could get this conversation on topic?"

"Please," Alexis said. "Did you have one in mind?"

"Well, there's always this file I had Sveinn collect on what these freaks have been up to," I offered, pulling it out of my pocket.

"Any actual information?" Aiko asked, leaving one of her pieces open and smirking at Anna. It was an obvious taunt; even if she managed to capture it, it would be an extremely poor move, tactically. The kitsune had a decisive advantage, and she was pretty clearly going to win unless there was a dramatic shift in fortunes. That wasn't likely, since she was playing with the magical equivalent of loaded dice. Literally; I bought them as a novelty.

"They've just been busy little bees," I said, glancing over the list Sveinn had compiled. It wasn't complete—it's really hard to get much clear information soon after something like this—but it was reasonably thorough, and he'd made notes of which data were from reasonably reliable sources. "Looks like ten targets got hit in the last three days. Eleven if you count the pack house, which, by the way, just got blown up. Again."

"You blew my house up again?" Kyra said. "*Christ*, Winter, do you think you could lay off the property damage for a couple years? I *liked* that house."

Ivanov cleared his throat. "Ah. Um. They're only behind ten of those, actually. The seventh one on that list was me." Everyone in the room turned to stare at him. "What?" he said defensively. "The suspect was uncooperative. Things got out of hand, okay?"

The problem, Snowflake said meditatively a moment later, *isn't so much that we live in a Three Stooges episode. It's that they couldn't decide on casting, so everyone we meet is curly.*

Too true, I sighed. "That leaves nine attacks," I said. "Looks like they've got an agenda." I wasn't a very good investigator, but I'm not a total moron. When one of the victims was a vampire, and three others were businesses which I knew for a fact Katrin had a stake in, it didn't take a genius to draw some lines.

A moment later there was a series of sharp, brisk knocks on the door. I tossed the folder on the cot next to me and went to answer it.

The woman standing on the other side was tall and pale, with long ash-blond hair. Other than that she was fairly plain, an impression which was reinforced by the plain black T-shirt and jeans. "Good evening, Wolf," she said pleasantly. "May I come in?"

I hesitated, then shrugged. "Sure." I wasn't totally comfortable with inviting Katrin into my safe house, but at the moment she was a pretty small concern to me.

"Thank you," she said sweetly, stepping across the threshold after me.

I heard a movement behind me and started to turn.

The next thing I knew, I was pressed against the far wall. My feet were six inches off the ground, and I was supported only by her hand on my neck.

"Who the devil do you think you *are*?" Katrin hissed at me from a couple inches away. "You think you can order me around? You think you can *mock* me?"

"Can't...breathe..." I wheezed, scrabbling ineffectually at her hand. It didn't accomplish much; I only had one good hand, and she had a grip like a vise. Behind her I saw that pretty much everybody had managed to get over their shock, and were currently going for weapons.

"Don't bother," Katrin called, clearly not speaking to me. "I can snap his neck before you even twitch." She tossed me to the ground—I landed on my bad arm, of course—and stalked a few paces away. She snatched the folder off the cot and brandished it at me. "Explain," she spat, flicking it at me.

I managed to catch it before it hit me in the face. "Ow," I complained. "Jump to conclusions much?"

"You've made it damned clear how you feel," she said, pacing back and forth. "I don't consider it much of a leap." Everyone else in the room was huddled in their respective seats, cowering away from the vampire's wrath. I didn't blame them; I would have liked to do something similar. I'd never seen Katrin quite this animated. Now that I did, it wasn't hard to see why the vampires of the city all obeyed her. In that moment, she could have cowed almost anyone with her sheer *presence*.

But I wasn't just anyone. I'd stood up to the Khan, who dominated entire continents with nothing but force of personality. I'd mocked freaking *Loki* to his face, knowing all the while that if he chose he could skin me alive in a heartbeat. And I'd be damned if I bowed to a jumped-up leech just because she waltzed in and strutted around a bit.

Attitudes like that do a lot to explain why werewolves don't actually rule the world.

"I'm glad to know you think so highly of me," I said sarcastically. "Seriously, Katrin. Even if I was stupid enough to rock the boat like that, why on earth would I ask you to come here for a chat if I were responsible?"

She hesitated. "There is that, yes," she admitted. "But you've done some fairly random things in the past."

"Oh, that's just...." I shook my head and pushed myself to my feet. "Look, Katrin. Do I like you? No, of course not, that's never been a secret. But I'm not going to deny that you do a lot for stability in this town. I've never *once* actually worked against you, because I can recognize that you're preferable to the alternative."

The vampire hesitated. "You're bleeding," she said eventually, rather than respond directly.

"Looks like my wound reopened when you threw me on it. Thanks for that, by the way, my day wasn't *quite* shitty enough already."

"Fine," she sighed. "Let's assume I believe you. What did you want to talk about?"

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"From your reaction, I'm guessing you've figured out that the person responsible for the recent disruptions are targeting you specifically."

She snorted. "No shit. Get to the point."

"From what I've managed to figure out, I'm pretty sure this is a local event," I said. "There's no way they could control this at any kind of distance. That rules out a lot of suspects, right there."

"I'd already figured that out," Katrin said, pacing back and forth.

"I'm getting there," I said, annoyed. Dealing with Katrin was always just such a pain in the ass. "I don't think it's particularly likely that this is the work of a newcomer on the scene. The targets they've chosen suggest a fairly intimate knowledge of local events. It's possible that this is a coup, but if so it's been in the works for a long time."

"So?"

"So who would it be?" I asked rhetorically. "There aren't all that many possibilities. It's safe to assume it wasn't you, I think—you've been hurt a little more than I see you doing just to throw people off the trail. Even if you were willing to go that far, this kind of wanton destruction just isn't your style. The same thing goes for Kikuchi—if he wanted to take you out for some reason, he wouldn't summon a monster to take out your lackeys. He'd go after you personally."

"You've cast yourself as the lead suspect again," Katrin said dryly. "If you have an actual point to make, I recommend you get there soon."

"Except it doesn't work for me, either," I pointed out. "Think about it. Even if you assume I had motive, I just don't have the *ability* to summon and control something like this. Not to mention that, oh yeah, I *lost most of my hand* the last time it attacked me, and I promise you that's not something I would do for the sake of selling a lie. Not to mention that it isn't really my style either. Can you honestly say that this seems like something I would do?"

The vampire frowned. "That's a fair point," she allowed a moment later. "You typically do your own dirty work."

"Thank you. So if we've ruled out the three major groups, that means it must have been a minor player. I didn't really have any ideas beyond that, until I saw this." I set the file down on the cot and flipped it open to the list of attacks. I pointed at two of them.

Katrin looked at my choices and frowned. "I don't get it," she said. Behind her, I noticed that both of the Guards were watching with similar interest, although neither of them said anything.

I tapped the first entry on the list. "This was an apartment building near the middle of town," I said. "As far as I can tell it was the first location they hit, most of a week ago. I've had people looking into this for a while, and apparently the only noteworthy thing about the place was a resident on the second floor. Guy was a fairly serious drug dealer."

"And the other?"

"Condos. Still under construction, but they were expected to be quite profitable. Trace it far enough back, and the financial backing was coming from a major organized crime figure." I smiled at Katrin. "So you tell me. What local groups have a reasonable amount of power, are completely reckless and irresponsible with how they use it, and hate both vampires and criminals?"

"Oh, shit," Aiko said suddenly. "You think it's the Inquisition?"

"Well, it's a pretty damn unlikely coincidence otherwise, don't you think?"

"Who are you talking about?" Katrin said, clearly losing what little patience she still had for me.

"Group of low-key mages," I said, massaging my neck gently. *Damn*, she had a strong grip. "There's, oh, maybe half a dozen of them still around. They get up to a fair amount of vigilante activity, and particularly dislike entities they think of as 'monsters.'"

"I'm familiar with the group. Is that what they call themselves?"

"They never actually settled on a name. We call them that for convenience."

The vampire smiled, the sort of expression most commonly seen on indulgent felines in the presence of small mammals. "Cute. Do you have any reason beyond a hunch for me to believe you?"

"Circumstantial evidence."

"That's less than compelling," she said dryly.

"I have a lot of it," I muttered. "Okay. Number one: the Watcher who was undercover in the group went silent shortly before this mess started. The timing is a little much for coincidence. Number two: they've been frustrated for some time that I haven't been more proactive about dealing with threats, particularly you." I nodded at Katrin.

"That's ridiculous," she said. "I have as much invested in this city as anyone. There are few people less likely to present a threat to it."

"You know that. I know that. They've never been able to wrap their tiny little brains around the concept, somehow." I shrugged. "Anyways, that's beside the point. What I'm saying is that they've been getting steadily more upset for the past several months. Number three: at least one of them has at least as much of a vendetta against organized crime. He's a police officer, in fact, and he takes it seriously."

Kimiko cleared her throat. "Ex-police, actually. Adams quit a couple of weeks ago. No explanation given." She noticed that everyone was staring, and shrugged. "You're not the only one who can make reasonable connections. We've been looking into them for a couple days."

"Thank you," I said. "Actually, that's even more damning. At this point, the number of temporal coincidences is a little more than just suspicious. Think about it. They've been getting more and more

upset recently. Then, suddenly, one of them quits his job—and he kept it quiet, too, or I'd have heard it before now. A few weeks later, a mysterious demonic entity shows up and starts killing people. And *everyone* it hits just happens to be one of the people they really hate."

"Our intelligence doesn't indicate that this group has the power to summon something like that thing," Ivanov said. He was starting to sound intrigued, now, rather than accusatory. "This is a major piece of work. They're bit players."

"There are plenty of ways to get around that," I said. "I can think of a dozen entities that could have provided them with the power. There are rituals, blood magic, demonic possession...." I shook my head. "I'm sure everyone here can think of ways to deal with that problem. It's not unreasonable to think that they might too."

"You'd have to be a fool to take any of those options," Ivanov said flatly.

"Exactly," I said excitedly. "See, that's just it. Everything about these attacks indicates that the person responsible is an idiot. The attacks are haphazard and poorly planned. They sent a monster with functionally limitless destructive power to kill us, and we got away with nothing more impressive than a fast car. If they had any kind of tactical skill, we'd all be dead by now. The timing's been cramped, like they have a list of jobs and they're rushing to get through it as fast as they can. They clearly have definite targets, but in every case there's been extensive collateral damage. This has all the marks of a reckless, careless person with no subtlety or long-term strategy."

"That much is true," the Guard said after a moment. "And you think this...Inquisition fits the bill?"

"Oh hell yes," Aiko interjected. "Speaking as an expert on reckless disregard for the future, I can tell you that they're a bunch of certifiable morons."

"I can confirm that," Katrin added. "While a few of them are reasonably intelligent, the majority have no concern whatsoever for the consequences of their actions." The vampire mused for a moment. "You make a reasonable case."

"Thank you," I said modestly. "Since we all seem to be in agreement that stopping this would be a good thing, perhaps you would be willing to set your people to finding them?"

"And killing them?" Katrin asked, not answering me.

"That would seem to be the appropriate response, yes. Although there are a few it might not be necessary to kill." I shrugged. "I'm sure you can guess which of them are likely to be involved as well as I can."

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "What do you plan to do?"

"I need to get some rest," I said bluntly. "I figure I'll take over in the morning. That's a more efficient division of labor anyway."

"We aren't going to be much help tracking them down," Ivanov said. "We'll focus our efforts on general investigation instead, in case your hunch is wrong."

Yeah, and most of that investigation was going to be targeted at me. I couldn't blame the Guards; this whole situation was fishy as hell, and from their perspective I was still suspect number one. "That sounds reasonable," I said, rather than mention any of that. "If that's all, would you mind heading out? I have something unrelated to discuss with Katrin, and I wouldn't want to bore you with our personal business."

"That's very polite of you," Ivanov said disingenuously. "We'll be sure to contact you with any findings." The Guard stood up and left. Neumann, who *still* hadn't said a single word, waited a beat before following. His hostility wasn't nearly as concealed as Ivanov's. A few seconds later, Kimiko followed the Guards out, nodding politely to me on her way out.

"Do you really think those two trust you?" Katrin wondered after the door closed.

I snorted. "Get real. Nobody involved in this farce trusts anyone else an inch. No, I fully expect them to be listening in, one way or another. I just asked them to leave out of politeness."

"Reminding us all once again why it is you're still not dead," Katrin said, smiling sharply. "Speaking of which, this is quite a nice safe house you have. Well-stocked, reasonably secure...you clearly put a great deal of forethought into this. The neighborhood was chosen carefully; I didn't realize there was anything this close to suburbia in this city. The people here aren't inclined to ask questions, shady characters stick out, and the response time in this area is short. And you kept it remarkably quiet, too; I honestly had no idea you had this set up."

"I have others," I growled in response to her implied threat. "And I'll be ditching this one after this, trust me."

The vampire laughed softly. "Wise choice. Who knows what might happen otherwise?"

"Natalie is planning some sort of coup," I said bluntly. I didn't have the patience to put up with Katrin right now. "She tried to buy me off to let that vampire off the other day."

"I know," Katrin said lightly.

I eyed her. "Of course you do."

"I do appreciate your telling me, though," she continued in the most cheerful voice I'd ever heard her use. "It speaks well for your trustworthiness."

"Gosh thanks."

"Why, if you don't mind me asking, are you telling me this? If you didn't want to be complicit in this little *scheme*, you could have simply turned her down."

I shrugged. "I thought it might offend her if I refused her offer to her face."

"And you think this won't?" Katrin said dryly. "You have some very odd ideas about Natalie, I think."

"You and I haven't ever agreed on much," I said after a moment. "We aren't friends, and that isn't likely to change. But you've never tried to use me as a pawn in your vampire games."

"You've made your opinion clear of the matter. There's no reason to offend you when there are other tasks you *are* willing to do."

"Right, and that's a very wise attitude to take. Natalie is not wise." I paused to let that sink in. "She deliberately put me in a position where I have no choice but to involve myself in your internal politics, after I'd already made it clear that I had no desire to do so. I don't appreciate that."

"So this is a form of petty revenge?"

I shrugged. "In part. It's also partly to discourage others from trying the same stunt. I have *no* interest in becoming involved in politics any more than I already am, and if people know that there might be consequence for going against that desire they might hesitate to do so." I paused. "Honestly, though, it's mostly just self-preservation. If Natalie did get your position, I'm pretty sure the first thing she'd do would be to stab me in the back. She isn't the type to reward the people who got her the job."

"And thus you demonstrate more understanding of her character than many who've known her much longer," Katrin said dryly. "Are you sure you're not interested in vampirism, Wolf? I could use someone with that acute understanding of human nature. And I expect to have a rather disappointing number of positions open in the near future."

"Thanks, but hell no."

"The offer's open," she said, smiling. It wasn't the friendly kind of smile. "I recommend you not worry too much about Natalie, Wolf. I have been aware of my dear quisling for some time now, and I assure you she will be rewarded appropriately for her treachery."

"I look forward to hearing about it."

"Good," Katrin said. Her smile had taken on an even crueler, more predatory cast now. "I have a great deal of work to do, so if you will excuse me...?"

"Of course. Good luck with that."

"And good hunting to you as well, Wolf," the vampire said as she left. The door opened and closed by itself, a piece of low-level theatrics which was nevertheless surprisingly effective at unnerving me.

Chapter Ten

There were two more attacks that night. The first was on a local politician I knew to be in the pocket of several businesses and at least one criminal organization—no surprise that he'd been targeted, and I found it difficult to regret his death. The second targeted the residence of Luna Kuzmak, a small-time information marketer and black marketeer. Her apartment building had been pretty thoroughly trashed, but Luna herself was far too canny to be caught that easily. She'd probably figured out that the person summoning this thing had a serious hate on for supernatural predators and criminals, and Luna was in thick with both. All reports agreed that she hadn't even been in the same neighborhood. I felt a small spark of happiness at that news; Luna and I weren't friends, but she was a consistent acquaintance, and I liked her well enough.

Less pleasant was the news that several other people in the same building hadn't been so lucky. Eleven people had been killed and a couple dozen others hospitalized.

Strangely enough, it wasn't until I heard that that I began to feel truly angry about this. Attacking gangsters and vampires didn't really upset me—hell, in its own spectacularly misguided way it was an ethically justifiable choice. Trying to kill me was more upsetting on a personal level, for obvious reasons, but that was clearly nothing personal. If I were entirely fair, I had to admit that I'd started that fight, not the other way round.

This was different. Using lethal force on someone who was, at worst, guilty of providing supplies and info to both good and bad people was questionable. Doing so in a way that was practically guaranteed to cause serious collateral damage to dozens of innocents was morally shaky to say the least. To do that when the target wasn't even there—and when that was fairly predictable—was unconscionable.

"Dawn of the sixth day," Aiko said as I finished reading the news story and closed the laptop. (Yes, there was a laptop sitting in the safe house. Plentiful funds and pathological obsession with preparing for disaster are a wonderful combo.) "Twenty-four hours remain."

"That would be a great deal more encouraging if I actually got to do this over as many times as I wanted."

"Nah," she said dismissively. "You'd get bored of the same six days within two or three reps."

"Probably true," I agreed. "I guess I should just get it right the first time instead."

"Truly, you must be a tactical genius. Did you have any actual plans?"

"Not really," I admitted. "Katrin hasn't contacted me, and the only message from Kikuchi just says that most of the Inquisition don't appear to be frequenting their usual haunts." I snorted. "I could have told them that and saved them the time."

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"That's a tengu for you," Aiko agreed. "Trap 'em in a burning building and they'll go through the manual to make sure it's actually on fire and locate their assigned emergency exit."

"Can you come up with anything?" I asked. "'Cause honestly, I'm out of ideas. This is too big."

She pursed her lips and thought for a moment. "You should contact Pellegrini," she said after a moment. "He has as much of a stake in this as we do, and a lot more manpower."

I sighed. "That's not a bad idea," I admitted. I didn't like the idea—I found everything about the crime lord repellent—but what she'd said was true. Pellegrini had money, hordes of minions, and access to a lot of resources that not even Katrin or Kikuchi could claim. Those weren't things I could ignore, not now. The stakes were too high for squeamishness. "I guess I'll get started on that."

Fifteen minutes later, I hung up and glared at the phone. I had contact info for Pellegrini—I have contact info for pretty much *everybody* in my city—but not a personal number. He must have given his minions a briefing on me, because dropping my name worked wonders, but there was still a legion of secretaries to battle through. Once I'd gotten through to a high enough level of management to get something done, I'd discovered that the gangster was in a meeting that "couldn't be interrupted," but he would hear about my call as soon as it was over.

I hate being given the runaround. It feels too much like karma.

Inside the safe house, nothing had changed. Alexis was pacing back and forth, her expression frustrated and scared. Aiko was sitting on one of the camp chairs in the corner of the room, looking at something on the computer. She looked more outwardly relaxed, but I knew her too well to be fooled. Neither of the werewolves had woken up yet.

This was getting ridiculous. A week had passed, and I'd learned *nothing*. I had to be the most incompetent investigator in the history of incompetent investigation.

Before I could think of what to do next, my phone rang. I looked at it, hoping it would be Pellegrini calling me back. I didn't recognize the number.

"Hello, Winter," a female voice said. It was high, and not nearly as bright or innocent as it had been the first time I heard it. I still recognized it, and wished I didn't. This couldn't possibly be good news.

"Hello, Katie," I said, feeling inordinately proud that my voice betrayed nothing of what I was feeling. "What's new?"

"I think we both know the answer to that," Katie said sharply.

"Ah. It's you, then?"

"Yeah. It's me." Her voice was equal parts defiance and sorrow, as though she weren't sure whether to ask for congratulations or condolences.

I wasn't surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised. I suppose I'd always known it would be Katie that turned to the dark side. She was the only pure soul the Inquisition had to offer, and it's hard find someone darker than the person who used to be so good. "Why'd you do it?" I asked, not really caring what the answer was. It didn't matter why, not anymore. There was too much blood on her hands to ever come clean.

"I couldn't stand to watch it anymore," she said, defiance predominating in her voice now. "They kept *getting away with it*. We'd take out the ones that went too far, but it never *mattered*. A week later, it was like we were never there. We didn't have the power to touch anyone who counted for anything. Well, guess what, Winter? I have the power now. I can finally *fix* things."

"You aren't fixing anything, Katie. How many people have you killed? There were a dozen families in that apartment building. They did nothing wrong."

"Do you think I don't *know* that?" she screamed. I winced away from the phone; clearly, stability was no longer one of Katie's hireable traits. "Do you think I don't *know* what I've done? Do you think I don't hear them screaming when I close my eyes? Because I *do*! But I don't have your power, do I? You could have made things better, but you didn't, and now I have to! I don't have a scalpel, Winter, but I do have a cannon. And if I have to use a cannon because that's all I have, I'm fucking well going to *do* it!" She was breathing heavily. She'd started out screaming, but by the time she finished her rant it sounded like she was practically in tears.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because it's not too late," she whispered. "You could still *fix* this, Winter. You could still help me make everything better. Please. Help me."

"Considering that you sent your pet monster to kill me last night," I said dryly, "you'll have to forgive me if I sound a little skeptical."

"I want you to help me," she said, her voice once again almost calm. "But I can't afford to have you working against me. You're too capable. I was hoping that I could remove you from play before you had a chance to get too close."

"Why change your tune now?"

"It didn't work," she said simply. "You got away from it, twice. It's too late to end this quickly, so I can afford to give you another chance. Please, Winter. It's not too late."

"I'm sorry, Katie."

"Please, Winter," she said again, as though she weren't sure what else to say. "You were always a good person. I looked up to you. Why couldn't you do the right thing?"

I felt as though my heart were breaking. "There is no right thing," I said bitterly. "There's never a right thing."

"Maybe not," Katie said, her voice growing firm again. "But there is a wrong one. Please, Winter. I can't give you another chance."

"I'm sorry, Katie," I said again, and then I hung up on her.

Loki got the Inquisition together, years before, for his own amusement. That's what he claims, anyway; some things I've learned since then make me wonder whether Loki's really that shallow, or he's playing a deeper game. Either way, I believe his claim that every member of the group participated for a different reason. Some of those reasons are noble, while others are rather unsettling, and a few are just plain sad. Matthew gets off on violence, Jimmy's on an ego trip, Aubrey wants power, and Kris just wanted a friend. With such a diverse range of motives, it's really no surprise that they fell apart once he stopped taking an active hand in things.

Katie was always the zealot of the bunch. The others mouthed the lines about protecting humanity from monsters, and most of them supported the cause to some extent. But Katie *believed*. She truly believed, with all her heart, that what they were doing was right, that even when they were doing wrong it was justified by being a necessary evil on the path to a greater good.

On some level, that was an accurate assessment. While I didn't always agree with their methods, and I thought their capability for understanding a situation was essentially nil, I couldn't deny that they had a point with their vigilantism. They had, all things considered, done more good than harm. Certainly it was preferable to perform the unsavory acts required to get there out of a sense of duty, rather than for sadistic pleasure or amoral greed. As a result, Katie had always been one of the few members of the Inquisition I respected.

She was also the only one I was genuinely frightened of. It may sound odd, but someone doing terrible things because they feel it's necessary is almost always scarier than one doing them just for fun. Even the most enthusiastically evil person can only handle so much murder before they get hungry, or sleepy, or simply bored. But someone who's really, truly dedicated to the cause can keep going forever, because they aren't in it for pleasure. A guy who's in it for kicks will balk at some things, because they're too risky, or too tedious, or too evil. A zealot will do *anything*, because in their mind everything else is secondary to the cause.

You can't reason with a person like that. You can't talk them out of it, or convince them that what they're doing is too costly. You can't intimidate or blackmail them. They care too much for what they're doing, and too little for anything else.

Katie was that kind of person. She was kind, honest, generous, and she would shove her own mother under a bus without hesitation if that's what it took to make the world a better place. She wasn't always like that—when I first met her, she was actually having doubts about the rightness of their

cause—but somewhere along the way she'd gotten ruthless. The last time I'd worked with the Inquisition, she'd put a bullet through a human shield to cripple a rogue werewolf. She was torn up about it, but there was no question in anyone's mind that she would do it again without a moment's hesitation.

I couldn't argue with her, really. I would probably have done the same thing. That werewolf really needed to die, and if he'd gotten away I had no doubt that he would have killed the hostage himself. The bullet was by far the kinder fate.

The idea of her having access to this kind of power still scared me absolutely shitless.

"Katie's the one doing this?" Aiko said a few seconds after I hung up. "Shit. Do you think it's too late to move to Belize?" She knew Katie as well as I did, and it took her just as long to work through the ramifications of giving her a superweapon.

"I hope not," I said. "But hopefully it shouldn't matter. We know who it is now, so it should just be a matter of telling Loki and letting him handle things from here."

"You called?" Loki's voice said from a position about six inches behind my left ear.

I think I squeaked. I know I jumped. I landed maybe five feet away, facing backward and scrabbling for weapons. I then tripped over the cot Kyra was sleeping in. I ended up with my chest on the ground (on my injured arm, because *of course I was*), and my legs draped over the cot.

Any dignity I might have had was already lost, and I didn't bother trying to pretend otherwise. A little wriggling, helped along by a less-than-subtle shove from Kyra, got me all the way down to the floor. I pushed myself back to my feet, wincing when I forgot and used my left hand, and tried to pretend that little detour was intentional.

Loki, needless to say, was standing right where I'd been, laughing his head off. I wouldn't have minded, except that everyone else in the room was *also* laughing at me. Aiko looked like she was about to fall out of her chair, and Snowflake would have been in much the same position except that she was already lying down. Even Anna, once she'd woken up and figured out what I just did, started laughing.

"Nice one, Winter," Loki said, wiping nonexistent tears from his eyes. He didn't sound even slightly out of breath, probably because he didn't need to breathe. "You're a one-man slapstick show. So what did you want to tell me?"

"I know who you're looking for," I said, hating myself for every word. Katie needed to be stopped—there was no question about that. But I didn't want to hand her over to Loki. I knew only too well what he was capable of, and Katie didn't deserve that. *Nobody* deserved that.

But I couldn't afford to care. The stakes were too high for squeamishness.

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"Don't care," Loki said casually.

I blinked. "What?"

Loki looked at me directly. I met those mad, whirling eyes, and looked into the wildfire therein. An instant later I was looking at the floor, and shivering a little. I have a hard stare, but when Loki gets serious his would convince a tiger to go back to its chew toy.

"It doesn't matter who summoned the interloper," he said, his voice calm and cold. "All that matters is that they be stopped. Tell me, Wolf, can you do that?"

I didn't look away from the floor. Loki might sound calm, but my instincts were screaming that he was far angrier than I'd ever seen him before, and that meant I was about six inches away from dying horribly. "No," I said, as submissively as I knew how. My voice wasn't loud, but it had gone dead silent in the safe house, and I knew that everyone could hear me.

"I thought not. Can you tell me where to go to solve the problem?"

"No," I admitted. I knew Katie was behind it all, but that didn't tell me jack about where she was hiding. Katie was always one of the most forward-thinking of the Inquisition, and she was smart enough not to go anywhere I would know to look for her.

"Well, then," Loki said, sounding almost cheerful again. "It sounds like you have some work to do before dawn, don't you? I think you'd better get busy." He snapped his fingers.

Predictably, they produced a sound closer to a large-caliber gunshot than a popgun, accompanied by a bright flash of light. I heard sounds of surprise and pain, particularly from the werewolves, through the ringing in my ears. By the time I could see again, Loki had vanished.

Gods can be such assholes. I mean, a little egotism isn't all that surprising in a literal deity, but Loki's insistence on *always* getting the last word still seems a little unhealthy.

"We're screwed," Aiko said a few seconds later. Her voice was mild, devoid of any emotion except a sort of detached curiosity.

"Utterly," I agreed. "Why did I agree to this again?"

"Because you're a complete moron with no ability to learn from past mistakes?" Aiko suggested. This was followed by various noises of agreement from everyone except Snowflake, who made hers nonvocally.

"Pretty much," I sighed. "We need to get moving, though. I don't think Katie traced that call, but it's probably best not to rule it out."

"Where are we going?" Alexis asked, grabbing her backpack off the floor. Alexis wasn't as paranoid as me, but she was getting there. She certainly didn't let her jump bag out of arm's reach at a time like this.

"Shit, I don't know. Back to the pack house, I guess. I want to see how wrecked it is." I grabbed my own bag, then grabbed the keys to the SUV from the hook by the door and tossed them to my cousin. Driving with my hand was just not a good idea, and from Kyra's expression I was pretty sure she'd bite me if I let Aiko drive again.

As we drove south, I tried to figure out why Katie had called me.

I didn't trust her explanation. That just wasn't Katie. She looked up to me, and I could see her wanting to give me another chance to join her loony-tunes crusade. But she wasn't sentimental. If I had to pick one word to describe Katie, "ruthless" would be near the top of the list. I just couldn't see her throwing away any advantage for what she had to know was the extremely slim chance that I would listen to her.

I trusted my judgment of her character. So, logically, she must have some reason to think it was worth it. There were two ways that could happen—she might think that the cost was smaller than I did, or she might have overestimated the likelihood that she could convince me.

The second possibility wasn't plausible. We weren't close, but I'd been dealing with the Inquisition off and on for several years. I'd never been shy about my opinion of their anti-monster crusade. Evidence suggested that Katie's mental stability wasn't too hot anymore—which, considering the power she currently held, was a freaking terrifying thought—but I just couldn't see her misjudging me that grossly.

I groaned to myself and rubbed my temples, where I was already getting a headache. It felt like I was trying to think through fog in a concert hall, and the awfulness of that metaphor just goes to show how stupid I was at the moment. My hand ached, although it didn't seem to have started bleeding again, and I was ridiculously tired. I'd gotten close to ten hours of sleep, and I felt like I'd been running a marathon all night instead. The skin of my arm didn't seem to be regenerating as fast as it should have, either. Considering the source of the injury, that worried me more than a little.

I forced myself to think through the path of logic anyway. If Katie had known that calling me was unlikely to provide much benefit, she must have thought that the cost wouldn't be significant. Revealing that she was responsible for all this was a significant cost; I'd been guessing it was one of the Inquisition, but I couldn't have pinned it on her specifically.

That, in turn, meant that she must have thought I would figure it out whether she told me or not. I didn't think there was a huge clue pointing at her that I just hadn't noticed, which meant that it must be something that hadn't happened yet. It was about to, though; Katie wouldn't have given me any more advance knowledge than she could help. Decent tacticians are annoying that way.

But what could she do that would tell me that it was her? By and large, her obsession with hunting monsters was shared by the rest of the Inquisition. She felt more passionate about the topic than most of them, but they had the same targets.

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A moment later, I realized what it had to be. "Oh, crap," I said, digging my phone out of my pocket.

"What is it?" Aiko asked. She was currently sitting next to me in the cargo area of the SUV. She appeared to be browsing NSFW comics on her phone. Because she could, presumably.

"If you were an extremist splinter group from an ideologically extreme gang, and someone gave you way too much power, what's the first thing you'd do?"

"Kill everyone who ever made fun of my fashion sense," she replied immediately. "Why?"

"I was just thinking that the only people religious extremists hate more than heathens are heretics."

Aiko did not take long to see what I was getting at. "You think Katie's going to take out the rest of the Inquisition?"

"Not all of them," I said, thinking it through as I spoke. "But Katie was always the most dedicated of the bunch. Now that she has enough power to go it alone, I could see her starting a purge."

"Maybe," Aiko said doubtfully. "I don't know, though. Katie's psycho, but she's always been fairly specific. I don't really see her going after humans deliberately." Her voice was slightly caustic for that last part. I don't care for the Inquisition's monster-hunting agenda, but Aiko's always been rather more vocal about her disgust than me.

I shrugged and dialed a number from memory. I wasn't willing to store it in my phone; I don't really know that much about the finer points of technology, but I was pretty sure somebody could find it there. "It doesn't hurt anything to give them a heads-up."

By the time we reached the pack house, I'd warned most of the living members of the Inquisition about my suspicions. Kris and Doug were both still working for Val, who assured me that he would tell them to clear out immediately. Chuck's boss was less understanding, but Chuck had never had any particular difficulty walking out on a job. Mac, once she woke up, was entirely willing to run and hide; she might be a pacifist, but that didn't mean she had to be a fool. Matthew lived well outside of town, but he said that he would run at the first hint of weirdness anyway. He's psychotic and craves violence, but he isn't stupid. Honestly, crazy though he is, I think Matthew's probably the smartest of the bunch. He has a surprisingly accurate understanding of his own capabilities, and he's never hesitated to back down from impossible odds.

I didn't have Aubrey's phone number, though. He's always been paranoid (pot, kettle, I know), and we don't really talk much. He's envious of my ability to defend myself directly, and I'm not comfortable being around anyone who can screw with my head magically. Brick, obviously, wasn't answering his phone, and I couldn't get an answer from Jimmy or Mike either.

That was a little scary. Katie having access to nigh-godly destructive power was bad enough. Brick was vastly better educated, Jimmy was on a massive ego trip, and Mike was maybe the only one of the Inquisition as dedicated as Katie. If one or more of them were helping her, things could get even worse.

I couldn't do much about it until I tracked them down, though. So I shrugged it off as best I could and got out of the car to survey the damage.

It was surprisingly mild, all things considered. The doors of the pack house had been disintegrated, leaving a ten-foot hole in their place, and from what I could see through the hole the ground floor had been more or less gutted. The building itself was still standing, though, and that was more than I'd been expecting. My armored truck out front didn't even appear to have been touched.

I wasn't totally sure whether that was a good sign. I mean, yes, I was happy that the place hadn't been demolished again, and yes, it was good that Katie appeared to be getting a handle on the collateral damage. On the other hand, that might indicate that Katie was learning to control this thing more precisely, and that was definitely not good news. The more she learned, the more dangerous the situation became.

For a situation that started out so dangerous that the nuclear option was actually fairly justifiable, that's pretty impressive.

"So what are we doing here, again?" Kyra asked, looking over the destruction with an air of faint boredom. If she felt anything at seeing her former home damaged in this way, she kept it hidden.

"Wait for it," I said, with more confidence than I felt.

Maybe five minutes later, Kyi ghosted out of the trees beside the building. As always, I was impressed at her skill; we were standing in an area I knew well, with literally nothing to do but watch for someone to show up, and I *still* didn't see her until after she'd left the trees.

"Kyi," I said. "Did everyone make it out?"

"*Já*," she said, nodding vigorously. "Everyone is safe. Tindr only slipped in the wood, and he is only bruised in pride."

"Good. Are they still out there?" I gestured vaguely at the trees.

"*Já*. I am here, if anyone comes back, because I am the quiet one."

I wondered, idly, whether Kyi had been planning to watch them or kill them. It could go either way. Kyi Greyfell was the least crazy of my housecarls, with the possible exception of Tindr, but she doesn't carry a bunch of knives and a compound bow for no reason. If I want someone to disappear without a trace, Kyi is by far the best minion I have.

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If you ever have to seriously consider which minion is best for a quiet assassination, either your priorities or your life have gotten epically screwed up somewhere along the line. I didn't want to think too hard about which one described me.

"Good," I said, trying to focus on the task at hand. It was giving me more trouble than usual. "Go get Haki, Vigdis, and, oh, let's say Kjaran for me. Tell them to bring their stuff. The rest of you should stay in this area for a few days. I'll contact you in person or by phone. Clear?"

"Clear," she said, nodding vigorously. "I bring them now here." She turned and walked back into the forest without another word.

"Why are you getting more thugs?" Kyra asked a minute or so after the jotun left. "Seems like we have plenty of manpower already."

"Pellegrini knows you," I said. I'd never gotten clear on the deals she'd made with the gangster back when she was Alpha, but I was certain they'd been conducted face-to-face. "And, no offense, but the rest of you aren't all that intimidating. I figure I might as well pick up somebody a little more blatant while we're here anyway."

"I thought Pellegrini was giving you the runaround," Aiko said.

I smiled. It was not a very nice smile. "Oh, he'll help us. He just needs a little persuading."

Chapter Eleven

Twenty-five minutes later, I was sitting in an uncomfortable chair with my back to the wall of a small outdoor cafe. Snowflake was sitting by my feet, and I had a frost giant looming over my shoulder.

Nicolas Pellegrini walked out maybe a minute later. He didn't look like much; a guy in his late forties, the only thing that would have set him aside in a crowd was the quality of his suit. If you watched him for a while, you might start to see something in his bearing that indicated that he wasn't anything so simple as an office worker, but it was far from obvious.

I knew better. This was a guy who could look an Alpha in the face and refuse to be pushed around. He had plenty of steel in him.

He walked straight over towards my table. There was one chair on the other side of the table. He considered it for a moment, then looked at the giant standing behind me. "Really, Mr. Wolf," he said disapprovingly. "Was it necessary to use such an overt intimidation tactic?"

I shrugged. "Minions seemed like an appropriate fashion statement the last time we talked. I didn't want to come underdressed."

He sighed and sat down. "I apologize for the delay," he said. His voice reminded me, once again, of an English teacher. "My secretary did not see fit to inform me of your call. I would have come sooner if he had."

"That's fine," I assured him, watching over his shoulder. I recognized the huge guy standing across the street; he was the same bruiser Pellegrini had brought with him to the last meeting. I imagine he would have intimidated a lot of people. With Haki standing about six inches away, he looked about as threatening as a dog snarling at a grizzly. "You owe me a favor."

Pellegrini's smile could have meant anything. "Oh?"

"That was the deal," I reminded him.

"The favor was to be in exchange for you removing a certain person," he said mildly. "Preferably in a way that would impress the consequences upon anyone else considering a similar action."

"Yes," I said patiently. "And they found her without her skin. Which I told you about at the time. I think that was a suitably impressive response, don't you?"

"There's no question about that," he agreed. "Whether you actually performed that action is less certain."

I eyed him a moment. Then I sighed. "Look, Mr. Pellegrini," I said. "We both know this isn't about that. You aren't fond of competition, and I've accumulated enough influence in this city to make you feel a little concerned. Is that about right?"

There was a brief pause. "Your appraisal is unusually direct," he said eventually, not answering my question.

"I'm extremely short on time. So I'm going to make this as simple as I can." I met the mobster's eyes, making sure to keep my voice and bearing as nonthreatening as I could. I really didn't want to make him feel defensive right now. "The way I see it, we're in something of a stalemate here. See, you're rich. You've got a lot more in the way of material resources than I do. You've got a lot of manpower. When it comes to contacts, lawyers, political influence, you've got me outclassed."

Pellegrini smiled and said nothing.

"But," I continued brightly. "I can screw you over pretty hard, too. You're a smart guy, Mr. Pellegrini. I'm sure you've done a certain amount of research on me. You know about the things I've done, the people I've done, and you've got to have a good idea about the problems I could cause for you."

"Is that a threat?" he asked mildly. I was pretty sure he knew what the answer was, but there were certain stereotypes to uphold.

"Of course not," I said derisively. "No, what I'm saying here is very simple. I have largely ignored your activities, and this has, perhaps, sent the wrong message. Perhaps you have come to the conclusion that I am weak, and not to be taken seriously."

"This is not the correct impression," I said, keeping my voice level and fairly quiet. "I have ignored you because, frankly, what you do is not my problem. I do not police this city, and I have no desire to start. But if, for whatever reason, you've decided to make it my business?"

I smiled and met his eye again, and this time I didn't try to make it a human gesture. "I can do that," I said softly. "I really can. You want a fight? I can bring one like nothing you've ever *imagined*. I'm in a hurry, however, so I would appreciate it if you could have the dignity to say so, rather than trying to back out of a fair bargain and play word games for the next twenty minutes."

Pellegrini was silent for a long moment. His eyes, a shade of blue somewhere between denim and the sky in December, were flat and inscrutable. "I've had men killed for taking that tone with me in the past," he said eventually. His tone wasn't angry; he was simply stating a fact, totally calm.

"What do you know," I said dryly. "The only person here is Kjaran, and Kjaran doesn't talk. Nobody has to hear about how I was all rude and disrespectful. Your reputation doesn't take a hit, and we can interact like reasonable human beings."

"Are you?" he asked mildly.

I smiled tightly. "Neither of the above," I said, and I truly didn't know whether I was lying. "But that doesn't need to stop us."

He considered me for a moment, and then inclined his head slightly. It struck me more as a gesture of respect, as a fencer acknowledging a hit, than agreement. "Very well, Mr. Wolf," he said, his voice still utterly unreadable. "What favor were you requesting?"

I carefully did not let myself relax. I hadn't been totally sure that Pellegrini was bluffing, but I didn't want *him* to know that. "It's really more of a mutual benefit thing than a favor. I expect you're aware of the recent attacks which have, to some extent, focused upon your business interests?"

"Naturally," he said, with a negligent gesture.

"Good," I said. "A woman I sometimes associate with named Katie Schmidt is responsible for it. I want you to have your people collect any information you can on her whereabouts, and if possible kill her. They should consider her armed and extremely dangerous, and if they get a shot, hit it with everything they can. I would recommend explosives, or something similarly extreme."

Pellegrini didn't even blink. "Do you have any information on her location?"

"My information is incomplete," I said, gesturing slightly. Kjaran stepped forward and placed a fairly thick folder on the table. "But I have some information on her and several known associates. Kindly instruct your men to report to me if they see any of them. If any of these associates seem to be acting in concert with Schmidt, they should be considered equally dangerous, and a similar shoot-on-sight policy should be enacted."

"This would represent a significant investment of resources," Pellegrini said slowly.

I smiled coldly. "I seem to recall having saved you a similar investment in the past," I said. "And really, this will help you as much as me. You have a great deal invested in this area, and Katie poses a serious risk to those investments."

He flipped through the folder, then closed it and stood. "Very well, Mr. Wolf," he said. "I will send out the instructions immediately."

"Good," I said, not standing. "Kindly keep me apprised of new developments."

I'd been expecting Pellegrini to take a little longer than he did. As a result, it was nearly ten minutes before my next appointment sat down in the same chair he'd vacated. I took the chance to snatch a quick meal, as did Snowflake.

Kjaran didn't. But then, that was hardly a surprise.

Sergeant Kendra Frishberg was, in many ways, the polar opposite of Nicolas Pellegrini. Where his expensive suit stood out here like jewels in a pigsty, Frishberg was wearing worn jeans and a hoodie. Where Pellegrini looked about as physically intimidating as an aging English teacher, Frishberg was on

the large and athletic side for a woman, and made no attempt to conceal that fact. She looked vaguely Hispanic, but there was too much of the mongrel visible in her features to pin them down definitively.

You might imagine that the cop/criminal dichotomy was another way in which they represented the opposite ends of a spectrum. I would probably agree, except that Frishberg was not, in any sense of the word, a model police officer. She was the one who was unofficially in charge of the freak squad, the group of cops who were responsible for the unofficial problems which, unofficially, nobody else wanted to deal with. Think *X-Files*, and then remember that nine-tenths of what a cop in any department does is bullshit and paperwork, and you've got a pretty good idea what Frishberg's job was like.

More importantly at the moment, she was also not at all averse to a little casual bribery. I'd gotten access to files I really had no business looking at a few times thanks to her.

"Shrike," she said, not bothering with a hello. "It's been a while."

"Yeah," I agreed. I hadn't seen her since I'd helped her out with a rather amusing situation the year before. "Look, I need a favor."

I laid the situation out for her in much the same terms as I had for Pellegrini. She wasn't nearly as argumentative about it as he had been, though. Frishberg didn't have the ambition that the crime boss did, and she was on much friendlier terms with me.

"You don't ask for much, do you?" she said dryly when I'd finished. "You do remember that I don't have any official authority, right?"

"Who said anything about 'official?'" I asked. "Look, I'm not talking about a formal manhunt. I just want you to take any resources you have on hand and look into things."

"I don't think you get what I'm saying. If I do this for you, and someone notices, there'll be hell to pay. I don't know if you're aware of this, but I actually get paid to make sure you people *don't* cause problems that show up on the official radar."

I sighed. I'd been afraid of this. I could probably have talked Frishberg around—just telling her what the stakes were would probably have done it— but I didn't have time, and I hadn't forgotten how serious Coyote had been about secrecy. "I'll owe you one," I said instead, hating the way the words felt in my mouth. "Any favor you need that I can do."

Frishberg suddenly didn't look like she was in the mood to joke around. "Aw, shit," she muttered. "It's serious, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. I've got a serious time crunch here, though. In or out?"

"In," she muttered. "Damn you anyway, Wolf." Frishberg shook her head and stood up. "I'll tell my people to start looking."

"Thanks," I said, standing as well. Snowflake stood and shook herself. "Call if you find anything," I said, and then hopped the fence onto the sidewalk. Kjaran followed, although he didn't so much hop the fence as step over it, and we walked off down the street.

Just after we got out of sight of the cafe, a massive eagle swooped down into the alley we were walking down. It was a huge bird, enormously outsized even by the standards of eagles; it could easily have flown off with a medium-sized dog.

When it was ten feet off the ground, I felt a sudden surge of ice-scented magic, and the bird turned into Vigdis. The giant did a casual frontflip and landed on her feet, falling perfectly into stride. Kjaran, without missing a beat or showing any reaction whatsoever, tossed her a simple black sundress, which she began pulling on.

"Did you see anything?" I asked. I'd had her doing overflights while I talked with Pellegrini and Frishberg, under the assumption that there was literally no degree of paranoia which was not currently justified.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Do you think that...thing will come back?"

"Possibly, but I doubt it. Katie's already missed her chance to take me out before I start catching on, and with that off the table I think I've moved well down her list of priorities."

Vigdis absorbed that for a few moments. "What will you do now?"

"I want you to take Kjaran and Haki and check out our list of known locations. Look for anything out of place, and try to get information out of anyone you think might know something. If you see anything threatening, run. Clear?"

"What if they don't want to share what they know?" Vigdis asked.

I paused. I wasn't totally comfortable letting them interrogate people. Vigdis was borderline sociopathic, Haki was antisocial to the point of mental illness, and Kjaran was unlikely to intervene if they started going too far. The chances of an interrogation getting ugly were distressingly high.

But the stakes were too high to back down now. "Use your best judgment," I said, and hated myself for saying it.

She nodded sharply. "Come on, big guy," she said to Kjaran. "Let's go get Haki. There's *work* to do." Gods help me, she sounded *excited*.

I sighed and kept walking. Snowflake, sensing my mood, didn't say anything on the way to the hotel room where we'd agreed to rendezvous after my meetings.

We didn't see anything on the way there. I kept watch, and paid close attention to whether things seemed to be bending around us, but I really didn't expect to see anything. What I'd said to Vigdis

about Katie's priorities was true, and it had been made pretty clear that sending her monster after me wasn't likely to pay off. She had no way of knowing just how close those calls had been.

Back in the hotel, a generic chain downtown I'd never used before, I took the stairs to the seventh floor. It was a little inconvenient, but it had a great view and it was high enough up that I could catch myself with magic if I had to jump. That was worth a few flights of stairs.

I didn't have a key, so I opened the door with the same trick I'd used on my safe. It was harder on a door, because the handle was harder to move, but I'd also spent a lot more time practicing this version. There are enough doors that only lock from the outside to make it worth the effort.

Aiko was the only one who'd beaten us back. "You get anything?"

I shrugged. "Both of them agreed to help, but neither of them was exactly thrilled about it. I don't expect much. What's the word at Pryce's?"

"Same old," she sighed. "Kuzmak's fled town, and everybody else's keeping their heads well down. Kikuchi's people managed to track down Aubrey, though. Looks like he bought a one-way ticket to New York the day before Katie went apeshit. Didn't even take his stuff."

I grunted. "Getting while the getting's good, you think?"

"It's Aubrey," she said dryly. "Guy's got a worse opinion of humanity than you do. He'd know how safe Colorado is for him with Katie going on a rampage."

If we lived through this, I was going to have words for Aubrey about that. I didn't blame him for skipping town. In his position, I'd have done the same thing. But he could have at least warned me first.

If my city burned because he didn't have the balls to tell me how badly his gang had screwed up, he'd have Hell to pay. Literally, if what Coyote had said was true.

"The werewolves are still out looking for scents?" I asked, dropping onto the bed next to Aiko. There were a couple of chairs, but I was pretty sure they were actually medieval torture instruments in disguise. Snowflake jumped up and curled around my feet.

"Yeah. I sent Kimiko with them to answer any questions. Figured they'd have better odds if they both went furry."

"Good idea," I agreed. "I don't have high hopes for it, though. Katie would definitely know to plan for that."

"Can you think of anything she *wouldn't* know to plan for?" Aiko asked, idly scratching Snowflake's ears.

"I've already tried them all," I said sourly. "You got anything?"

"Zilch." Aiko was silent for a long moment. "How long do we wait before we run?" she asked finally, sounding distinctly unhappy.

If my life were a storybook, this is where I would have made some dramatic and inspiring speech about how we'd never give in and run. We'd miraculously pull it off at the last moment, with ten seconds left on Loki's countdown, and then go home to our happy ending.

But I've never been much good at giving speeches, and all my miracles come from the dark side.

"Midnight," I said after a moment's thought. Loki gave me until dawn, but I didn't think this was a good time to cut it close. Midnight would give us about five hours before any reasonable definition of dawn. If that wasn't enough time to get far, far away, then we weren't trying hard enough.

"Sounds good," Aiko said after a moment. "That gives us thirteen hours to find Katie and deal with her."

Thirteen hours. Well, *that* sounded fun.

The next nine hours were an exercise in pointlessness, futility, and frustration.

It seemed bizarrely unfair that, with all the effort I'd put into this and all the favors I'd used up, there should be so little result. Of all the avenues I'd taken, *none* of them had yielded anything worthwhile.

The jötnar hadn't turned up anyone even worth the bother of interrogating. In five hours of searching, the only person they'd found with any useful information was an old man who said that Katie had moved out of her apartment nearly a month earlier. All three of my housecarls agreed that he wasn't keeping anything back, and in fact seemed positively eager to gossip about his neighbors. They weren't the best choice for canvassing a neighborhood, but I was pretty sure they would have found anything obvious, making further investment of resources in that direction a waste of effort.

Kyra and Anna found Katie's scent in a number of places—apartments, university buildings, restaurants, and the like—but in every case the trail was long since cold. As far as they could tell, Katie hadn't been to any of her usual haunts in the last two weeks, and most of the trails were more than a month old. Aside from telling us that she'd been planning this for a while, which I'd already guessed, this wasn't terribly useful.

Frishberg, probably aided and abetted by the various other forces I'd put into motion, had APBs out for Katie, Brick, and Mike. Thus far, there had been a great many false alarms, and nothing useful. They did manage to find Katie's car, in long-term parking by the airport, but it didn't seem to have been touched in months. The number she'd called me from turned out to be maybe the last payphone in the city, which wasn't exactly useful for tracking her down. Katie was the type to drive halfway across town before she used a payphone, just so that if I found it it wouldn't point me at her lair.

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Pellegrini didn't contact me at all. I wasn't terribly surprised by that—it had been made very clear that he was cooperating under duress, and I hadn't expected him to contribute much—but it was still rather disappointing. I hadn't heard a word from the two Guards, either; presumably they were still too busy trying to prove I was guilty to consider actually helping.

Kikuchi, at least, was following through on his commitment. At this point, I thought he might have accomplished more than I had. Not only had his people managed to track Aubrey down, they'd also found Jimmy. It turned out that I'd been unable to contact him earlier for the simple, rather embarrassing reason that he'd changed his phone number recently. Kikuchi's minions had interrogated him fairly thoroughly, and come to the conclusion that he was not only not participating in Katie's schemes, he appeared to have no idea that there was anything going on at all. That fit; Jimmy always was the sort to be oblivious to something right under his nose.

That was the sum total of all our knowledge with four hours or so left to go before midnight. We'd managed to rule out a couple of suspects that were, frankly, fairly long shots to begin with. We'd managed to confirm that Katie wasn't stupid enough to be caught by looking in incredibly obvious places, which even the dumbest psychic could probably have told us. That was about it.

I would have liked to get out and look myself. I didn't. My minimal investigative skills were just not likely to find anything that the rest of the people looking wouldn't have. My time was better spent coordinating everyone else's efforts and making sure that all the various groups I was trying to manage were kept informed of each new development. I knew that.

That didn't mean I had to like it.

Dusk found me sitting in the hotel room, watching the sun set through the window and desperately trying to think of any other way I could go about finding Katie, and failing to come up with anything more practical than dowsing. I'd gotten some food and sleep, which did me some good. I still felt abnormally tired, and my maimed hand was throbbing painfully, but I could at least think clearly.

Just when I was getting ready for another round of futilely checking in with every group to make sure they hadn't heard anything, my phone rang. I recognized the number, but I'd been on the phone with so many people in the last few hours that I had no idea who it was.

"Wolf," Jackal said tersely when I answered. "Is that sorcerer you told me to look for any good with shadows?"

"Yeah," I said, starting to feel excited for the first time since I woke up. "Yeah, that's her specialty. Why?"

"I think we've got something for you."

Jackal looked, under her usual feral attitude, rather satisfied with herself. She was wearing the same thrift-store rejects as the last time I'd seen her, although she'd changed out her minions. Wishbone and Moose had been replaced by a slender, petit woman with features best described as cute. She had long, silky black hair, and pale grey eyes.

"Wolf," Jackal said, nodding tightly to me. She'd told me to meet her in the parking lot of a smallish grocery store on the north side of the city. "This is Blackcap."

"Hello," Blackcap said. Her voice was quiet and hesitant, almost to the point of stuttering.

"I've had my people staking out groceries and restaurants since you called me," Jackal said, pacing restlessly back and forth. "Blackcap, tell them what you saw."

"Okay," she said. "It was about an hour ago. There were two people using a shadow-based veil. They came in the front door and then stole about a day's worth of food. I followed them out the door, but they turned down an alley and they would have noticed me following them."

"Did you get a good look at them?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not," Blackcap said, flinching away from me slightly. "They didn't drop the veil where I could see them."

"Can you show us the alley where you lost them?" I asked.

Blackcap glanced at Jackal, then nodded. "I can," she said, her voice a little firmer. "Follow me."

The alley turned out to be an unremarkable specimen of the type, about three blocks away. I could see why Blackcap hadn't been willing to follow them in here; it wasn't a terribly populated area, and she would have a hard time blending in with the handful of people who were present. This wasn't a nice part of town, and Blackcap looked like she came from a background five times richer and ten times more vulnerable than anyone in sight.

Not that I believed it for a moment. She hung around with Jackal, and from what I'd seen of Jackal she was about as gentle and well-mannered as her namesake. Based on what I'd heard from Aiko, that wasn't an uncommon result in the harsh, dog-eat-dog society of fae half-breeds. If Blackcap had survived that, it was a safe bet that she was a lot tougher than she looked.

I couldn't detect anything out of the ordinary in the alley. That wasn't surprising, really; it had been an hour since Katie had been here, if that was who Blackcap had seen, and she wouldn't have lingered long. Any trace of the veiling spell would long since have faded, and only in lazily-written stories do bad guys leave obvious calling cards or unique tire treads wherever they go.

Fortunately, I'd come prepared. Almost before I'd gotten a chance to look things over, Kyra and Anna moved past me and started casting for the trail.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

Scent bomb, Snowflake informed me a moment later, undoubtedly relaying it from Kyra. I could communicate with werewolves directly, but it was harder, and I needed skin or eye contact to get much detail unless I was in a trance. *Peppermint and silver dust. Guess we're expected.*

Yeah, I agreed. It was a little troublesome, but also a good sign. A scent bomb spiked with silver was really only good for one thing. Given that silver was rather expensive stuff, most thieves wouldn't bother using one unless they had good reason to expect a werewolf to be tracking them. *Can they figure something out?*

She says she thinks so, Snowflake said after a few moments for everything to work its way through the pipeline. *They used too much mint. Kyra thinks they should be able to follow it without having to breathe silver the whole way.*

Awesome, I said, starting to grin. It wasn't the friendly sort of grin. *Tell them to follow it as far as they can without risking detection, and go with them to make sure. The rest of us will go get prepped. It's starting to sound like this might be our ticket to finding Katie, and I want to be ready.*

Chapter Twelve

It took almost an hour for Kyra and Anna to follow the trail to the end. When they had, I no longer had any doubt as to whether it was Katie's or not.

"I don't get it," Alexis said. "A tile store?"

"A *closed* tile store," I corrected, watching the building from a hundred yards away. "It's been closed for a while. There's a fairly huge tunnel complex underneath."

"How do you know about this?" my cousin asked.

"There was a witch using them a couple of years ago," I said. "And Katie was there when we shut him down." The building had been almost demolished in that fight; someone must have fixed it up and kept it from being repossessed on back taxes.

"Oh. So this is it, then."

"Looks like." I dropped the binoculars; there didn't appear to be any activity near the building. Less so than there should have been, even; this wasn't a high-traffic area, particularly at this time of day, but in the past five minutes I'd noticed people giving the tile store a wide berth even by those standards. I wasn't sure whether that was because people could tell, on some level, that there was something bad going on there and avoided it as a result, or because Katie had taken more active measures, but either way it was good news for me.

The last thing I wanted right now were witnesses.

"I want you to take the werewolves and go," I said, handing the binoculars to Alexis. "Get well out of town. I would recommend France." I was referring to another safe house, a relatively small place in the French Riviera. Alexis, Aiko, and I all knew a gate terminus nearby. Aiko was the only one who spoke French, but there were so many foreigners in the Riviera that you could pretty much always find someone who spoke English.

Alexis clearly wanted to argue. She didn't. One of the qualities I've appreciated in my cousin is a willingness to realistically consider the dangers involved in a situation, and bow out when those dangers become too much for her to handle. She's serious about using her powers to help people—which, I might add, she does in a rather more intelligent way than the Inquisition ever managed—but she isn't stupid.

"You sure?" she asked instead, her tone unhappy.

"Yeah," I said firmly. "Take Snowflake with you, too."

Hey! Snowflake said, sounding distinctly upset. *You can't send me away!*

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I sighed. *You saw that thing, Snowflake. You can't do anything to help me against it. I can get out through the Otherside, if I have to; you can't. And if there's one place Loki would be extra thorough when he destroys the city, it's right here.*

I know that! she said indignantly. *I'm not stupid, Winter. But bad things always happen to you when I leave you alone. If I let you go in there alone, you'll die.*

Do you think I'll do better if I have to spend my attention making sure you're safe?

You can't do worse, she said defiantly.

I sighed again. *Look, Snowflake,* I said, feeling very tired. *I know the odds here. I know there's a pretty good chance I'm not coming back out of there, whether you're there or not. If I'm going to hell tonight, I'd rather not take you down with me.*

Now you're just fighting dirty.

That's my specialty, I agreed. *Will you do it?*

Fine, she said bitterly. *But you'd better come back. Aiko and I wouldn't make it very far without you.*

"Hang on a second," Alexis said suddenly, interrupting my train of thought. "Aren't we overlooking something? Loki said if you told him where to go, he could deal with it. Why don't you just call him up?"

"That's a good thought," I said. It was also one I'd already had, as soon as we started tracking Katie back to her hideout, but I didn't mention that. "The only problem is that the tunnels under this place are huge. I haven't explored them in any detail, but I know there's at least one tunnel that's about twenty miles long. I don't think that level of precision would make Loki happy."

"Oh," she said, clearly disappointed. "Shouldn't you tell him anyway, though? It could at least narrow things down a little."

I paused. "Probably," I admitted. "But considering how pissed he was the last time, I think he'd kill me if I called him again without having an answer for him. If I can't figure anything out soon I might have to take that option, but for now I still have a chance of resolving things myself."

"I guess so."

"It was a good idea," I reassured her. "Now go on, get out of here."

I had a lot to think about, as I walked up to Katie's lair. Did I seriously believe I had a chance of pulling this off? I knew all too well what this thing was capable of, and I was well aware that the idea of me presenting a serious challenge to it was laughable. Was this really an attempt to solve the problem,

or was I just throwing my life away for no gain, trying to assuage a misplaced sense of guilt? Was what I'd told Alexis true? Did I refuse to contact Loki—if I could even do so, which wasn't at all certain this late in the game—because I thought it was the best way to stop Katie, or was I just frightened of what he might do to me if my performance wasn't satisfactory?

Or, more disturbingly yet, did I just want to take her out with my own hands? She'd done more to hurt me, personally, than anyone had managed in quite a while, and I've never been good at forgiving and forgetting. Was I risking my life for justice or revenge? What was the difference, in the end, if the consequences were the same?

It felt like a long, uncomfortable walk, alone in the night.

Finally, I reached the long-abandoned tile shop. I made no effort to hide my presence; to the contrary, I marched quite openly up to the front door. My armor had been lost when their pet monster destroyed our mansion, but I'd had a reasonable wardrobe stashed in the safe house. Currently I was wearing black leather pants and a white silk shirt. The shirt had my coat of arms, a black shield with a ragged-edged wolf's head in white, prominently displayed on the chest.

I had reinforced both the shirt and the pants fairly heavily with magic. They wouldn't provide nearly the protection that actual armor would, but unless I got unlucky they should at least stop small-caliber bullets, and knives driven by merely human muscles.

That would have been a lot more comforting if Katie were using either of those weapons.

Anyways, what I'm getting at here is that I cut a fairly impressive figure. My left hand was still a maimed, shredded hunk of raw meat, but that just made the result scarier.

I didn't bother trying to open the door. Katie was smart enough and skilled enough to have some way of monitoring the area, either magically or with security cameras. Between that and my rather distinctive appearance, I didn't think I had much chance of sneaking in.

It was possible that she was about to send her otherworldly monster down my throat, in which case I was about to be in a lot of trouble. But I didn't think that was too likely. From what she'd said I was pretty sure she really didn't want me dead, and she had to be curious what I was doing loitering around outside her door. I was pretty sure she'd come to check it out personally.

To encourage that attitude, I'd deliberately kept my appearance as low-key and nonthreatening as I could. I had a whole bunch of weapons in my cloak, but nothing visible or obvious. That was a bit chancy, but I didn't really expect a knife or a shotgun to stop Katie at this point anyway. I thought it was a chance worth taking.

I'd been standing there maybe fifteen minutes when the door opened—long enough that I was starting to feel pretty antsy, but not long enough to eat into my margin of safety before dawn. I was expecting to see Katie on the other side, and I wasn't disappointed.

I just wasn't prepared for how wretched she looked. Katie had always been on the small side, and slender. But sometime in the last couple of months she'd gone from slender to *starved*. Her clothes hung loose on her frame, as though she were a scarecrow; I was pretty sure that if she hadn't been wearing them I could easily have counted her ribs. Her forearms, where they stuck out from her ratty T-shirt, were stick-thin, with a clearly visible indentation between the bones. Her face was almost cadaverous, with cheekbones that could have cut a tense silence. Her hair was filthy and matted, and could have benefited from the attentions of a lawnmower. Her dark eyes were sunken and haunted, but feverishly bright.

The man standing behind her looked hardly any better. Mike Adams had been a lot bigger to begin with, and so he could sustain it a little better, but he still looked like shit. He must have lost fifty pounds of muscle, and his skin was so pale that I wondered whether he'd been aboveground since he quit his job. His hands, when he moved them, had a slight but noticeable tremor. Both of them put off a stench so thick I gagged almost ten feet away; neither their bodies nor their clothes seemed to have been washed in weeks.

Summoning literally ungodly monsters from beyond the edge of the universe could give you vast power, but it turns out that maybe it didn't come for free.

Katie stared at me for several seconds. Her eyes didn't seem to focus quite right, and her face was curiously slack, as though she wasn't sure how to form expressions anymore. "Winter," she said at last, her voice quiet and dead tired. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to give you one more chance," I said, silently panicking. Coyote had said that anyone stupid enough to try this stuff lost control eventually, and looking at them it wasn't hard to see why. With the condition Katie and Mike were in, I doubted they would be able to maintain the degree of concentration required for that kind of heavy-duty magic much longer. Never mind dawn, it might break free the very next time they sent it out. If that happened, I had a sickening fear that France might not be far enough to run.

"One more chance?" Mike asked, his voice slow and somewhat unsteady. "For what?"

I kept my gaze focused on Katie. She'd always been more willing to listen to reason, zealot or not. "To stop," I said, keeping my voice fairly submissive. I remembered how volatile Katie had been in our last conversation, and I couldn't afford to set her off right now. "If you stop now, everything can still be all right. We can work together and fix this mess."

Katie's eyes focused on me for the first time, and her expression went cold. "You can't push us around anymore, Winter," she said, her voice flat and bleak. "Nobody can. We're stronger than you now. Go away, Winter. Go away and don't come back." She started to close the door.

Well, shit. I'd said exactly the wrong thing to get through to them. I didn't stand a chance of chasing them through the tunnels, not when they'd had who knew how long to learn their way around

and prepare traps. I needed to get them out of the building, and I had to do it before she could close the door.

And then I realized exactly what to say.

"He who fights monsters should be careful that he does not become a monster himself," I quoted, slowly and distinctly. Katie stopped moving the instant I started, and I knew I'd chosen right. "And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

Katie opened the door again, and I was legitimately frightened by her face. She glared at me with a hatred that bordered on madness, and that hatred transformed her. Her skeletal frame ceased to be a cause for pity, and became terrifying instead. "How dare you," she breathed, her voice unsteady. "How *dare* you say that to me?"

I leaned back against the wall, several feet away from the door, and smiled. It was a provocative smile, deliberately so. "I was chatting with Katrin Fleischer a couple days ago," I said casually. "I don't know if you know her, but she's the baddest vampire in the city. Real nasty character, believe me. Even *she* thought you guys were going a little far. I mean, I don't like her, but I've gotta say, at least she only kills the people she means to. Hell, you two have a higher body count than anybody I've dealt with, and you haven't gotten *any* of the ones you say you hate. Really makes me wonder what you're trying to do here."

By the time I'd finished the third sentence, Katie's face was locked in an expression of apoplectic fury. When I started questioning their motives, she lunged out the door, her hands raised as though to strangle me, which I strongly suspected was her actual intention. Mike reached out and caught her by the elbow; his reactions were too slow, at this point, to catch her before she crossed the threshold, but he made her pause before she actually reached me.

In that momentary pause, Aiko pulled the trigger.

I had an excellent view, from less than five feet away. The first round hit Katie in the side, just under her arm, and proceeded through her body at a fairly sharp angle. There was no question of it stopping; the .50-caliber rifle Aiko was using could put a bullet through a brick wall no problem. Flesh and bone didn't even slow it down.

Blood and meat sprayed out the exit wound, a hole the size of my hand just to the right of the center of her chest. It wasn't a heart shot, not at that angle, but her lung was destroyed. It was a damn good shot from a hundred yards, even with a sniper rifle.

Katie staggered to the side, all but thrown from her feet by the impact, and hit the wall. Her expression was one of total shock—no pain, that hadn't had time to register yet, but she looked almost stunned as she saw the damage that her body had just taken, an injury far more severe than anything I'd ever received.

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A moment later, as my ears started to ring from the sound of the first shot, the second bullet hit her. Thanks to Katie's movement, this round hit a little lower, on her abdomen. It punched through her liver, possibly clipping the kidney on the way by, and then shredded her intestines on the way through. More blood sprayed across the wall, mixed with feces and chunks of organs.

I watched for sudden realization and pain to come over Katie's face, for her to stagger and fall. She didn't. Blood was pouring out of her in buckets and I had bits of her innards splattered on my face, but she didn't show any sign of pain, and she didn't fall. Her face was contorted by even more vicious fury instead, and she turned to face the direction the bullets had come without hesitation.

A moment later I was hit by a hammer of magic, scented with shadows and iron. It was overpowering, an order of magnitude stronger than anything I'd ever seen a human produce; the sheer sensation of it literally knocked me from my feet, and it wasn't even directed at me.

Almost instantly, darkness seemed to boil out of nowhere in a massive, hemispherical shield, cutting the three of us off from the rest of the street. It was absolutely opaque, blocking out any light from the other side. Presumably Aiko was equally unable to see us through Katie's spell. It was a brilliant defense against a sharpshooter, and I had to applaud Katie for thinking on her feet, even if it was a little late.

Except, apparently, it wasn't. She turned to face me, and as I watched more shadows seemed to crawl from her feet up her body. They were thick, almost oily, and as they moved I was struck by how *alive* they seemed. It was like watching a time-lapse video of rot spreading across meat. The shadows lapped at the edges of her wounds, almost tentatively, then slipped inside.

Katie shivered. Her eyes were half-closed, and her expression was touched for the first time with pain, and also a strange, unsettling pleasure. I felt intensely uncomfortable watching it, yet couldn't tear my eyes away. I wasn't sure whether this was the first stage of some sort of parasitic infestation or just a particularly disturbing bit of magic, but either way it was *creepy as fuck*.

As this was going on, I heard another gunshot. It didn't penetrate the wall of shadows.

That was beyond terrifying. Shadows aren't supposed to have any physical strength, and magic can only twist something against its nature so far. I was reasonably skilled with this kind of magic, and I'd never managed to make a shadow much stronger than duct tape. Even that was difficult, and I couldn't keep it up for more than a couple seconds.

Katie had just bounced a bullet that could pose a serious threat to tank armor, with no sign of effort, while simultaneously shrugging off damage that could have put any werewolf I'd ever met down for the count.

Coyote had said that the monster they were summoning could provide power. I was kinda wishing he'd mentioned that, in maybe two weeks' exposure, it could turn a crappy half-trained mage into a world-class nightmare.

Katie didn't even seem to notice that her shield had just been shot. She was standing steady on her feet again, and her wounds were completely covered in those thick, unnatural shadows. She didn't even seem aware that most of her guts were now splattered across the wall. "Get Wolf," she said. Her voice was thick and wheezy, and blood flowed from her mouth when she spoke. It looked *wrong*, oily and a couple shades too dark, laced as it was with those unnatural shadows. She didn't seem to notice that either.

Mike nodded and started walking towards me. He didn't seem to have reacted any more strongly to what had just happened than Katie did; his expression was blank, and he didn't hurry at all. When another bullet hit the wall of shadows without penetrating, the shaman didn't even flinch.

I scrambled away, startled out of my reverie by sheer panic. I was so terrified that it hardly even registered when my ruined hand hit the ground. It was fair to say that I was scared shitless of Katie and Mike, and in that moment I honestly would rather have faced Loki's disapproval than spent another instant in the company of these supercharged lunatics.

I didn't get the choice. Mike, without accelerating or showing any sign of effort, gestured with one hand. A moment later I was hit by a wall of magic, driven by the same unbelievable power as what Katie had been doing. I didn't have a prayer of resisting that overwhelming force; all my mental defenses crumbled before it like dust before the wind. I'd barely had time to recognize what was going on before I lost consciousness.

Chapter Thirteen

Trying to classify people is an intrinsically impossible task. People vary too much to fit into neat little boxes. Unless you have so many categories as to be uselessly uninformative, there are always going to be people who straddle the edges, and the system breaks down when you try to make them fit one category or the other.

That being said, there's a certain amount of worth to it. No two people are quite the same, but sometimes you can make sweeping assumptions that are accurate enough to be a decent first guess. !!Not everyone who listens to NDH is a Goth, but it's common enough to target advertisements to that subculture.

It's the exact same with mages. Sorcerers, for example, are a huge and diverse group. They vary wildly in their attitudes, tastes, motivations, and ambitions. But they're typically reckless, egocentric, and impulsive, given to mood swings and extremes. Katie's behavior, in that regard, was an exaggeration of the trend, not something totally new. Likewise, while their magical capabilities are highly variable, they tend to excel with quick, relatively clumsy work. Most of them have a fairly narrow range of talents, but they can be pretty good within that range.

Nowhere, though, is the classification system more obviously pointless than with shamans. By far the rarest of the five major types of mage, they're also much more variable than others, in both powers and personality. Some shamans have developed something very like prescience, while others specialize in seeing the past. A shaman can read your mind or tell your future in the flight of a plastic bag. Some of them can compel spirits to do their bidding, or exhibit the traits associated with spirits themselves. It's not unheard of for them to exert an influence on space and time, domains more typically associated with wizardry.

What I'm getting at here is that, if you put two shamans in a room, odds are very good that there would be absolutely no overlap between their talents. Attitudes are similarly unpredictable. Most shamans tend to be somewhat withdrawn, preoccupied with a world that most people don't even know exists, but beyond that all bets are off.

Between the massive variance in their powers and their extreme rarity (to my knowledge, Mike was the only shaman I'd ever met, and he hardly counted), I'd never really bothered to learn that much about them. I kept meaning to get around to studying up on the topic, but somehow there was always something more pressing.

It is, thus, no exaggeration when I say that when I got up, I had absolutely no idea what Mike had done to put me down.

When I opened my eyes, I was standing in the forest. It was a vast forest, although I had no idea how I knew that, and not a friendly one. The trees, a mixture of fir and spruce, grew thickly all around. It

was nighttime, but not even a little bit dark. The full moon hung overhead, huge and bright, surrounded by a sea of stars that blazed with cold, steady light.

I took quick stock of myself. I was naked and barefoot, without any weaponry or protection. My hand was whole, but I was bleeding freely from a deep cut in my left thigh. Strangely, it didn't hurt at all; I could see, feel, and smell the blood running down my leg, but there was no pain at all.

I had no idea where I was or how I'd gotten here.

There was no path to speak of, but a game trail led off through the trees to my left. I followed it, for lack of any better idea what to do, for several minutes. I paid just enough attention to watch where I was going; the rest of my mind was focused on coming up with a plan, without much success.

The next time I looked around, everything had changed. Snow lay thick on the ground, utterly pristine and sparkling in the light of the moon. Looking back, I saw nothing but the omnipresent trees; my passing left no trace, no mark in the snow. I didn't feel even slightly cold, even though I was knee deep in snow. At the same time, I realized that at some point I had changed. I was walking on four feet, now, and anyone who saw me would have little doubt that they were looking at a wolf.

I froze. I couldn't change without noticing it. A werewolf's change is slow and painful, *not* something you could miss.

And right about then, I realized where I was, and was suitably terrified.

Shamans are defined by a connection with the spiritual world. What that means is a question that only a shaman could answer; to say that my knowledge of spiritual affairs was sketchy would be an understatement of criminal proportions. My understanding was that the spirit world was the flipside of the physical one, the world of thought and dreams. Ideas were real here, while material things were nothing but a mirage, forgotten as swiftly as rain in the desert.

Mike had wanted to incapacitate me, quickly and relatively permanently. To do that, he'd trapped me in the spirit world. More specifically, in the spiritual representation of a single person.

Me.

I'd been in such a spiritual realm once before, three years ago. That one had been belonged to Aiko; walking through it with her had been a deeply uncomfortable experience. I had seen deeper into her than one person is meant to see into another.

They say that in the spirit world, the only things you have to fear are those you carry with you. For someone like me, that wasn't much reassurance.

Aiko had implied that leaving your own spiritual domain was harder than getting there, and carried a certain element of risk. Unfortunately, I had no idea how to go about it. It wasn't something I'd ever researched, and Alexander was even more clueless about the spiritual than I was.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

"Hey there," a voice said suddenly behind me. It was a fairly unremarkable voice, baritone, with a dry, bemused sort of humor to it, the voice of someone who looked at the world and laughed at the absurdity.

I froze in place. A few seconds later, the source of the voice pulled up even with me. He was floundering a little in the knee-deep snow, but doing so in a good-natured way, with no resentment of the snow for making his hike harder. He looked little more remarkable than he sounded; on the short side, and thin. He was wearing a light sweatshirt, jeans, and hiking boots—somewhat inadequate for the conditions, but that didn't seem to bother him. He had charcoal grey hair and amber eyes, but his features were normal enough otherwise.

I stared. There was no mistaking it. That face was *mine*, less four years of hell. He had fewer scars; his hands were healthy, and there was no wound in his leg. But it was still, unmistakably, *me*.

He grinned, a friendly expression, and continued along the path. "Cat got your tongue?" he asked, laughing easily.

I shook myself and followed...well, myself. I noticed as I did that he, unlike me, left tracks in the snow.

"Oh, right," he said, as I caught up and walked abreast of him. "Can't talk, can you? I always forget how inconvenient that is. Well, I guess you'll have plenty of time to listen, won't you?"

At some point while I was distracted by meeting myself, it had turned to day around us. The sun blazed down from a sky as deep and blue as any ocean, painfully bright as it reflected off the snow. "That's kind of a problem we have, isn't it?" the other me said as he led the way down a path that hadn't been there a moment before. "We talk a lot and listen a little. I think there's a saying about that, isn't there?"

I blinked at the incongruity of me giving myself advice about listening more. When I opened my eyes again, the scene had shifted again. To the right were the same deep, threatening woods as before. To the left loomed a city, one not quite like any I'd ever seen. It was made of white marble, gleaming and perfect and constant. It was surrounded by a high wall, easily higher than I could leap. There was only one person in sight, sitting on the parapet of the wall.

Three guesses who it was, and the first two don't count.

"Howdy," the newest me said, waving cheerfully. He was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and looked even less scarred than the one walking beside me. He was carrying a pistol, but hardly looked competent to use it. "Wow, that's a big dog. Is he safe?"

"Maybe," the other me said. "You'd probably best stay up there, though. Just in case."

New me nodded, not seeming bothered. "That's fine," he said, taking a bite out of a sausage in a bun. "Where are you fellows going?"

"Nowhere special," the first me said, ambling along through the snow at the edge of the trees.

New me nodded again. "Good luck with that," he said, tossing the rest of his lunch casually over the edge of the wall. My eyes fixed on where it had fallen, and I suddenly became aware that I was intensely, overwhelmingly, ravenously hungry. New me turned and walked down a staircase on the other side of the wall, into the city.

The other me looked at me and sighed. "He isn't the brightest, is he?" he asked, shaking his head sadly. "A little on the naive side, I've gotta say. Doesn't matter how many times you show him that something ends badly, he's just gotta try it once more."

A couple steps further on, we were suddenly, inexplicably beside a gate. It was deeply inset in the wall, with a portcullis and murder holes and all the other tools of siege defense. Another me was standing by the gate, and this one looked grizzled enough to make up for the last version. He was the first I'd seen bleeding from the leg the way I was, and he was dressed in heavy leather, suitable for combat. He was carrying the shotgun I'd lost years ago, and my Bowie knife was prominently displayed on his hip.

"Hello there, my good sir," the me walking beside me said. "Might I get into the city this fine day?"

The guard me looked straight ahead, not even deigning to notice the real me or the me I was with. "No," he said tersely. "Move along."

"You sure?" the other me said, clearly disappointed. "I was hoping I could get one of those sausages, or maybe a new coat."

"No," the guard me said, his voice flat. "We don't need your kind here. Move along."

The other me sighed, and then started walking again. "I guess we aren't wanted here," he said sadly, not seeming to care that guard me was still in earshot. "Very strict entry requirements, I suppose."

I was starting to feel a little disgusted. Symbolism and metaphor were par for the course, in the spirit world, but I would have hoped for my subconscious to be a little more subtle than *this*.

A few steps later, it was night again, and we were wandering through the depths of the forest. There was no sign of the city, no indication that cities were a thing at all. I was still losing blood with every step, but there was no pain, and I felt no weaker. A quick glance backward confirmed that there was no blood in the snow, either.

Not far in front of us was a campfire. Three people were sitting in the small circle of light it cast, roasting what smelled like a rabbit. I started salivating at the smell; I felt so starved it was physically painful. My hunger seemed to have grown in the few minutes I'd been awake.

Event Horizon (Winter's Tale)

To no one's surprise, all of the people by the fire were me. One of them was a hard, crazed looking guy, lean and vicious. He was wearing black and white armor, covered in spikes and sharp ridges. Blood poured from his left thigh, seemingly unnoticed, and he was missing some teeth. His features were scarred, and there was an ugly light in his amber eyes. Tyrfin hung at his side, a deadly threat even in its sheath. The fallen log he was sitting on and the ground for a couple feet in all directions were covered in frost, several inches thick. He took no notice of it.

The next version of me was hardly any better. He also had the wound on his leg, and his left hand was a mangled mess. The other scars were mostly hidden under a white shirt, emblazoned with my wolf's-head crest, but I was confident they were there. He had a cloak, seemingly woven of pure shadows, thrown over the shirt, which didn't quite conceal the knives he was carrying. His eyes were hard and cold, more frightening in their ruthless calculation than the other man's madness. He was poring over a topographic map; it didn't show any city.

The third me, though, was by far the worst of any I'd seen. Lean and hungry, he lay on the frozen ground by the feet of the first me, his eyes fixed on the rabbit over the fire. A heavy silver collar was clamped tightly around his neck, with no visible means of removal, attached by a short chain to a spike in the ground. He was muzzled, as well, with a contraption of leather straps and silver buckles. The straps prevented him from opening his mouth, while silver spikes inside his mouth kept him from closing it fully. The result looked horribly painful.

As you might imagine, this me was a wolf. It didn't matter; I knew who it was. I knew *what* it was.

The me walking beside me held up one hand, as though to hold me back, and then walked out into the small clearing where they'd made camp. I stayed put. I knew better than to disregard that warning.

I didn't need a warning. This was me, after all, no matter that it felt like something outside me; everything I'd seen was just a representation of who I was, deep down.

"Good evening," the me I'd been walking with said, waving. "Do you mind if I borrow a bit of your fire?"

The me in the cloak looked up from his map at the other me. "You're welcome to it," he said, in the least welcoming tone imaginable. "You should be careful out here, though. There's a wolf in these woods."

"Is that so?" the first me said, looking out beyond the edge of the firelight to meet my eyes.

"Yeah," the me with the sword said, staring into the fire. His expression was ugly, vicious and cruel. "Killed four people, not that long ago. Family that lived out here. Nasty scene."

"I'd imagine," the other me said, shuddering for effect. "Listen, friends, I just realized, I forgot something back in town. I need to go. But first, do you mind if I take some of your meat? It's a long walk back."

"By all means," the me in the cloak said, back to studying his map. "But watch yourself out here. You're a long way from the city, and the rules are different out here."

The other me took about half the rabbit and walked back out into the woods where I was waiting. He motioned me to silence, then handed me the rabbit.

I closed my teeth on it, being careful not to bite myself. It smelled even better so close; I felt like I hadn't eaten in a week, and my body had gotten physically weaker for lack of food. Saliva was pouring out between my teeth. In that moment, there was nothing I would have liked more than to tear into that rabbit.

I tossed it back into the firelight. My aim shouldn't have been worth shit—this wasn't something I'd practiced—but this was the spirit world, where intention was a physical force. The meat went where I wanted it to.

A moment later, the collared me fell on the rabbit like a starving wolf, probably because it was one. It was hard for it to eat, in that muzzle, and clearly physically painful. It did so anyway, driven beyond desperation by the hunger.

The other me wanted to move on. I refused, waiting until the collared me had finished his meal. It took a while, muzzled as he was, and blood was running down his chin from the spikes before he'd finished. The whole time, the other mes didn't do a thing, didn't even watch their slave suffering.

As I'd expected, as soon as I turned away from the scene it disappeared. My companion and I were walking along a ridge, the moon shining high above. To either side, the slope descended at a steep angle, covered in trees and rocks, with sheer drops everywhere. At the moment it wasn't a concern, but up ahead the ridge became narrower and narrower, until at some point it was clear that I would be forced to choose a side.

I'd had just about enough of this sick game. I stopped, forcing the other me to stop as well, and stared at him. My hunger had grown even stronger, making it hard to concentrate.

Werewolves in fur can't talk. It's one of the first things every werewolf learns to hate, and there's no way around it. A canine throat simply can't produce human words.

But this was the spirit world, where force of will counted for more than any physical reality. And my will said I could talk.

"What's the point of this bullshit?" I growled, glaring at the other me.

He regarded me with mock surprise. "Oh, so you do have a voice?"

"Stop joking around and answer the question."

"Well, I suppose that depends on who you ask," he said, clearly humoring me. "If you were to ask Mike, he'd say the point is to keep us out of the way. He stuck us down here to keep us from interfering with his plans. It would probably have worked, too, if he understood what we are. As it is, he tailored it all wrong. I'm almost free now."

"What do I have to do to get out of here?" I asked. My voice was still a growl, although I hadn't meant for it to be.

He considered me. His expression was almost sad. "Here's the thing," he said. "You're thinking of it like you're the real Winter. What if you're not? What if you're just the last piece of my subconscious I need to deal with? The bestial part of my nature that I need to overcome before I can wake up and deal with Mike and Katie?"

I considered this other me, the only one who had interacted with me directly, the only one who left tracks in the snow. I considered that he was the only one who had seemed complete, rather than representing only a portion of who I was. I considered the growing, all-consuming hunger within me. I looked up at the moon, which offered me no answers.

Was it always this simple, I wondered? Was this what everyone had to do to leave the spirit world?

"I think you're right," I said. "But there's something you're forgetting."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Oh? What's that?"

"The beast was always the real me," I said. I couldn't decide between brokenhearted sobbing and hysterical laughter, and ended up choosing neither. "You're the one that's a mask."

The only me that wasn't armed presented little challenge. A few moments later I bent my head to feed. The meat satiated my hunger at last, as I knew instinctively the rabbit would not have. I did not stop until there was nothing left but cracked, hollow bones on the ridge. Then I threw my head back and howled guilt and loathing into the night. Moonlight washed it all away, even as the world around me began to fade.

Chapter Fourteen

I woke up screaming.

That is, for the record, not normal. That scene in the movies, where someone sits bolt upright and screams coming out of a nightmare? Yeah, that doesn't happen.

It took me a minute to get my head together enough to get my bearings. I was deep underground—I wasn't sure how I knew that, but I was absolutely sure of it—lying on a cheap cot. The room I was in was reasonably spacious, albeit not as high-ceilinged as some would like, and smelled of long-term habitation.

"You're up," Brick said from somewhere nearby. He sounded vaguely surprised.

I looked around frantically, still panicky and disoriented, until I located the sorcerer sitting on the floor about ten feet away. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt and jeans two sizes too small, and smelled almost as filthy as Katie. I was a little scared by that, until I realized that he looked to be in much better health than they were. Brick was a far better mage than either Katie or Mike had ever been, but I was pretty sure he would have shown *some* effect if he were involved in summoning that monster.

"Where is this?" I said haltingly. My heart was still pounding, and I thought it would be a while before I forgot what I'd seen in the spirit world.

"I'm not totally sure," Brick said, leaning against the stone wall and stretching his legs out casually. "Those nutjobs stuck me in here about two weeks ago. I haven't gotten out since."

"How'd they get you in the first place?" I asked. I'd been wondering about that for a while now. I was pretty sure Brick stood no better of a chance against their new and improved talents than I did, but unless I was mistaken they'd hit him before they summoned their monster.

"Katie kept me busy, and then Mike blindsided me. He locked me in some sort of dream sequence, and then woke me up here." He grimaced. "Teach me to overlook a shaman."

So Brick hadn't been able to get out of the spirit world? That was interesting. I wondered whether I was just more experienced or better able to recognize what I was looking at, or my subconscious had been right and Mike hadn't understood what I was. Something to think about later.

"Why haven't you left?" I asked, standing up. My hand hurt like hell, and I was a little hungry, but otherwise I felt fine. I was guessing that meant I still had a little time before the shit hit the fan. I just wished I'd known how long; Katie and Mike had taken all my stuff before they dumped me here, and I couldn't really estimate time underground.

Brick looked about as happy as I felt. "Mike again. He did something to stop magic from working in here. We can't get out."

"We'll see about that," I said grimly. I was truly pissed now. There were a lot of things I could forgive; Mike had done the one I couldn't. "Where's the door?"

The door turned out to be a massive, ugly thing deeply inset into the stone of the walls. It took me about thirty seconds to determine that Brick was right about our chances of getting through it. It appeared to be solid steel, and could have laughed off a battering ram. It was hung to open inward, and there was no handle on our side.

I'm pretty good with locks, but that only really works when there's a lock to work with. This door didn't even have a latch. And, inhumanly strong or not, I didn't think I could kick this thing down. What Brick had said about doing magic in here was true, too; I tried several times, but no matter how I strained, I couldn't stir even the tiniest breeze, or bend a shadow even slightly. There was just nothing there.

I sat down in front of the door to think about it. Brick went back to sitting against the wall, his attitude making it clear that he was waiting for me to give up. No surprise; he didn't realize what a short deadline we were on. Heck, if his senses were locked down that tight, he might not even know what they'd been getting up to.

A couple minutes later, I grinned. Then I closed my eyes and concentrated. I was really hoping Mike hadn't realized that I was more than just a werewolf with some magic tricks. Considering the Inquisition's track record for competency, I thought it was a reasonable hope.

Whatever he'd done, it wasn't powerful enough to keep Tyrfing away. When I put my hand down, it came to rest on the sword's hilt naturally, as though I'd known it was there. I stood up, drawing the sword, and stepped forward.

The door was thick, heavy steel. It took me almost five minutes of swinging to embed Tyrfing deeply enough to stick. Once I had, I managed to twist the blade and use it as a lever, pulling the door open far enough to catch it.

"How did you do that?" Brick asked. His voice was quiet, almost awestruck.

I laughed, and Brick flinched away. Maybe he could hear the wolves and the wind, howling beneath the surface of the sound. Or maybe it was just a scary laugh. "Mike doesn't understand the first thing about me," I said, in a cold, remote voice. "Or he would have known better than to think I'd be caged." I pulled the door open, and held it long enough for Brick to follow me out. It slammed shut behind us with a hollow *boom*. Katie might hear it and realize that we were getting out. That was fine. I hoped she did.

"What's going on?" Brick asked, sticking close to my heels.

I smiled a wide, cold smile as we moved forward into a dark, low-ceilinged tunnel. White globes on the walls cast enough light to see, but not enough to make out any details. "What it comes down to,"

I said to Brick, "is a con game. The thing about a con game is that every layer you add makes all the previous layers obsolete."

"I don't get it," he said, sounding almost plaintive. He was lost and confused, and totally out of his depth. So was I, but I was a lot more used to it. Brick was a Watcher, a certified magical badass; he was used to being the one terrifying his enemies and running circles around people, not the other way round.

"Don't worry about it," I said kindly. "Listen, we're outside the radius of whatever Mike did to shut down magic. Can you open a way to the Otherside from here?"

"I think so," he said after a moment.

"Good. Do that. Get away. Either stay on the Otherside or go somewhere at least a few hundred miles from Colorado Springs. Stay there until this all blows over. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. What will you be doing?"

My grin felt sharp and icy, more a wolf's expression than a man's, and more a monster's than either. "Hunting," I said softly, and turned away into the darkness.

What I'd said to Brick was true. This whole thing—everything that had happened—was nothing but an enormous, epic confidence game. I wasn't sure who was pulling all the strings—the obvious answer was Loki, but my gut said he'd gotten played just as hard as I had—but I was totally sure that strings were getting pulled.

Well, I'd had just about enough of getting my strings pulled. It was painfully clear that there were always going to be games being played around me. This time, I'd chosen to play one of my own.

I'd known that my little chat with Katie wasn't going to end well. There was just no chance that I was going to get through to her, particularly when she was unbalanced by the stresses of the magic she'd been doing. Thus, I'd had Aiko waiting with a sniper rifle.

Katie had known that I knew that things would devolve into violence. Thus, she'd been prepared for me to throw the first punch. My treachery, if you could call it that, hadn't caught her by surprise at all. She was too well acquainted with how I operated to expect me to fight fair.

I'd known that she would know that. Katie's not a moron, and she'd seen me throw sucker punches and arrange traps often enough that she wouldn't be terribly surprised by one more. I'd also known that she didn't really, truly want to kill me. I'd been gambling that she would use a nonlethal takedown instead, and that I would be able to get loose. So far I'd won on both counts.

Katie knew that I would foresee that possibility. Thus, she'd taken all my stuff. I had no doubt that she was fully expecting me to get out of Mike's lotus-eating trap, and she couldn't seriously think

that I would be caged by a heavy door and a little bit of shamanic magic. By depriving me of my equipment (I didn't even have clothes, although I was too focused to pay much attention to the lack) she'd gone a long way towards defanging me.

I knew that I couldn't expect Katie to rely on me being held captive, and would take measures to weaken me if I should get out. As a result, I was carrying several different tracking devices. They were not your cheap, run-of-the-mill products; even deep underground, at least one of them should have been able to get some kind of signal out. Once they pinpointed my location, backup would have a fairly easy time getting to me. It wouldn't be as simple as walking in the front door, but I'd called in some fairly heavy movers and shakers; they'd get there eventually.

I had no doubt that Katie had seen that coming, as well. Using myself as bait and then bringing in hardcore backup was a tactic I'd used in the past, at least once that she definitely knew about. She'd be a fool not to search me for tracking devices. I was pretty sure she'd found and disabled all of them.

And, naturally, I knew that she would do so. Those devices hadn't even been broadcasting to anyone. I didn't know anyone with a better chance of taking them down within the time limit than I had.

There was no backup coming. Aiko, with any luck, was already in France, and everyone else who might take me seriously had gotten instructions to run hours or days earlier.

I wasn't here to play games with Katie and Mike. I was here to kill them.

I wished that I knew how long I had to do the deed. I didn't have any way to tell how long Mike's little trick had kept me down. I might have only been out for half an hour, in which case I still had a couple of hours before dawn. Or it might have been a week, in which case the city had already been destroyed and I'd only survived by being underground. I just didn't have any way of *knowing*.

That was incredibly stressful. At any moment, the world might dissolve into the fire of a mad god's wrath, and I would have no warning. I resented every moment that I wasn't running them down.

I forced myself to slow down and think it through anyway. Rushing in would just waste time I didn't have available, even if it didn't get me killed horribly. With half a million lives riding on me getting this perfect, I couldn't afford to take chances.

The problems I'd listed for Alexis earlier were still valid. These tunnels ran for miles and miles, and I had no idea where in the complex I was right now. I'd never gone back and explored them after I took out the lunatic that owned the place; there were too many bad memories associated with it. Just now I was starting to regret that.

That made my task very simple. I needed to localize, reach, and kill my prey, as rapidly as possible, with no mistakes and no hesitation. That made my next step an obvious one.

Normally, I take ten minutes to change. In a rush, I can cut it down to five, at the cost of considerable pain.

I wasn't sure whether I'd ever been in so much of a rush as I was right then. I started the change and then forced it, faster and faster, throwing magic at it desperately. I kept moving as I did, which I'd never tried to do before, shambling along down the tunnel. There didn't appear to be any branches on this path so far, which made it easier to choose where to go.

It hurt. Oh, it hurt. It felt like pumping acid through my veins. My muscles screamed at me, and putting weight on a bone while it's in the process of changing shape was an agony like nothing I'd ever experienced. At some point I fell, and when I rose it was on four feet. My joints screamed, burning, as I forced them to carry my weight without giving them a chance to align themselves properly, and it was all I could do not to scream. Where I walked, blood and frost mingled on the ground.

But I never stopped. Amazing, really, what you can do if you want it badly enough. I just wished I hadn't needed a catastrophe quite this serious to discover what I was capable of.

By the time I'd reached the first intersection, perhaps a hundred yards or so from the cell door, I was fully lupine. Brick had completed his portal and vanished to the Otherside by that point, which was some small gratification; I'd saved at least one life tonight. I was panting pretty hard, but I'd gotten my legs back under myself, and the stabbing pain in my knees had died down to a dull throb. My left forefoot hurt like hell every time it touched the ground—changing had helped the healing process a little, but not nearly enough. I forced myself to ignore it.

At the crossroads, I lowered my nose to the floor and took a deep breath. I was assaulted by a wave of odors, foremost among which was a dry, dusty scent, the smell of long neglect in a place that never saw the sun. Under that, and not deeply, was the stench of human bodies gone weeks without a shower. Katie and Mike had passed this way, and recently.

I was expecting to have to work for it—like I'd told Alexis, parsing scents wasn't something I'd practiced as much as I should have. But as it turned out, it was so easy that I don't think I could have missed it if I tried. Katie and Mike were both a great deal more pungent than most people, and there weren't a lot of scents to compete with down here. It helped that it was underground. With no wind or rain to wash things away, an odor could last for years down in the dark.

It took me maybe a second and a half to establish that one of the paths leading from the intersection had been traveled repeatedly, while the other two had seen little if any recent use. That tracked; this tunnel complex was far larger than the two of them could possibly need on a regular basis. I was guessing that there was a relatively small section that saw consistent use, while the rest went empty.

I turned down the tunnel that smelled of use and started running.

I started out at a normal, sane wolf's speed of perhaps thirty miles per hour. Then I sped up, until I was doing maybe fifty through the tunnels.

It hurt. A lot. My maimed limb was not, in any way, healed enough to take this kind of abuse. I ripped the half-healed skin open almost immediately, and I knew I was leaving a trail of blood behind

me. Ordinarily that would have been a cause for some concern; if a mage gets a bit of your blood, they can use it to do horrible things to you. As it was, I had bigger fish to fry.

As it happened, though, it was more of an immediate problem than I'd thought. It turns out that a layer of blood between your foot and the floor isn't all that great for your footing. The loss of a few toes had also wrecked my balance, and the floor was too smooth to provide much traction. The first time I tried to take a sharp corner, following the scent down the only tunnel that had seen any recent use, my feet slipped out from under me, and I went sliding into the wall.

For the record, sliding into a stone wall at the next best thing to fifty miles an hour is not anyone's idea of a good time.

It took me a minute to get my breath back after that. I was pretty sure my ribs were cracked, too, which was a lot more painful than it sounds. I went more slowly after that, and took care with corners.

Thirty miles an hour is still a pretty good pace, though. It took maybe half an hour, during which I only got sidetracked twice, before I started hearing voices. They belonged to Katie and Mike, indisputably; the sound was too faint and distorted to make out any words, but I knew whose they were.

I slowed down at that point, until I was only moving at a fast lope (which was still almost a sprint for a normal human, granted). I had no idea how far away they were—sound carries strangely through tunnels—but I didn't think I could be too careful. I couldn't take them in a straight-up fight anymore, that had been made abundantly clear earlier. I was only going to get one chance to sucker punch them, and I had to make it count for as much as I could.

After another five minutes of walking, I saw a brighter light up ahead. The voices were louder now, and clear enough that I could make out words easily. I slowed down even more, until I almost crawled up to the tunnel mouth.

I was looking out onto a massive chamber, lined with cut stone. It was about a hundred yards square, and thirty yards tall, with numerous tunnels leading off of it. The one I was in was at floor level, midway along one side of the room. Maybe forty yards away, in the center of the room, Katie and Mike had set up shop.

I'd seen a lot of magic circles in my life. Almost every spell more complicated than quick and dirty combat magic used one. It prevented natural currents of power from disrupting the structure of the spell and provided a foundation for the more complex layers to build upon. They vary a lot, though, in appearance and function. For a simple spell, all you needed was a ring of steel set in the floor, a bit of spray paint, a few stones set out at strategic locations—almost anything would do. It didn't even need to be circular; that was just the easiest shape to envision.

More complicated spells tend to use more elaborate circles. They might involve multiple layers, designed to perform different functions. They almost always require a variety of materials and objects,

meant to resonate on an energetic and symbolic level with the task being performed and the mage casting the spell. I'd seen circles with half a dozen layers, made of precious metals and other exotic materials.

I'd never seen one quite like this, though.

The outermost edge of the circle was thirty feet across, laid down in silver. Then came a foot of blank stone, in which were painted all manner of symbols. Most of them were simple geometric patterns, meant to channel energy into a certain shape. I also saw a number of runic inscriptions. The runes had no intrinsic power, but they expressed a meaning, helping to focus the mage's intention. The designs were painted in a dozen colors, crossing and overlapping to form an intricate, almost fractal look.

The inner bound of the designs was at another circle. This one was a deep groove, maybe six inches across, filled with water. The water moved counterclockwise around the circle, at a fairly brisk pace; they must have had some sort of pump installed. Inside of that was another trench, this one filled with some sort of slow-burning oil. The flames were a pale, sickly looking green, and formed a wall almost as tall as I was.

Inside of that was the monster.

It looked much the same as when I'd seen it previously, a roughly spherical shape perhaps ten feet across, hovering close to thirty feet above the ground.. Thirty or so appendages sprouted from its surface, without any apparent order to their placement. They were almost eight feet long, and writhed continuously. The only difference I could see was that it didn't seem to be destroying the integrity of the world around it, presumably because it was caged in the circles.

The thing had grown, since I'd seen it last. That couldn't be good.

Mike and Katie were sitting in a smaller circle, between me and the monster. The interior of this circle was hardly big enough to fit them both, but it was just as elaborate as the circle holding the monster, and looked about the same. The flames were only knee high, and the water wasn't moving quite as quickly; other than that, they were identical. Both of them were staring at the thing they'd summoned, as though entranced by its ceaseless movement.

I'd thought that they looked horrible before. I was wrong. Mike had lost another ten pounds, and it looked like his hair was starting to fall out. Katie was....well. Imagine the scariest cyborg you've ever seen in a movie, and double it. Half her chest was held together only by shadows. They still looked just as unnaturally thick and oily as when she'd summoned them, and they pulsed rhythmically, like a second, horrid heartbeat. She'd lost more weight, as well, to the point that she would make someone starving to death feel better about themselves. It looked like a stiff breeze could knock her over.

"We should move," Mike said. His voice was dull, lacking any animation whatsoever. "Winter found us. It's possible that someone else will."

"No," Katie said. Her voice was quiet, and skittered oddly across tones. No wonder I hadn't been able to overhear them clearly; both of them sounded *wrong*, as though they no longer quite remembered how to talk. "We don't have anywhere else to keep it."

"So let it go. We can summon it again when we set up another location."

"Where can we go without attracting attention?" Katie asked rhetorically. "No. We finish this tonight and then let it go for good. Just one more push."

Well, that wasn't good. Looking at them, I was sure they couldn't keep control when they let it out of the circle this time. Using the vast, unnatural powers they'd gained clearly took something out of them. If I gave them a chance to get started again, everything I'd done would be for nothing.

I resented the time lost. But I needed to be lethal, instantly, on the very first stroke, and I only had one weapon that might be capable of that where two .50-caliber rounds had failed. So I took a deep breath and changed again.

The pain was, if anything, worse this time. I wasn't used to changing this often, and the less time you left between changes, the more they hurt. On top of that, I was starting to feel seriously tired. But I pushed it as hard as I could, and five minutes later I was human again, lying on the floor. I was breathing harshly, but I'd made almost no noise during the change, and they hadn't noticed me.

I'd lost track of the argument through the pain, but apparently Katie had won. The two of them were chanting, now, in a language I didn't recognize. The smell of magic filled the room, terrifyingly strong. The scent was the disinfectant-like odor of human magic, touched with a sick, rotten undercurrent that was painful to smell. The monster seemed to be responding to whatever they were doing; the churning motion of its tentacles had slowed somewhat, and it appeared to be descending towards the floor.

I started moving out onto the floor, and almost tripped on the first step. I was just too tired, in too much pain, to be graceful. My hand hurt like hell, and hadn't stopped bleeding. My ribs were definitely cracked, and it hurt to breathe. I was scared there might be internal damage, too; sliding into the wall like that was a great way to cause internal bleeding, or even rupture organs.

But I couldn't afford to be less than perfect. So I did something I very, very rarely did, and with good reason.

In my nightmarish sojourn to the spirit world, I'd seen a lot of faces of myself, most of which I didn't care for. One of them had been a wolf, tightly bound and muzzled. It didn't take a genius to figure out the metaphor there. I'd always kept that part of myself under a tight leash. It was wild and dangerous, lethal power without conscience or restraint. It was never made to deal with the modern world, with the small indignities and civilized restraints that society demanded.

But I didn't care right now.

I wasn't wearing fur. That didn't matter. A lot of young werewolves assume that the wolf is just another body, but that's wrong. The wolf was a state of mind, a part of me. Wearing a different shape made it easier to dismiss, but deep down I'd always known that the thing standing in the way of my dreams of peace was that the person having them was me. There had always been a wolf inside my skin, whether I could turn into one or not.

So I took a deep breath, and then I took the muzzle off.

Chapter Fifteen

The world changed. Pain, fatigue, doubt—all these things retreated, driven from my mind. Those were things for prey, and my world did not include them. In their place I found hunger, power, certainty, cold and feral. I didn't care that what I was doing was insanely dangerous. Safety was also a thing for prey, and it had no place in my world.

I looked at the monsters chanting in the circle, the only true monsters in the room, and felt a cold and savage fury. A snarl bubbled out of my throat, too soft to hear over the chanting, and I felt my lips draw back from my teeth. How dare they challenge me, how dare they deny my commands, how *dare* they call themselves my equals? They had killed on my territory, they had challenged my authority, they had questioned my power, and they would be rewarded in the only way such as they deserved.

I padded forward into the room, with thoughts of blood in my mind and an ice-cold whirlwind in my heart. Tyrfin found its way to my hand, without a thought crossing my mind. I flicked open the clasp and drew the blade from its scabbard, slow and sensuous, and a new note entered the raging storm inside me, cold and sharp and utterly without mercy. I lowered the scabbard to the floor, gently so as not to make a sound. My hand protested this exercise, a pain dismissed as swiftly as last year's snow.

I spun the blade in my hand, every motion smooth and perfect, and had to bite back a laugh at how *right* it felt. The hilt of the sword fit perfectly in my hand, the best friend I'd ever had, always there, always eager, so much a part of me that I could hardly have said where the sword ended and I began.

My prey were foolish, certain of their safety and occupied with their task. They had set no guards, and were far too focused to see me creeping up behind them. I crossed the space between us swiftly and in perfect silence, every step confident, assured, perfect. The air turned cold in my wake, frost covered me unnoticed in a coat almost as good as fur, and my sword glittered beneath a layer of ice, sharp as any razor.

I reached the edge of their circle within a few seconds, and looked at it with a cold, dismissive smile. Such foolish prey, to think that *this* was enough to stop me, to shield them from their well-earned fate. Tyrfin cracked their spell like an egg and I stepped over the circle, flinching away from the silver but not breaking stride. They started, the chant slipping out of time, as I stepped over the water and strode through the fire. It licked at my flesh but was turned away by the ice in me, dismissed utterly. They turned to me, shock writ large across their bodies, as I reached them. Tyrfin drew back, smooth as snow, as I drew near.

Another me might have hesitated. Another me might have felt horror or shame at killing a man who was only trying to do the right thing. Another me might have wondered whether this was evil.

The wolf didn't care. Good and evil were just words, lacking immediacy, understood hazily at two removes. The wolf understood power, understood territory and what it meant to keep it, and that was all that mattered, that was enough, I knew what to do.

Tyrfing fell, blood sprayed through the air, the smell of it a drug, and Mike's body hit the ground, his head hit the ground as well but several strides away, a spray of blood raining on the ground. I kicked his body casually into the fire as I passed, turning to Katie now, and the flames wreathed it almost instantly, sickly green fire that stank of magic. No more shaman, no more tricks and dreams, now it was just me and Katie and an honest fight.

I almost won it at once, reaching her while she was still stunned and confused, mind occupied by the ritual I'd disrupted. Tyrfing licked out, quick as a viper's lunge, ready to pierce the shadows holding her together and tear the mask away.

I didn't reach her. Before the sword had half crossed the distance between us she raised one hand, her mouth shaped a word I didn't hear, and darkness swarmed across the distance between us like a speeding train.

I threw my power against it. This was a magic I knew, and I'd always been stronger than Katie. I should be able to tear her spell apart with little more than a thought.

I didn't even slow it down. It was too close and too fast to dodge, and I couldn't move fast enough to get away. I reversed direction instead, moving into it, cutting at the cloud of darkness she was throwing at me.

It almost worked. Tyrfing cut its substance like tissue paper, and I began to slip through the hole.

Then the rest of the shadow moved, twisting on itself, and wrapped around to strike at me from the other side. It took me from my feet and threw me across the room.

I hit the wall thirty feet away with devastating force. I heard a distant *crack*, like the breaking of tree branches, and pain rushed through me. A moment later I fell, hitting the ground twenty feet below. That hurt as well.

Some part of me, distant and uninvolved, began cataloguing my injuries. Shattered ribs, at least a few of them. My hand was bleeding freely now, and my arm as well. My left shoulder had been broken or dislocated. I landed badly in the fall, and sprained an ankle.

The rest of me was moving again, throwing myself sideways with all four limbs. A moment later another blast of darkness hit the wall where I'd just been, shattering stone like glass. I kept moving, rolling sideways, just in time to dodge a shadow that fell over the ground like a blanket and then began to contract.

I came back to my feet, limping slightly, watching Katie warily. The wolf was still capable of moving, for it knew that to stop was to die, but I had taken too much damage for even the wolf to ignore. I eyed Katie with wary respect, Tyrfing at the ready in my hand.

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She didn't hesitate. Her expression was slack and blank as she raised her hand. A globe of darkness gathered around it, almost as impenetrable as the body of the thing she'd summoned from the outside. A moment later she threw it at me, too fast to see clearly.

I knew the moment I saw it that I couldn't dodge this attack, and trying to stop it with magic directly wasn't worth consideration. Instead, panicky and desperate, I threw up a wall. It was made of solid ice, one foot thick and five feet tall.

Thick ice is a very serious obstacle. That wall could have stopped a charging linebacker cold, no pun intended. Small arms fire wouldn't have been a problem for it.

Katie's spell turned the top half of the wall into so much shrapnel.

My tactic was successful, in the sense that it prevented that ball of shadow from hitting me, and I was pretty sure that if it had my torso would have been turned into so much pulp. But it did have the side effect of sending a hundred shards of ice flying at me, each one a tiny, beautiful, deadly razor.

That hurt a lot.

A moment later, I became aware that I had fallen. Lying on my side, I stared at one particularly lovely shard, a piece of ice six inches long embedded half its length in my right biceps. The light glimmered through it, making it sparkle like a tiny star. I was fascinated, staring at it. I knew that I should get up, but I wasn't sure why and I couldn't make myself move.

It was just too much. I'd never tried to conjure a tenth that much ice before, and the effort left me exhausted. I'd given the wolf inside my skin control, because it was far more capable of dismissing pain and fatigue, and its ruthless, feral certainty was a deadly weapon in and of itself. But it wasn't invincible—it was a part of me, and this much abuse was too much for it cope with. I couldn't even stand, let alone keep fighting.

A moment later, ropes of shadow wrapped themselves around my limbs and hauled me to my feet, horribly strong. They didn't stop there, pulling me five feet off the ground and holding me against the wall. Another length of shadow reached out and wrapped around my head, pulling it upright so that I could see what was going on.

Katie was still standing exactly where she had been. Her expression hadn't changed, and that blank, emotionless face was more terrifying than any werewolf's snarl. She didn't show any strain from holding me in the air, even though that was far more force than I'd ever been able to exert through a shadow. She didn't even look like she was trying.

Behind her, I watched a figure step out of the fire. It was covered in green flames, which licked its flesh but did not burn. It picked its way carefully over to stand beside Katie, not seeming inconvenienced by its lack of a head. It must have been bothered to some extent, though, because a moment later a new one formed on its shoulders, made entirely of emerald fire. Its features were crude,

as though sculpted of clay by a five year old, but they were still clearly, unmistakably those of Mike Adams.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Katie got shot twice with a sniper rifle, and she didn't even fall down. I cut Mike's head off with Tyrfin and shoved his body into a magic fire pit, and he shrugged it off after a minute or so.

What the fuck did it take to *kill* these things?

Mike looked at me. I met his flaming eyes with my frozen ones, and was afraid.

"Kill him," he said, and his voice was the voice of fire, with nothing human in it.

Katie looked at me for a long, tense moment, her features utterly without expression. "I'm sorry," she said at last. She didn't sound sorry. She didn't sound anything. "I can't protect you anymore, Winter." She lifted her hand, and another cannonball of darkness gathered around it.

I laughed, a long and broken sound, sharp and cold and biting as an icicle, with the howl of wolves barely hidden beneath the surface. Katie had left any semblance of humanity far behind, but she still hesitated at the sound.

"Loki," I said through a mouthful of blood. "Loki the crafty in lies, I call thee. Loki Sky-Traveler, I summon thee. Loki Laufeyjarnson, I name thee! Come to me!"

When I began to speak my summoning, Katie threw her fastball of shadows at my face, with enough force to spray my brains across the walls. I flinched, but forced myself to keep talking, knowing that I could never complete what I was saying before it reached me.

I didn't need to. Loki, unsurprisingly, was paying close attention to me, and he heard it when I said his name; the ritual repetition was totally unnecessary. The spell shattered, a foot in front of my face, shadows flying in all directions. They gouged at the wall on all sides, spraying me with chips of stone, but none of the shadows touched me, and I finished my invocation.

When my vision cleared, I saw Loki standing in front of me. And, badass though I was, if I could have moved, I would have fallen to my knees before him, and wept, and prayed with all sincerity that he not notice me.

I, who had stood unflinching before monsters and driven them back, who had held the forces of the universe in my hands, who had struck bargains with gods and demons, who had seen wonders and terrors most men never even imagine....

Next to the naked power of a god, I was nothing. *Nothing*.

The god stood nine feet tall, lean and long-limbed. He was dressed in dusty black, with a single golden ring, and a cloak of feathers thrown over his shoulders. The feathers were brilliantly colored, the vivid shades I'd seen dancing in the chaos between worlds, colors like nothing on this earth. He blazed,

head to toe, with divine fire, gold and white and crimson, like a star made flesh. Aside from the eerie green flames of their circles, it was the only light in the room, and more than adequate. His reddish blond hair hung about his head like a halo, drifting in the updrafts from his fires.

I met his eyes, two candles amidst the wildfire, and was lost.

A heartbeat and a lifetime later, he chose to blink, releasing me. The god made no gesture, showed no sign of effort, but the ropes of shadow holding me against the wall burst into sudden golden flame. The fire licked at my skin, a sensation akin to being bathed in feathers, but did not burn me, and when I fell from the wall the flames cushioned my landing.

"You have cut your time short, Sir Winter," the god of fire said, in a voice as cold and remote as any glacier. "But you have performed your function. This bargain is complete."

I looked at the floor, and shivered, and was wise enough to be silent.

Loki turned away from me, and the absence of his regard was simultaneously the greatest relief and the most crushing loss I'd ever experienced. "I am not a god of mercy," he said, in a voice that filled the room and a little bit more. "But you belong to me, and I am not without loyalty. Thus, I give to you one final chance. Cease your actions now, or be extinguished."

I chanced a look up. Loki was facing away, which was far more of a mercy than I can possibly express. Katie and Mike, in their broken, inhuman bodies, faced him. The monster, vast and dark as the spaces between stars, was framed between them, a churning mass of nothingness.

"We have been given power," Katie said, her empty voice flat and assured, without a trace of hesitation or fear, "for a reason. Such power that no one can push us around or force us to tolerate their evils. Not even you."

I couldn't see Loki's face, for which I thanked any gods that were listening. But I could hear his mad, sharp grin in his voice when he spoke. "Maybe so," he said easily. "Guess it's a good thing I'm not alone, isn't it?"

For a single, terror-filled second I thought he was talking about me. Then columns of golden fire, too bright to look at, swept down from the ceiling at his sides.

When the fires faded, there was more than one god in the room.

To Loki's left, Coyote stood in an attitude of casual, cocky disregard. He didn't appear to share Loki's need to show off. He was wearing the same body as when I'd seen him previously, and the same clothes. The only addition was a simple belt with a pair of heavy revolvers hanging from it.

I didn't do more than glance at him, though. I couldn't. My attention, and likely everyone else's, was entirely focused on the third god in the room.

A wolf seldom weighs much more than a hundred pounds. They aren't even as big as a big dog. A werewolf is quite a bit larger, sometimes as much as three hundred pounds. A large werewolf stands three or four feet at the withers. That's pretty impressive for even a large dog breed, and intimidating.

This was a bit like that, except more so.

The wolf was probably ten feet tall, and twice as long. It could bite me in half without even trying. For all its size, though, it looked practically scrawny. It was unhealthily thin, almost as thin as Katie. Ribs the size of polearms stood out starkly against its flesh. A narrow silver collar hugged its neck, barely visible against the silvery-grey of its fur.

I had seen and spoken with the Fenris Wolf a half dozen times. He had helped me several times, and I generally considered him a friend. But I had never before seen his true shape. I had never seen him with his power gathered around him. Now that I did, I understood why he was feared.

He turned his head to face me, and I wanted to flinch away or start gibbering in terror. I didn't. I knew how he would take it.

I looked into a golden eye, easily larger than my fist. It was like meeting Loki's eye, and vastly different. When I looked into his father's eyes, it was like looking through a window into madness and fire. Fenris's eyes were more like a mirror filled with power. I had a wolf inside my skin. I knew all too well the hunger that lurked behind the Fenris Wolf's eyes.

His mouth didn't move, but I clearly heard his voice all the same. "Winter," he said, sounding sad and resigned and *hungry*. "You should go."

I tried to stand, and failed. The monster from the outside surged forward, its bonds lifted, the power to unmake the universe chained only by the will of two of the more flawed people I'd ever met. Loki raised his hands to the sky, laughing a mad and terrible laugh, and his fires blazed brighter, brighter, driving back the darkness. The creature reached for him with those awful tentacles, but it couldn't get close, golden flames licked at it and *these* flames it could not take lightly, nothing in the universe could. Fenris surged forward, ten tons of muscle driven by the will of a god and a hunger that could swallow the world.

Coyote lifted his hands as well, and laughed a coyote's laugh, and power gathered around him, vast and terrible. Where Loki was chaos and destruction and mad, tumbling, divine fire, Coyote was night and darkness and inevitability. His power didn't cast light, but drained it from the world instead; not even Loki's golden light could reach his skin.

And yet, when he turned and looked at me, I could see him only too clearly. His eyes were the blackness of the abyss, deep pits lit with sparks of gold that melted and flowed like quicksilver. He winked at me, then turned back to his task.

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The first caveman to look out over the ocean did not equal my awe at the vastness of what I saw. The first astronomer to grasp just how far away the stars burned in the night could not match my appreciation of just how small I was, for I had seen the gods, and understood them.

This wasn't magic. Magic was entirely too small a word for a power that could sculpt entire universes from nothing but chaos and will,.

What was all the power in the world, next to beings that were worlds in themselves?

It was too much, all too much, too much pain and too much fear and too much *power*. I could smell the power in that room, could feel it roll across my skin, and it was too much, far too much, nothing mortal was ever meant to be in the presence of this power. I was screaming, had been screaming, would never stop screaming, because in that moment I had seen the truth, I had seen how very insignificant I was beside a power that could unmake the world and make it anew in a heartbeat, and in the wake of that knowledge I would never be the same.

And then a touch of that power, just the tiniest fraction, reached out and embraced me, enfolding me in the scent of wolf and woods. It sent me down into the dark, and I went gladly.

Chapter Sixteen

I became aware, with no sense of transition, of an incessant, high-pitched giggling, the kind of laugh that held more madness than any scream. As though that were the switch on a floodgate, I became aware of a surge of other sensations. I could smell pain and terror, all of it my own, a reek that left me almost gagging. I was sitting on a hard floor, which felt more like wood than tile, and my back was against a wall. Other than the laughter, all I could hear was my own heartbeat, fast and strong and panicky. I couldn't see anything, and for a while I was afraid that what I'd seen had burned my eyes out of my skull.

It took almost ten minutes before I thought to open my eyes.

When I did, I immediately shut them again against the midday sunlight streaming in the window. The room wasn't that bright, but it was painful all the same. I eventually, after several tries, managed to keep my eyelids open.

I was sitting in the living room of my safe house in France. I hadn't seen it often—visiting often kinda negates the point of keeping a hidden sanctum—but I knew it when I saw it. I was hugging my knees to my chest and rocking back and forth, and I couldn't for the life of me stop giggling. My head and my hand both throbbed painfully in time with my heartbeat, and the light seemed to stab at my eyes.

It was almost twenty minutes before the laughter died down to the occasional chuckle, and then to nothing. I was still breathing hard, panting like I'd just run ten miles and then arm wrestled a troll.

Maybe five minutes after that, when I was just starting to get my breathing under control, I heard the door open. A rush of fear went through me, the raw, animal panic of a rat in a trap, and I would have thrown myself out the window if I hadn't tripped. By the time I managed to push myself back to a sitting position, the irrational terror had faded a little, and I managed to sit still as the light, graceful footsteps proceeded through the house.

When they reached the living room, the footsteps paused. Roughly half a second later, I was bowled over and pinned to the floor. "Oh God," Aiko said, hugging me so tight that I heard my ribs creak. "You're back, you're *alive*, thank God."

I hugged her back just as tight, and for the first time since I'd woken up, my heart stopped racing, and my breathing calmed.

"I thought you were gone," she whispered into my neck. "I thought they'd finally gotten you. Where have you been?"

I thought back on what I'd done, and seen, and tried to think of a way to make her understand.

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Five minutes later, I had the giggles under control again. Aiko seemed to understand, and held me gently as I laughed, and shivered, and hugged myself. I felt hollow, and I didn't think I'd ever be warm again.

"It's okay," she murmured, as I finally managed to choke off the laughter. "It's okay. You're safe now."

That almost cracked me up again, although it was at least ordinary hysteria, rather than outright madness. *Safe*? After what I'd seen, I didn't think safety was a feeling I was going to entertain for a long time, if ever.

"Are you all right?" she asked after a moment. "Can you talk?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I think so," I said eventually. Well, said might be an overstatement. The words were badly slurred, as though I were talking through a mouthful of blood after half a gallon of vodka, but understandable.

Aiko seemed to relax. "Good," she said. "That's good. Do you want to talk about what happened?"

I flinched. "No!" I said, almost shouting. Aiko drew back a little, and I forced myself to calm down. "No," I said again, more quietly. "I mean, yeah, I'll tell you about it. But...not now. I'm not ready to talk about it yet."

"That's fine," she said. "Do you want some food?"

At the question, I suddenly became aware of my hunger, a fierce, gnawing thing at the base of my spine. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so hungry. "Yeah," I said.

She chuckled, although it sounded almost more like a sob. "Of course you do," she said. "Who am I kidding?" She drew back enough to look at me, and then froze.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," she said, a little too quickly, and then looked me over from head to toe. "So," she said with a smirk, her vulnerability carefully masked again. "What did you do with your clothes?"

Almost two hours later, I was finally starting to feel all right again. We'd been sitting in an expensive restaurant near the safe house for the past hour. No monsters had leapt out of the shadows to rip my face off, and I hadn't broken down giggling once, although it was close a couple of times.

"Hell, Winter," Aiko said, laughing. "Aren't you getting full yet?" She'd finished her meal some time earlier.

I paused. "No," I said slowly. "I'm not." The hunger wasn't nearly as bad as when I'd woken up, but I wasn't even close to satiated. That wasn't right. I'd already eaten three loaves of bread, a couple pounds of meat, a bowl of French onion soup, two large bowls of pasta, and probably a pound of cheese, and drunk two pitchers of iced tea. The restaurant staff were watching me with expressions ranging from almost-fear to near awe. Not surprising, really; you didn't expect Andre the Giant to eat that much at a sitting, never mind a relatively thin guy who was smaller than average.

Now, don't get me wrong. I go through a lot of food. Werewolves tend to have a higher metabolic rate than humans, and it's not uncommon to eat almost twice as much. But not like this. My stomach shouldn't even have been able to *hold* all that.

"That's okay," she said, as I tried and failed to ignore the spike of fear that went through me as I realized that. "Take your time."

I kept eating, although there was no pleasure in it now. Finally, after another thousand Calories or so and half a gallon of tea, the hunger stopped gnawing at me. It felt like I could think clearly for the first time since I woke up.

"Why did you think I was dead, anyway?" I said, doing a reasonable job of keeping my voice light and carefree. "I was only missing for a couple hours. Have a little faith."

Aiko paused in the middle of getting out money for the extremely high restaurant bill. "Winter," she said slowly. "It's...been a little longer than that."

I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It's been almost two weeks since you disappeared. I only came back here to get a few things from the safe house. The city's been recovering faster than I would have guessed, but it'll be a while before things are settled down."

I felt lost, confused, and not a little scared. "Aiko?" I said slowly, and I'm sure some of what I was feeling showed through, because her face reflected it. "Recovering from what?"

"Right," she said. "You don't know." She hesitated, a long, uncomfortable hesitation. "It'd be easier just to show you," she said at last, sounding atypically unsure of herself. "Come on."

I stood at the edge of the disaster zone and watched the emergency crews working. Two weeks later, they'd gotten the fires out, but the wreckage wasn't even close to cleared.

The disaster was centered around the subterranean hall where men had laughed at gods and gods reminded them why that was a bad idea. The crater was a hundred yards deep and a little bit more across, a pit dug in the earth by main force, burned black and lined with glass. I hadn't seen it yet, but I'd seen pictures.

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The destruction spread around it in a vaguely circular pattern twenty square miles in area. The damage had been strangely erratic; in places there was only one building left standing on an entire block, surrounded by the burned wreckage of houses and businesses. In other places a single building had been plucked from its place and crushed, the pieces left to rain down on the neighboring areas.

Twenty square miles. A tenth of the city, wiped away in a single morning. More than five thousand people confirmed dead so far, and at least as many injured. More than thirty thousand unaccounted for. Most of them would never be found, I supposed.

Thirty thousand. Ye gods, how was I supposed to cope with that? How was I supposed to *comprehend* it? I'd had plenty of blood on my hands already, but *this*...

Thirty thousand lives, lost to my incompetence, my arrogance. It didn't help that I hadn't done it myself. These deaths were on my shoulders. I had found Katie and Mike, and charged in like an idiot, too proud and too scared to call Loki until I was at the brink of death. Before that, I had known about them, known that they were arrogant and stupid and far too powerful for comfort, and I'd done nothing. I hadn't been willing to shut them down hard when they were just a bunch of kids trying to fix all the problems of the world, and thousands of people had paid the price.

How do you go about making up for that?

As I stood there, staring at the wreckage and trying to adjust to a world in which I was responsible for the deaths of thousands, I heard a news reporter nearby. I couldn't hear her clearly—there was too much background noise—but I made out a few key phrases. Things like "most devastating acts of terror...ever seen," or "officials...yet to release details...not clear how many bombs...death toll in the thousands."

And then, because of course I did, things hadn't gone far enough wrong already, I heard the following. "Winter Wolf, resident of...believed to be involved...possible sleeper agent...unknown terrorist group. Circumstantial evidence linking...several previous attacks...witnesses placed him at scene...wanted for questioning...armed and extremely dangerous...please contact authorities."

Naturally. Loki probably wanted to make his opinion of my tardiness clear. Not that he'd needed to do much; I hadn't exactly kept a low profile the past week.

I couldn't complain too much, though. After all, they were pretty much right.

I struggled to maintain an objective point of view. Yes, I'd fucked up something royal—but it wasn't like I meant to. I'd done everything in my power to keep this from happening. And it had worked, somewhat. Tens of thousands of people were dead, but that still meant I'd saved hundreds of thousands from dying when Loki destroyed the city to save the world. That had to count for something, right?

Right. Sure. I believed that.

"Come on," I said to Aiko. "We should get off the street." I was wearing a hoodie and sunglasses, covering up most of my more recognizable traits, but everyone in the city had just seen a wanted picture with my face on it. The chances of someone recognizing me were just too high.

She nodded silently and led me back to the car.

Aiko, Alexis, and Snowflake had been staying in a hotel for the last week or so. It was expensive, but we still had a nice cushion left over from the Watcher's payment, and they hadn't wanted to visit any location that was associated with me. After hearing what they were saying about me on the news, I didn't blame them a bit.

I moved as quickly as I could up the stairs to the room; I didn't want anyone to have a chance to identify me. That wasn't as quickly as I might have liked—my coordination was shot all to hell—but I didn't encounter anyone on the way up.

I pushed the door open from the inside the same way I had at the last hotel and walked inside. The way my life had been going recently, I wasn't even surprised to see Loki waiting for me.

He was sitting on a comfortable armchair that I was damned sure wasn't hotel standard, sipping scotch with evident satisfaction. He was back to his normal look, human-sized with short reddish-blond hair. He was still wearing that golden ring, though, and he had a sprig of mistletoe pinned over his heart. He smiled at me as I came in. The expression was twisted by the scars around his mouth, a score of thin white lines.

Alexis was standing against the wall, as far as she could get from Loki without actually leaving the room. Snowflake was next to her, cowering under a chair, everything about her conveying the impression of stark raving terror.

"Sir Winter," he said, nodding to me regally. "Excellent work, if a bit lacking in punctuality. Come in."

I did so, feeling like a marionette. He gestured me to sit and I did so, knowing full well that a chair would appear before I completed the motion.

Behind me, Aiko opened the door. She took in the scene in a moment, and said, "Fuck shit."

"Miss Miyake," Loki said genially. "Please, come inside. Have a seat."

Aiko was terrified. I knew her well enough to see it in the tension of her posture, to hear it in the tightness of her voice. But she also knew better than to refuse the invitation of a god. So, rather than run away screaming, she moved cautiously into the room. "You're too kind," she said, carefully not saying anything that could be construed as thanks.

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A minute or so later, Aiko and I were sitting side by side in matching armchairs. I was holding a steel goblet full to the brim with dwarven mead, which I knew damn well I wasn't going to touch. Aiko had a matching cup, although hers was filled with what smelled like faerie wine.

Alexis and Snowflake hadn't moved or spoken since we came in.

"What did you do to them?" I demanded, giving Loki a hard look. It wasn't smart, but I wasn't in the mood to be smart.

"I placed them in stasis," he said mildly. The god didn't seem at all perturbed by my attitude. "This conversation has only tangential relation to them. I thought it simplest to remove them from it for the time being. They will return to normal when I leave."

I nodded. I believed him. Loki knew how I would react if he hurt them, and he wasn't the type to throw a tool away without a good reason. "Did you get them?" I asked bluntly.

He smiled, and the wildfire in his eyes sped up a little. "Oh, yes," he said softly, and I shivered to hear the madness in his voice. "They put up something of a fight, but I assure you, Katie and Mike are no more. The creature they called forth is less simple to destroy, but I removed it from this world. It will be some time before it finds another way in."

"Good."

"My apologies for the mess," he continued. "Such confrontations are seldom neat."

I blinked, and had to work not to stare. I wasn't sure whether I'd ever heard Loki apologize. It had certainly never sounded like he *meant* it before.

He placed his glass of scotch on a table that didn't exist before he reached for it, and smiled at me. Aiko shuddered at the expression, and it was only familiarity that kept me from doing the same. "So," he said, in a voice smooth as silk, "that leaves only the matter of your reward."

"Nine true answers," I said immediately. "To the questions of my choice, to be taken at my leisure. That was the bargain."

"Indeed, and you more than completed your part," he agreed. "I think it only fit that I reward you with more than I promised." He smiled and stood. "Come with me, if you please," he said. Apparently he didn't care whether we pleased or not, because he didn't wait for an answer before transporting us elsewhere.

It was daytime, where we were now. I was starting to feel like my jet lag was approaching temporal whiplash; I'd gone from fighting in the morning, to waking up in the afternoon two weeks later, then moved to night in Colorado, and now it was back to daytime.

We were standing at the edge of the woods, a thick, dark forest of conifers. In front of us was a massive hill or a baby mountain, five hundred feet at the very least, the upper half of which was sheer and rocky. A set of steps led up the slope, cut into the stone, to the door of a castle.

That wasn't an exaggeration. It was a literal castle, medieval-style, huge and grim. The walls were made of massive grey stones, rough-cut and mortared together. The tower in the center was a full hundred feet above the mountaintop. I was pretty sure that medieval engineering wasn't supposed to be able to do that, but Loki didn't care.

"Welcome to Transylvania," Loki said, and I could just hear his grin. "I hope you enjoy your new home."

Transylvania. Well, that figured. It was going to be a hell of a commute—although, given that I was now a wanted terrorist, that might be a good thing. I was willing to bet this castle was even more defensible than its medieval inspirations, too.

I looked at Aiko. Aiko looked at me. A moment later we both broke down laughing. And if there was an edge of hysteria to it, well, I wasn't going to complain.

Walking through the castle was an interesting experience. An effort had obviously been made to replicate the mansion which the monster had destroyed. The decoration scheme was the same, with a heavy focus on dark woods and expensive fabrics, colors mostly green and blue, and lots of steel and bronze. The stone was primarily granite, rather than marble, but other than that it could almost have been the same building.

I would have been happier if I liked the mansion's decoration in the first place. As it was, I still felt uncomfortable, surrounded by the wealth of a small nation. People like me aren't supposed to have freaking throne rooms. The castle lacked the sheer, overwhelming size of the mansion—I didn't think there was a building on earth that could match that place—but it was still huge. We could have garrisoned a sizable force there. The dining hall could seat maybe a hundred and fifty without crowding, and the adjacent kitchen could have fed them without straining.

I hadn't misestimated its defensibility, either. The exterior walls were solid stone, ten feet thick, with battlements and machicolations and everything else a defender might want. Between that and the extremely harsh terrain, anyone trying to take the place by force was in for a treat. A prolonged siege wasn't a great idea, either. There were a couple of wells inside the castle walls, and the storeroom stretched off into the distance, lined with sacks and barrels.

Not that that meant a lot anymore. Stone walls wouldn't do jack to stop a plane. But still, it was oddly comforting to know that our new house could hold off a Mongol horde.

As I might have guessed—and, in fact, had guessed—our personal rooms were in the central tower. The bottom floor of the tower was empty, bare stone, blank and cold. The door to the staircase

was heavy steel, six inches thick, with steel bolts on the inside an inch in diameter. It would take a team of werewolves with a battering ram several minutes to rip that door out.

Oh yeah, and there were three of them blocking the stairs. Even if an attacker managed to penetrate this far, odds were very good they would be unable to get through those doors before we'd managed to escape. Between that and the fact that there *were* exits readily available, I thought this place might be even more secure than the mansion, once it had been fortified appropriately.

The next floor up was an armory, clearly styled after the one I'd lost. There were weapon racks against the walls, and tables and display cases scattered around the room, all made of smooth, dark wood with bronze fittings. The lights (there were electric lights throughout the castle, although I had no idea where the power was coming from) were gentle and slightly ruddy, almost like firelight, softening the lines of the room.

There was a lot of stuff in the armory. That was to be expected, I supposed. We'd managed to salvage quite a lot from the mansion's armory before it was destroyed, and it went without saying that Loki could arrange for all of it to be moved here without our knowledge. He appeared to have added a few things, as well; I was going to have to investigate them carefully. Shotguns and rifles hung in racks along one wall, with ammunition and smaller guns on the tables underneath. Knives, magical foci, and stored spells rested on tables or nestled into thick, emerald velvet in the display cases. Finely crafted, carved wooden crates under the tables held raw materials and more exotic weapons in bulk, each neatly labeled.

All of that was ordinary enough. What surprised me was the armor.

It had a stand all to itself, near the door to the stairs. It resembled my old armor, in the same way that an enraged wolf resembled a Chihuahua having a tantrum. The general lines were the same—white and black coloration, lots of spikes and sharpened ridges, and a helmet with the mask in the shape of a snarling wolf's head. But this armor had taken those elements and refined them, put a fine edge on them.

White and black formed a severe geometric pattern across the surface, reminiscent of the patterns frost makes on metal, accented and trimmed with blues, greens, violets, all the colors of a glacier. A closer inspection showed tiny runes inset in the bands of color in black, each of them no larger than a fly, perfectly formed and stark against the background. The wolf in the mask had been crafted by a true artist, every hair sculpted individually and perfectly placed, every tooth sharpened. The eyeholes were hidden behind something that only looked like glass. Even the boots were armored with delicate-looking plates of steel, articulated with mail at the ankles.

As far as appearance went, though, by far the most obvious change was the crest emblazoned on the breast. It was my coat of arms, replicated with perfect attention to detail, right down to the motto underneath the shield. Just below that was a sprig of mistletoe, rendered with such artistry that I had to look again to be sure that it wasn't real.

I paused before the armor on the way by, reached out to brush it with my fingers. The surface was smooth and cold, and burned with the power in it. I could smell it as well, the magic rich with the scents of ice and earth and steel, and just a touch of mad, divine flame.

I guess it pays to work for a god, sometimes.

"Wow," Aiko said, looking at the armor. "Maybe I should get an upgrade. I'm starting to feel a little jealous."

I snorted. "Look over there," I suggested dryly, looking pointedly at the matching stand on the other side of the door. Aiko's new armor was lighter than mine, and lacking the pointy bits, but otherwise quite similar. The colors were a little cheerier, with lots of red and gold, accented with black. Like mine, it had characters inscribed in the black bands of trim, although hers were Japanese kanji rather than Norse runes. The only major change was that the generic demonic visage of her mask had been replaced with a snarling fox, much the same as the wolf on mine.

Oh yeah, and hers had a coat of arms, too. Hers was a red-and-gold shield, with a vaguely scale-like pattern, and a black falcon diving. The shield was mantled in black and crimson, and supported with a pair of gold foxes. The motto underneath was the ever-popular *Nemo me impune lacessit*, which was way less depressing than mine. Between that and how colorful it was, I wondered whether I should file a complaint.

I'd never seen that coat of arms before. But, then, that was the exact same way I'd discovered mine. Loki wasn't big on asking permission.

Next to the armor, on a table set aside for the purpose, was a traditional Japanese sword stand with a katana, wakizashi, and tanto on it. The blades were clearly a matched set, with the same color scheme as the armor, and they were a work of art. That did not detract from their functionality. Just looking at those things, you *knew* they could cut a cinderblock to pieces without suffering any ill effects.

"Wow," Aiko said, staring. "You should work for Loki more often. It pays well."

It took probably five minutes before we managed to tear ourselves away from ogling our new toys and continue up the tower. When we did, I got an even bigger, and more disturbing, shock.

The next floor up was a library. It wasn't nearly as large as that in the mansion, but it had much the same furnishings, and felt similarly cozy.

That was fine. A library was an entirely predictable choice for our personal quarters, particularly considering how valuable some of the books I'd accumulated had been. There were a lot of them that I wouldn't have wanted just anyone reading.

I would have been a lot more comfortable if I hadn't still had them.

Walking through the library on the way to the next staircase, I had plenty of time to glance at the books on the shelves. Almost all of them had been in the old library. In some cases, that wasn't

concerning—an unabridged dictionary, for example, was a pretty predictable thing for me to have, and not one that would be too hard to acquire. But there were other books which were less typical. Some of my texts on magical theory and practice were very old indeed, and I was pretty sure some of them had never been published using a printing press, never mind a computer. It had taken me years of work and more than a few sacrifices to build that collection, and its loss had been one of the more distressing aspects of the mansion's destruction.

Almost all of the books were here.

There were only two explanations for that, and neither of them was very comforting. The first was that Loki knew my library well enough to replicate the contents, right down to the stains and water damage on some of the covers. I didn't think that was very likely. Not that he wasn't capable of it—I was sure he was—but because I had a hard time seeing him putting that much thought into it. The only other explanation that I could think of was that he'd been in the mansion when it was attacked, watching everything that happened, and he'd removed the books before they were destroyed. He had not, however, felt any need to warn us, let alone actually provide assistance.

That was disturbingly plausible, and put a new, uncomfortable spin on the events of the past several weeks.

We did not loiter in the library.

The next floor up was an intimate sitting room. There were relatively few furnishings—a couple of chairs, a sofa, a small table—but they were of the very highest quality. A glass-fronted liquor cabinet by the wall appeared to be well stocked already, and somehow you just knew it wasn't the sort of stuff you bought in a store. There was a large fireplace, currently dark, a handful of bookshelves, some tasteful and subdued art on the walls. It was, all things considered, a pleasant, almost totally unremarkable room, making it a pleasant break from the previous levels.

Finally, up at the very top of the tower, we found the bedroom. With the exception of the attached bathroom, it occupied the entire top floor, which was pretty much the perfect size. It was large enough to be luxurious, but not as absurdly, pointlessly oversized as the master suite in the mansion had been. The bed, although of much the same design, was merely twice as large as a king-size, rather than being as large as a modest house.

I'd never seen the room before. But when I walked in, it felt like coming home. I looked around, and a tension I hadn't realized was present ran out of me, and for the first time in three weeks I thought that things might be all right after all.

In the bathroom, which was large and luxurious but otherwise not noteworthy, I spent a moment looking at the changes which had so unnerved Aiko when she first saw my face. I'd had a glimpse of them earlier, but this was the first really sizable mirror I'd had a chance to look in.

Oh, it wasn't just my face. My injuries all appeared to have been healed, but the evidence was very much there. My left arm was a mass of scars from the elbow down; my skin was mostly numb there, as though under the effects of a permanent topical anesthetic. My hand was still a maimed, ruined mockery of what it should be; my fingers were still missing, and my grip would never be as strong as it once was.

But my eyes were what I noticed. They'd always looked odd, a shade of amber on the edge of the human range. Now they were beyond that range. The color hadn't changed, but they looked frozen, the irises patterned like cracking ice, or crystals of frost. It looked a little different every time I saw it, and I got the distinct impression that time lapse photography would show it changing with glacial slowness.

I shook myself, and walked away from the mirror. It was, I told myself, to be expected. You didn't walk away from the experience I'd had unchanged. If the only change was that I showed my inhumanity a little more openly, I'd call that a win any day.

Back in the bedroom, there was a sheet of paper on the pillow which hadn't been there previously. I walked over, curious, and looked at it.

It was some of the nicer paper I'd seen, thick and creamy with just enough texture that you knew it came from a tree. It seemed like a bit of overkill, considering that there was only one line of text, surrounded by a vast expanse of blank paper. It read, in flawless, beautiful handwriting:

Congratulations on your apotheosis! —Loki

I read it. Then I read it again. Then, as the meaning started to sink in, I started to laugh.

Epilogue

Three days later, I was sitting in my throne room again.

I was wearing my new armor, and Tyrfin rested against my throne. Aiko sat just to my left in her matching, slightly smaller throne, also wearing armor, with her wakizashi by her side. Snowflake sat at my feet, in the white-and-blue armor we'd found tucked away in a corner of the armory, which was clearly of the same design as mine and Aiko's. She had her collar on, and her eyepatch was unrelieved black.

I often wear armor when I'm passing judgment. It presents a threatening, martial air that fits well with my image. But I seldom wear the helmet, because it removes any visual trace of humanity, and that makes it hard for people to relate to me. I'm not exactly a personable jarl, but I try to make *some* effort.

Today I didn't care. My face was hidden behind the wolf's mask, blank and without pretense of being human.

A minute or so later, the door opened. I looked at it, my speech already on the tip of my tongue, and then froze.

I'd never seen the person in the doorway. I, um, I'm pretty sure I would have remembered that.

I have high standards for physical beauty. I'd spent most of my life around werewolves, who universally look young and fit, and as a result tend to be very attractive. Then I'd started hanging around with things like jötnar and the Sidhe, who were typically possessed of literally inhuman beauty. Scáthach herself was so lovely that it was actively uncomfortable being in her presence, and almost painful to look at her or hear her voice. So I guess it's fair to say that I was somewhat jaded to physical attractiveness.

Today I was reminded that what you look like doesn't matter nearly as much as your attitude.

The woman who walked in the door was not, in the classical sense, beautiful. Her skin was a little too pale, as though she never saw the sun, her cheekbones too pronounced, her nose a little long, her muscles just a touch too defined. Taken individually, her features were, while not repellent, hardly exceptional; as a whole they were more distinctive than attractive.

But when you looked at her, that didn't matter. She sauntered in the door like she owned the place, her posture casually arrogant. Her movements were smooth, flowing, as though she'd practiced that walk a thousand times. Something about the set of her face made her dark eyes seem to smolder, and her smirk emphasized her lips.

Bottom line was this. It didn't matter that she wasn't all that pretty; when you looked at her, you thought of sex. And I was sure, somehow, that she *knew* the effect she had, that that awareness was what made the effect so very strong.

It was a good thing I was wearing my helmet, because I was pretty sure my expression was less than dignified. Next to me, Aiko whistled softly.

"Winter jarl?" the newcomer said, in a voice as soft as a cat's fur after a hundred brushstrokes. "My grandfather said this was a good time to come."

Of course. This must be Coyote's granddaughter, the succubus. "He told you the terms of your employment here?" I asked, mostly to give myself time to get my thoughts in order again.

"Of course, my lord."

"Good. And call me Winter."

She inclined her head to me slightly. "Selene."

"Is that your name?" I asked, more out of curiosity than anything.

"I have a great many names," she said, with just a hint of sharpness. "But that one is my favorite."

I considered that. Something told me that what she'd just said was a lot more significant than the words she'd used. "Thank you, Selene," I said after a moment. "I'm expecting visitors shortly, and it would be difficult to explain the situation before they arrive. For now, why don't you go upstairs, and we can discuss the specifics of your employment after this business is concluded."

"As you wish, Winter jarl," she said, and immediately went to the stairs. Interesting, that she knew where to go. I wondered if Coyote had given her a floor plan of the building before he sent her.

"Damn," Aiko said after she'd left. "You should *totally* do favors for gods more often."

I started to retort, then froze when the door opened again. This time it was the group I'd been expecting.

Sveinn led the parade, wearing scale armor and a steel helmet. He had a simple, straight sword at his side, and a wooden targe on his back. Behind him came Jimmy, Brick, Matthew, Doug, Kris, Chuck, and finally Mac, in single file. The rest of the housecarls followed behind them, herding them in. A moment later, Kjaran emerged from the safe room in the basement, literally dragging Aubrey.

All the living members of the Inquisition, in one room for the first time in quite a while. For a moment I considered killing them all, and ending the problem right now. All I'd have to do was speak a single word. The housecarls would rip them to shreds without difficulty, without question. It would solve a lot of problems.

But I was still trying to be a good person. So I stuck to the plan instead.

It didn't take long for the housecarls to split the herd the way I'd instructed. Jimmy, Brick, and Matthew were dragged over to stand next to Aubrey. Kjaran stood over them, a massive warhammer at

the ready, and Kyi was standing at the end of the hallway with her bow trained on them. Not even Brick could start something right now and expect to live. Vigdis and Tindr, meanwhile, kept the other mages in a separate group, several feet away. Haki was standing next to the door, watching.

Sveinn knelt in front of me. "We have brought them, *minn herra*," he said redundantly. "As you asked."

"Very good," I said, gesturing for him to rise. How many of them, I wondered, would be impressed by this bit of theatre? What was even the point of an act, when no one was fooled?

"What do you think you're doing?" Jimmy demanded. His voice was loud and angry, as though to cover the fear underneath. Another man playing a role when everyone there knew the truth.

I ignored him, addressing the other group. "All of you," I said, "ceased to participate in vigilante activities some time ago, of your own free will. What I am about to say does not directly concern you. You are here only to hear what I say to your fellows; I think that it will be of some interest. Clear?"

You could have heard a pin drop.

"Good," I said, turning my attention to the other group. "Two of your number," I said, my voice growing cold and hard, "are not among you. Katie and Mike became involved in activities which were, to say the least, ill-advised. As a direct result, a large section of the city has been destroyed, several thousand people are dead, and I am an internationally wanted criminal. This makes me upset."

"That's nothing to do with us," Brick said. Alone of all the people in front of me, he sounded perfectly calm. "You just said it was the two of them responsible."

"Yes," I agreed. "And all of you interacted with them on a regular basis. You were aware of their increasing extremism. You were aware of their desire for increased power. At least one of you knew that they had taken steps to fulfill their ambitions which were likely to cause serious harm. None of you acted to prevent this. None of you informed me of this situation."

I paused, and smiled behind my mask. They couldn't see it, but I was confident they would hear the ice in my voice. "This," I purred, "is not something that makes me happy. There are a great many people who are very upset by what has happened recently. As Katie and Mike are already deceased, they are looking for people to blame. They have chosen you."

The room went silent again.

"I have chosen to protect you," I said after a moment. "I have accepted responsibility for your future actions. In brief, you work for me now. The vigilantism will cease. You will do as I tell you, when I tell you. No exceptions."

Brick cleared his throat. "You can't do that," he said. "I already answer to someone. You know that." The other mages looked, to varying degrees, startled. A couple of them—Kris and Aubrey were

the ones that stood out to me—didn't seem surprised; I was pretty sure they'd already guessed this. The others just as clearly hadn't.

"So now you answer to two," I told him. "You have failed in your duties, Brick. You treated the people you were assigned to monitor as harmless, despite knowing that they were violent, shortsighted extremists. You failed to report the escalation of the situation. When confronted, you failed to recognize the danger they posed, allowing them to overcome you. I suspect your boss will see things the same way I do."

"You have no place in that decision," he said, the brittle pride in his voice failing to cover the fear underneath. He knew he'd failed, and I didn't think Watcher had much patience with failure.

I smiled even wider. "You operated in my land," I reminded him. "My territory. As a result of your failures, *my* territory has been harmed. *My* subjects have been killed. *My* reputation has been tarnished. Under the standard treaties, there's no question that you have caused me personal harm. This is a mild response compared to what I could, legally, do to you." I was grinning now. "Unless you think the Conclave will start a political incident with Skrímir over you, of course, in which case you're welcome to leave, and let the dice fall as they may."

He was silent. He did not move.

"As I was saying," I continued, addressing the rest of them. "You are now my employees. Serve me to the best of your abilities, and I will provide you with protection and resources. Screw up again, and I will kill you." I considered them, a ragtag bunch of fools far more dangerous than they looked. "I'm sticking my neck out for you, here," I said, more gently. "Don't blow it. This is the last chance any of you are going to get."

Herded by the housecarls, they started drifting out of the building, with varying degrees of resentment and, in a couple of cases, excitement visible on their faces. I took my helmet off and got off my throne, stretching. I would never understand why, with all of the resources available to him, Skrímir couldn't make a throne more comfortable than the floor.

"Good job," Aiko said, standing up as well.

"You think?" I asked, staring after the departing mages.

"Yeah," she said firmly.