

Frost Bitten

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Frost Bitten (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. Why am I even bothering with these clever addendums to the disclaimer anymore?

Emrys Vaughn

This book is dedicated to...um...someone? I don't know. How about a cat? That sounds like a good idea.

There we go. This book is dedicated to a cat.

Chapter One

I was shifting around on my throne, ass already numb, and wondering how much tickets to the tropics would cost me. I'd heard that Hawaii was very nice at this time of year, and if we timed it right we could be quite well hidden before they ever thought to look for us. I'd never been to a tropical island before, but it couldn't take *that* much adjustment.

"Jarl?" a slightly diffident voice said. "Are you ready?"

I sighed, sat up straight, and cursorily glanced over my appearance. Everything seemed in order, which left me with no excuse for further delay, so I said, "Yes, Sveinn, thank you. Bring him in."

"*Já, minn herra,*" Sveinn said, and gestured slightly. I'm not entirely sure why he couldn't say it in English—"yes, my lord" cannot be *that* difficult to remember, and it wasn't like I in any way encouraged him to add the lordly bit in any case. Besides, he spoke English just fine. I suspected he just did it to annoy me. I probably shouldn't have let it go on—I *was* technically his lord, after all, regardless of how little I wanted the position. But Sveinn Wartooth was the most sane and reliable of my half-dozen housecarls, and I didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that reliability.

Besides. I didn't want to start *thinking* of myself as a jarl. I might be in a position of authority now, but nobody said I had to like it.

A moment later, two more of my minions walked into the room, dragging a bound and gagged man visually indistinguishable from a human. He was dressed in clothes which would let him blend into any college crowd in the city without too much difficulty, although the effect was ruined by his expression. His hands were tied tightly behind his back with actual rope, and another length of rope connected his feet. It was long enough for him to walk, but would severely limit his stride length, and the jötnar carrying him were moving too quickly for him to keep up. It wasn't until they stopped, directly in front of me, that he was able to stand up under his own power.

Vigdis Bloodaxe, perhaps the craziest of my housecarls—although that was, in all fairness, a fiercely disputed title—was standing to his right. She was holding his shoulder in one hand and his elbow in the other, and had a broad, nasty smile on her face. Kjaran, on the man's other side, was supporting his weight with one hand under his arm. His face was dispassionate, disengaged.

Vigdis is the lunatic of the group. But Kjaran unnerves me more. I do not understand him. I do not know what he wants, or why he continues to work for me. The man is an enigma. Even Aiko finds him strange and a little creepy, and not much gets to her.

"Thank you," I said calmly. Vigdis nodded sharply, her features suffused with pride—she had been instrumental in his capture. Kjaran didn't react, but then he wouldn't. Not for nothing do they call him the Silent.

"So," I said, speaking to the bound man now. "Good evening, Mr. Miner." He startled visibly when I spoke his name; clearly, he'd thought himself anonymous—justifiably, considering how tricky it had been for me to learn his real name. "I'm sorry to meet you under such circumstances, but you didn't seem particularly amenable to speaking with me before." I'd made a point of sending him a very public, very well-attested message; I didn't want anyone to claim I hadn't offered him a choice.

"Now then," I continued briskly. "I hear that you've been saying rather offensive things about me for some time. Insults and such. You will notice, Mr. Miner, that I have allowed you to do so. It is of course your inalienable right to believe and, indeed, to say whatever happens to come into your evidently quite tiny mind!" I shook my head sadly. "Unfortunately, you recently went beyond speech. You acted against a person under my protection. There are things which can be forgiven, Mr. Miner, and there are things which cannot. Your recent actions—which, I might add, are directly in violation of the treaty your people agreed on with me—are distinctly in the latter group." Val hadn't been in any real danger, of course—he was *very* capable of defending himself, as were both of his employees—but it made a good excuse, which was all I really needed.

Besides. You don't go around trying to set fire to peoples' stores. That isn't political protest or whatever he wanted to call it. That's just being a dick.

"Shall I kill him, jarl?" said Vigdis eagerly. It was, I knew, a serious offer; she knew the plan, but if I told her to just kill him now she would be overjoyed to do so.

"Not just yet, thank you," I said. "You see, Mr. Miner, this presents me with certain problems. If I simply kill you, Katrin will undoubtedly be aggrieved. She takes the loss of one of her vampires quite seriously, however valueless the vampire in question may be. Now, I would be well within my rights as defined by our treaty to do so, but I would prefer not to antagonize her needlessly." I sighed. "Quite a conundrum, isn't it?"

"Do you want us to let him go?" Vigdis asked, sounding reluctant. The vampire relaxed, and even started to look a little smug, assuming this had all been an exercise to scare him a little. Had he been able to see that Vigdis was still grinning, he probably would have known better. When Vigdis grins, it usually presages violence, usually being inflicted by her.

"No, no," I said absently, leaning back in my throne and letting my gaze wander off. "Have you ever read Machiavelli, Mr. Miner? It's quite fascinating—he was a very insightful man, and remarkably honest, I think.. People tend to consider him devious, even evil, but I must admit I've always read it a little differently. Indeed, it seems to me that his attitudes were quite moral; his morality was simply more farsighted and logical than was the fashion at the time. After all, if there's one thing you can say in support of an iron-fisted ruler, it's that they *rule*. Better, it would seem, that the people be governed harshly than that they be crushed by an invader, or ravaged by civil war, or any number of other things that are invited by a weak ruler. Stability, even unpleasant stability, is often better than chaos. Don't you think?"

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The vampire couldn't answer, of course, but his glare had acquired tones of contempt and derision. Perfect.

"Interestingly," I continued, hardly even seeming to pay attention to what was going on, "Machiavelli even notes several times the importance of avoiding, above all else, being despised and hated—words which are, unfortunately, often confused in this language, when their meaning is really quite distinct. Now, it seems clear that if I kill you, I will provoke hatred from Katrin, something which I should seek to avoid. But if I simply let you go, it will make me seem powerless. It seems to me that there is nothing quite so likely to provoke disdain in the populace in general as to allow a declared enemy to escape punishment." I shook my head sadly. "As I said, quite a conundrum."

He managed to snort. Aiko, sitting on the floor to my right, had her head pillowed on my thigh, and seemed hardly even present, mentally speaking. Snowflake had already fallen asleep, sprawled across my feet.

"Fortunately," I continued brightly, "I've had all day while you were, ah, asleep to think of solutions to this puzzle, and I think I've come up with four different ways to deal with it. First off, you can simply leave my domain. Exile isn't a terribly harsh punishment, but it will allow me to save face, which is really all I'm interested in right now. Second, you can publicly recant your statements regarding me. I think that will be some measure of reparation, and the public humiliation should be a severe enough punishment that it won't be viewed as excessive lenience on my part. Third, I can give you a highly visible injury, which should keep people from seeing me as weak. I think removing a hand should do it—and, Mr. Miner, while you might not think that a terribly significant punishment, I assure you that if I cut off your hand with this—" I touched Tyrfing, which was leaning against my other thigh—"it will not grow back."

"Now," I said, with a warning note in my voice, "I should warn you that this is a one-time only offer. Should you break the rules again—which includes returning to the state of Colorado, if you should choose exile—I will not be so lenient. The choice of which of these punishments you will receive is, of course, yours. Kindly remove his bindings."

Vigdis and Kjaran hastened to comply. A few moments later, the vampire was standing under his own power, ungagged, a few lengths of rope pooled around his feet. Vigdis still had her hand on his shoulder, but Kjaran was standing a few feet away. It didn't matter; vampire or not, there was no way he could get away or win a fight. Not with me, Snowflake, Aiko, and half a dozen jötnar standing there ready to go to town on him.

He was still glaring at me fiercely, but he seemed to be at least slightly nervous too. That was good; it suggested he might not be a *total* moron. "What's the fourth?" he said finally.

"Pardon?"

"The fourth option," the vampire said impatiently. "You said there were four choices. You've only listed three."

"Oh, man!" I exclaimed. "How could I forget that! The fourth option is, I kill you in such an entertaining way that hopefully Katrin is too busy being amused by it to get upset with me. I'm thinking I'll have Vigdis pull your arm off and beat you about the head with it, then maybe stick it up your ass and stake you through the heart with your other arm bone before having your head chewed off by weasels. But if you can think of something funnier I'm all ears."

Vampires are typically pale. But this one moved another shade or two towards snowy. "You can't do that," he said blankly.

Vigdis grinned and tightened her fingers on his shoulder. Now, Vigdis doesn't look terribly impressive—she's about average height and only slightly heavier in build than a normal woman, in her human guise. But she's a frost giant, and I knew she was more than strong enough to pop his shoulder out of its socket with her fingers. I also knew that the vampire was realizing more or less the same thing right now. She leaned closer to him, just inches from his ear, and whispered, "Want to bet?"

The vampire had the peculiarly shocked expression of someone realizing too late that he's in over his head. A moment later his features firmed into a credible mask of calm. He stuck his free arm out in front of him and looked at Tyrfinn significantly.

A short time later, we were all seated comfortably in what used to be the Alpha's bedroom, back when this house was owned by the pack. It was a little cramped, but now that the main room of the house had been converted into a throne room, it was the de facto gathering place. Given that the second floor had been given over into living quarters for my housecarls, and the third-floor study was basically my office now, there wasn't a lot of choice. The only room larger was the safe room in the basement, and I wasn't willing to spend time there. I don't have a lot of psychological problems from my stint as a prisoner in a werewolf safe room, but I won't ever be comfortable in one.

I probably shouldn't have been there in any case. I mean, chumming with the minions after completing a mildly difficult and seriously unpleasant task doesn't exactly fit with a proper jarl's dignity and decorum, I suspect. But I have no interest in being a proper jarl, and in any case I wanted to keep my housecarls friendly. They were in an excellent position to stab me in the back, literally or otherwise.

"That was awesome," Kyi Greyfell said, laughing. "You were so funny, and then he not laughed. I expected not, that would he that choice choose." Kyi, the other female out of six housecarls, was also the youngest of them, maybe no older than me. English isn't her first language. Not that any of the other jötnar's first language *is* English, but Kyi's relative youth meant that she *sounded* like it, particularly when she's had a bit to drink. Being a jotun, that's most of the time.

"I didn't see it coming myself," I admitted. "I'd have thought he was smart enough to pick exile."

"Aren't you worried he'll try to get revenge?" Sveinn asked.

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"Not really. Katrin won't want him embarrassing her, and at this point any time someone sees him it will be an embarrassment to her. I expect she'll have him killed or shipped off soon." I was guessing the former; Katrin wasn't the sort to worry overmuch about little things like justice or loyalty. If killing a minion was the most expedient solution, that was what she'd do.

"Clever," Tindr the Exile said, sounding impressed. He was smaller than any of the others save Kyi, in both human and giant forms, and the worst fighter of the lot. That made him bottom of the totem pole in the hyper-violent jotun society. I was always careful to treat him with respect, though; Tindr is smart. After Sveinn, he was responsible for organizing this mess, and he was the most bureaucratically-talented of the group. He also did all my accounting, now that I was dealing with enough money to need an accountant. I was clever enough to see how vulnerable that left me to him, should he decide he would be better off not to serve me loyally.

"You should have him watched anyway. Just in case." That was from Haki Who-Fights-Alone. As his name suggests, he's not the most enthusiastic team player. He wasn't antisocial, exactly; just not accustomed to working with others, and not particularly inclined to change that. Not entirely unlike me, really, except that I didn't get the option. When Skrímir informs you you're going to hold court and command housecarls, you don't argue. It isn't wise.

"Excellent idea," I said. "Thanks for volunteering." Everyone in the room laughed, with the exception of Kjaran. Kjaran doesn't laugh. Ever.

I can't say it's the gang I always wanted to be the boss of. But it could be worse.

About an hour later, I got a call from a familiar number and excused myself to answer it, somewhat gratefully. The housecarls had broken out the mead some time earlier (I have no idea where they get the stuff, but it's seemingly an endless supply), and several of them also had more exotic forms of alcohol. As a result, Kyi was lapsing incoherently in and out of whatever bastardized version of Old Norse the jötnar used, Vigdis was reminiscing about some battle or other, and Sveinn had started singing in what sounded like Swedish.

Given that I don't drink and at the moment wanted nothing more than to go home and go to sleep, I was rather glad to have an excuse to leave.

"Hey," I said, closing the door to my office firmly. Snowflake was already there, waiting to go home; she doesn't like the jötnar much. "What's up?"

"Exciting times," Kyra said. Her voice was very light and casual, but I knew her well enough to recognize the tension underneath. "Could you do me a favor?"

"For you? Anything. Especially if it involves leaving this freaking city."

"Now you know how I felt. So how soon can you get to Wyoming?"

I frowned, estimating timing. It was made trickier by the fact that time's passage could be slightly more fluid than people usually conceive of time as being in some of the places I traveled through. "An hour," I said eventually. "Maybe an hour and a half. Why?"

"Wait, what? An *hour*? How are you going to manage *that*?"

"Being a freak of nature has its perks," I said smugly.

"Be that way," she said. "Well, I don't think Dolph will be here before morning, so I guess I'll see you then."

I considered going back into that room and pretending to celebrate a small, ugly victory in the small, ugly war between me and Katrin, and pretending to take pride in the maiming and probable death of someone who, while no saint, probably never even understood the game he was a pawn in. "Actually," I said to Kyra, "do you mind if I come tonight? It sounds like this is one of your *complicated* favors, and I'd like to hear what I'm getting myself into before Dolph gets there."

"Fine with me," she said, probably shrugging. I mean, I wouldn't know, obviously, but I could imagine her shrugging while she said that, and the other person not being able to see you never seems to stop people gesturing.

"Great. I'll see you in a few hours."

Almost an hour later, Aiko, Snowflake and I walked in the front door of our mansion. All of the housecarls had offered to come along, of course, because that's the sort of thing a housecarl is supposed to do, but I'd turned them down. I was looking forward to a little time without having minions around, and if necessary I could always come back and get them.

A few steps inside the door, we were met by Alexis. My cousin and I were never particularly close, but I was currently sort of teaching her magic, and it was simpler for her to live with us than be constantly traveling back and forth. There was plenty of room for it; there are castles smaller than the mansion. It was also cheaper, and significantly safer for her—there are very, very few people capable of attacking a pocket dimension built by a god with the explicit purpose of being very private and very defensible.

"This is ridiculous!" she said, glaring at me.

"What is?"

"The jackass you keep insisting I take classes from!"

"Shihan Johnson has very good credentials," I reminded her. "And he knows what he's talking about, which isn't at all the same."

"Maybe," she allowed, not much mollified, "but he's an asshole."

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"Oh, no," I assured her. "John's a very nice man. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to convince him to be an asshole to you. He didn't like the idea very much, let me tell you."

The belligerence drained out of her face, replaced by confusion. "Wait a second. You *asked* him to be a jerk?"

"Absolutely," I confirmed.

"*Why?*"

"Because you need to start learning self-defense, aikido is a good place to start, and he's an excellent aikido instructor. And you also need to learn how to deal with assholes in positions of authority, because believe me, you will never stop encountering them. This was just killing two birds with one stone."

She stared at me. "That...almost makes sense. Which kind of scares me."

I grinned. "Don't worry about it. You've got the basics down, so I don't think it matters much if you stop going at this point. Most of the higher-level stuff is window dressing and niche applications you don't really need. For now, pack your bags for a couple of days."

"For what?"

"Trip to Wyoming," I said cheerfully. "You get to meet some interesting people."

"Most of whom will probably try to kill me," she muttered as she walked away.

"Well, duh. You're traveling with me and Aiko, what do you expect?"

Trying to use magic to travel is a difficult prospect. People get all the wrong ideas about it. See, teleportation is possible, in the most technical sense of the word, but it isn't practical for anyone short of a deity. Space is a fundamental part of the universe, and trying to warp it that much takes astronomical power, literally; trying to do so with the precision required for safely transporting a living thing takes the kind of skill and expertise no human has. Flying is easier, but still very difficult. Trying to manipulate enough energy to move a human's weight is pretty hard, to begin with. Then you have to do so powerfully enough that it's faster than walking. That means some pretty terrific forces are involved, which means that a single mistake is likely to be lethal, which means that it's damned hard to practice. So basically, it can be done, but only by people who have a pretty strong gift in that direction.

The method most people use to travel, assuming they travel with magic at all, is a little more complicated. It takes advantage of numerous extremely esoteric principles of spatial and metaphysical relationships; the theory behind it is so far beyond me I've never even tried to grasp it. Basically, though, it takes advantage of a loophole in the idea of place and takes a side trip through another level of reality, going from A to B without actually interacting with the space between at all.

In practice, what this means is that magical travel is a difficult, exhausting, and dangerous process. It also has the very important limitation that you can't use it to travel anywhere you don't already know intimately.

I explained all this to Alexis as we walked to the first waypoint. She'd heard most of it before, and even traveled this way, but it was the kind of thing she could stand to hear twice.

"Why do you do it at all, then?" she asked when I was finished.

"Because we're about to go about a thousand miles in an hour," I said.

"Well, I suppose it beats flying."

"That's the spirit!" Aiko said brightly. "Now shut up, please. I'm trying to concentrate." We were currently standing just out front of a small movie theater. Given that it was only around ten, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that it was a fairly busy place, and we didn't have much trouble blending in. There weren't a lot of people standing around outside, given that it was mid-December, and our appearance was such that we always attract a bit of attention, but I imagine they see enough weirdos at theaters that they hardly even notice them anymore.

"Watch what she's doing," I said to Alexis quietly. "You see the energy structures?"

"Yeah," she replied. "Wow. That's some really intricate patterning."

"Yes," I agreed, "it is, which is why you shouldn't mess around with it yet. Screw up with this stuff, and you disappear."

"What, like, die?"

I frowned. "Nobody's quite sure. As far as we know, nobody's ever managed to make contact with anything that's gone through a failed portal. But nobody's ever come back either." She started to look very, very concerned. "Don't worry," I said. "Aiko's good at this."

"Yes," Aiko growled, "but I'm better when people *shut up*."

I smirked. But I shut up.

A few minutes later, an elongated oval of absolute darkness snapped into place against the wall in front of her. I stepped through first, then Snowflake, then Alexis, and Aiko brought up the rear.

The other reason people avoid using this sort of travel is that it sucks. A lot. The moment between entering one end and stepping out the other was only a fraction of an instant, but it packed a whole lot of unpleasant into that period. It felt like being stretched and crushed and burned and frozen and blinded and exsanguinated all at once. Not really, of course, because it wasn't a physical sensation at all, but I have difficulty describing it in terms that make any sense at all, and an extended metaphor comparing it to more ordinary sensations is the best I can do.

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I blacked out for a minute or two on the other end. I always do. I don't know why. I don't really understand much about this stuff. I can do it, although not all that well, and beyond that I absolutely do not want to know. When I came to, I was on my knees, Snowflake was on the ground next to me making a sort of whimpering noise, Aiko was leaning on me for support (which didn't make it any easier not to fall over, trust me), and Alexis was flat on her back in the unbelievably perfect grass a few feet away.

I stood up, slowly enough not to upset Aiko's balance. "I bloody hate coming straight here," she muttered, glaring at me. "Why couldn't we use an intermediary again?"

"Because I don't want to go through the sleazy neighborhood world ever again, and there wasn't a convenient place to get to Faerie around." I glanced around. We were standing in the middle of a rough oval of grass, brilliant green and lush in ways no grass in my world ever was. The space, around the size of a football field, was delineated by towering obelisks of some silvery material I'd never seen anywhere else. A gibbous moon hung in the sky, casting more than adequate light.

Predictably, the most distinctive part of the world we were now in to me was the scent. The air here smelled wonderful, all the time. At the moment it smelled like a mountain breeze, and the air after a thunderstorm, freshly cut grass and night-blooming flowers. It was balmy here, a sharp contrast from the chilly air of Colorado. It was always balmy here.

It took a few minutes to recover from the crossing. Oh, I suppose they weren't strictly *necessary*; I'd done much nastier ones, and in comparison this was downright pleasant. I mean, *none* of us was violently ill afterwards. We could have gotten up and kept going, if necessary carrying Alexis, who wasn't accustomed to such things. But, well, why?

"Ugh," my cousin said a few minutes later. "Where are we?"

"A backwater world the Sidhe use to host minor events," I said. "That's how it started, anyway. It got some publicity for a breakout show of some sort, and a few different groups have started using it, although not on a regular basis."

Aiko sighed. "Come on, Winter. You could have told her *anything*, and you go with the boring truth? I'm disappointed in you."

"We call it El Dorado," I concluded. "Although that isn't the proper name. It sure as hell isn't the original."

"Good," Alexis said with a note of relief. "I don't know if I could handle that."

"Just wait until you see Atlantis," Aiko said, taking off across the grass.

She's kidding, right? Snowflake said, standing up and shaking herself thoroughly.

Almost certainly. Operative word being almost.

The next stop was in a park. The grass, just as lush and unbelievable as all the rest, came up above my waist, and rustled with a soothing, almost musical sound in the breeze. Trees, mostly ash and oak with a scattering of conifers, towered overhead. It was tricky to estimate exactly how high they were—El Dorado was tangentially connected with Faerie, and the second Faerie becomes involved concepts of distance and spatial arrangement are so unreliable as to be worthless—but it had to be at least a few hundred feet.

Aiko opened the next gate as well, spinning it within an arch formed by massive tree branches near the small stream that passed through the park. We stepped through it, and found ourselves in a place almost diametrically opposed to that which we'd left.

At first glance, it seemed fairly similar. The trees were more varied—beyond what I would ordinarily think possible, even—but equally enormous. The bright, sparkling brook had been replaced by a dark, slow river that seemed as though it might be hiding nearly anything beneath its surface. The sky was obstructed by a rainforest-like canopy of branches, casting the forest floor into a perpetual state of twilight, not too different from the moonlit streets of El Dorado.

Every specific feature was, although not the same, quite similar to the place we'd left. And yet no one would ever confuse the two, not even momentarily. I'm not sure I can really explain why. It simply...felt different. This forest had a hushed quality to it, almost a sense of awareness. It wasn't that it felt like the trees were watching me; it was more that it felt like they *could* watch me, but weren't currently bothering. This was a place that had little knowledge of me or anything like me, and less desire to learn. It was friendly enough, though. There was no real sense of malice. It was just a lot *bigger* than me.

None of us had nearly the symptoms of last time. Snowflake trotted over to the water and took a long drink, then settled down to wait. Alexis looked a little ill, but she was hardly on the brink of passing out. I felt dizzy and my headache had gotten noticeably worse, but I was in fairly good shape, on a relative scale.

Aiko didn't look like she was having any problems at all. Her eyes were half-closed, and her expression was one I didn't often see on her face, one of contentment. She wandered over towards the river, moving in an almost dreamlike manner, her fingers brushing against the bark of the trees. She looked like she was coming home.

But then, that's probably because she was. From what little she's willing to say, the Wood was more her home than her mother's domain ever was.

A few moments later Alexis once again asked, "Where are we?" Her voice was nothing less than awestruck, a perfectly appropriate and rational response to Inari's Wood.

"Inari's Wood," I said. "You remember who Inari is?"

"Japanese deity," she recited dutifully. "Very important Shinto kami. Associated with agriculture, particularly in the form of rice."

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"Right, and his servants are...?"

"Foxes, particularly high-ranking kitsune," she said, glancing at Aiko. For her part, our resident kitsune didn't abandon her usual dignity and decorum to grace that with a response. Which is another way of saying she was twenty feet up a spruce; a second or two later she bounced a cone off my head.

"Good job," I said. "He created this domain as a sort of homeland or refuge for the kitsune. It should be the last stop before we get to our destination, if Aiko would get down here."

"Hey," she said unrepentantly, tossing a cone at Snowflake, who bit it out of the air. "You're driving."

"True," I sighed, turning to where a pine branch bent to the ground, forming a sort of elongated triangle.

"Wait a second," Alexis said. "*You're* driving? Should I be worried by this?"

"Try not to sound so happy," I said dryly. "You'll make Aiko feel bad." I started gathering power together and shaping it into the pattern I wanted.

I'm nowhere near as good as Aiko at this particular area of magic. She's a native of the Otherside, however easy that is to forget, and that makes her naturally more suited to this sort of thing. She's also had close to fifty years to practice, while I'm twenty years younger than she is and I've only been able to do this trick at all for maybe three or four.

But I've had a lot of opportunity to use it, recently. I was getting better. I only made two false starts before getting it right, and the whole process took me less than fifteen minutes. Still not good enough for a quick escape, maybe, but there are ways to compensate for that. The experience of transfer was even less fun when you were the one making the portal, and this domain was far enough removed from my destination point to make it noticeably worse, but I could cope.

I could always cope.

Chapter Two

When I became cognizant of my surroundings again, the contrast was quite remarkable. The air was cold, helped by a noticeable breeze. I could smell snow on the air. The leaves were long since fallen, but pine needles rustle pretty well in the wind too.

"I told you he'd be here," someone said. I didn't recognize the voice, which immediately put me on high alert—because, seriously, if someone you don't know says that right after exiting a portal on your way to help a friend with an unspecified favor, you'd damn well *better* be scared.

I opened my eyes and looked around. I was leaning heavily against a spruce tree, but I at least felt capable of movement. A quick glance showed that Aiko, Snowflake, and Alexis were all present and accounted for, and appeared unharmed, which was a relief.

The bad news was that a half-dozen people I *didn't* know were also present. They all looked human, more or less, but it wasn't a perfect resemblance. There were a bunch of tiny details that just weren't quite right. None of them were dressed for this kind of weather, for one thing, and yet none of them seemed to notice the cold or the wind. They weren't carrying any lights. Their clothing was a bizarre mix of different styles and time periods—each individual was internally consistent, but between them they had everything from a 1920s newsboy to a modern Goth teenager.

The one who'd spoken appeared to be a male, in his late teens, in a Scottish-style kilt. But it was a slightly older-looking female with a face vaguely resembling a hatchet wearing modern thrift-store rejects who led the group towards us.

She stopped around ten feet from me, her cohorts arranged in a rough semicircle behind her, and looked us over. "You Winter Wolf?" she said at last. Her voice was unpleasant, rough and raspy. Her ash-grey eyes were hard, cold, and almost feverishly intense.

I considered my answer for a moment. I was getting a distinctly unfriendly vibe from these people, which I was disinclined to dismiss. On the other hand, they outnumbered us six-to-four, and given that Alexis wasn't much of a fighter that effectively gave them twice our numbers. Depending on what exactly they were that might or might not be an insurmountable challenge. In any case, though, I thought we'd do better given a chance to recover from the crossing, which meant I wanted to keep them talking, which meant I had to play along.

"That's me," I said, somewhat reluctantly. "Who am I talking to?"

They ignored my question entirely. The ringleader smiled, a nasty and unsettling smile. She suddenly had a knife in her hand, a long and simple knife of some metal that looked and smelled like silver. Behind her, the others produced weapons as well. "Going to make you pay, wolf," she said quietly. Her voice, although superficially calm, just about made me shiver, and not many people can pull that off anymore.

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I stood up straight and called Tyrfing to hand, but didn't draw it. "Look," I said calmly, not backing down or looking away from the ringleader. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know who you people *are*. So, if you'd care to sit down for a few minutes and talk this over, I really think it would be better for both of us."

"Don't believe you."

"Took him away."

"Going to die, wolf."

"Killed him. We kill you."

"Liar. We know your kind."

"Make you pay."

I wasn't entirely sure where the whispers were coming from. I mean, it was fairly clear that they were coming from the people I was talking to, just from thematic resemblance, so in that sense of course I *did* know where they were coming from. But they *sounded* like they were emanating from thin air, or the forest around me, with no clear source. The result was fairly creepy. The semicircle of armed, whispering lunatics started moving closer.

Aiko was suddenly standing right next to me, her wakizashi already drawn and gleaming dangerously in the moonlight. She made a sound intermediate in tone between a snarl and a hiss. The group of nutters slowed, then the ringleader spat something in a language I didn't recognize and they started moving again.

Right about then, I heard a branch breaking in the woods. Judging by the sound it came from not far behind the ring of psychos, who froze when they heard it. A moment later the leader said something else in the same language and sliced across her own arm with her knife, holding her arms open as though to embrace someone. The effect on the rest of them was instant and dramatic. They immediately stopped advancing and put away weapons. A few seconds later a portal to the Otherside formed at the leader's feet, looking like a bottomless pit, and they jumped through, vanishing. She gave me one last hate-filled look, then followed them down, the portal closing after her.

A few seconds later Kyra walked out from under the trees. She wasn't carrying a light source, and appeared to be having no trouble navigating the forest undergrowth by moonlight. Werewolves are quite comfortable in the dark. "Hey, Winter," she said. Then she frowned, seeing the weaponry. "What's the problem?"

"Thought I heard something," I said, which was technically true. "How'd you know where to find us?"

Now, you might be wondering why I didn't just tell Kyra the truth. The reason for that is very simple. At this point, I had essentially no knowledge at all about what was going on, or why she'd asked

me to come here, and only the vaguest conjectures about what had just happened. Given that, I'd be a fool of monumental proportions to share any information that might turn out to be a valuable secret until I had a better hand on the situation.

You might be saying that, given that Kyra was my best friend and ally, I should be sharing what info I had with her. That would be correct. Unfortunately, it also overlooks a great deal. The reality of the situation was that I'd had very little contact with Kyra for several years. At this point, she might owe loyalty to any number of people who were inimical to me. If that was the case, and at this point I had no evidence as to whether it was or not, then we might well find ourselves in opposition, regardless of our personal feelings towards each other.

I hate thinking like that. I hate treating my friends as potential enemies. Absolutely hate it. But that can't change the fact that it is a necessary consequence of the path my life had taken. And, given that I made those choices knowing full well that there would be a price to pay, I have little room for complaint.

"I didn't know where you would be, actually," she said. That made sense, given that I hadn't told her. She hooked one thumb over her shoulder. "He did," she said.

Bryan Ferguson stepped into my field of view. He was wearing nondescript tan clothing, reminiscent of traditional Bedouin garb, but in all other ways looked exactly as he had when I'd seen him last. "Good evening, Winter," he said in his toneless voice.

I sighed. Just what I needed. "Good evening," I said resignedly. It wasn't, of course, but there were certain patterns to follow. Bryan wouldn't care about such things, but it helped me keep my mind off how much worse things had just gotten.

"Come," he said, making no mention of the fact that I'd just lied to Kyra—and I was certain he knew that I'd lied. It was very difficult to deceive Bryan, and in any case I was confident he'd heard or otherwise sensed the weirdos. "You should speak with Edward. This is not a safe place for you now."

I didn't argue. Kyra looked like she wanted to ask him what the hell he was talking about, but she didn't say anything. Alexis and Aiko both started to ask me questions, but I shushed them; this was very much not the time or place to have this discussion.

And so the lot of us followed the werewolves through the woods, which seemed a lot more shadowy than they had a few moments prior. Nobody spoke. Bryan did not look back to see if we were following. He did not need to.

Wolf, Wyoming's a pretty interesting place—or, more accurately, I respond to it in interesting ways. It isn't my home anymore, but there's a certain amount of truth to the claim that what's learned in the cradle is taken to the grave. This place had been home when I was a kid, even before I moved here, and something of that comforting familiarity would always stick with me.

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Walking into town, I always get the feeling that it's strangely insulated from the outside world. That part of Wyoming is mostly plains and rolling hills leading up into the foothills, but there's a small, anomalous forest at the edge of town. I've never been quite sure whether Edward is responsible for it, or it's natural and he just chose to settle down near it.

Whatever the cause, the result is a small, quiet town bordered by forest to the northwest and tall, steep hills on every other side. The only road in is a low-traffic two-lane highway that switchbacks along the hills in one end of town and out the other. It had been paved since the last time I'd been here, more than a decade ago, but a decent number of the roads in town were still dirt. Only a few miles away, I knew, the plains reasserted themselves, but inside the bowl of the valley, you wouldn't guess that the topography was so drastically different a short distance away. Edward has a fairly sizable ranch out there; he doesn't make very much money from it, I don't think, but he doesn't really worry about things like that.

It's a quiet, peaceful little place, and Edward works very hard to keep it that way. Oh, not officially—but even the human residents are well aware of who's in charge, and his unofficial directives have a way of being enforced by pretty much everyone in the community. It's one of the few places I know of where, even before the whole publicity stunt fiasco, you could reasonably expect that anyone you talked to would believe in werewolves.

They don't talk about it much. Living there, you learn quickly that there are some questions you just don't ask.

It was a good place to me, when I was younger. Somewhere I could get away from a world I couldn't cope with anymore. Strange, that it wasn't until I reflected on it as an adult that I realized that most of the other residents were there for the same reason.

"Spooky place," Alexis said quietly after maybe thirty seconds of walking through town. Edward's house was on the other side of town, and while that didn't mean too much in such a small place it was still a few minutes of walking.

I glanced at her curiously. "Oh? How so?"

"There aren't many ways to get around. No streetlights." She shrugged vaguely. "Besides. It just has a spooky vibe."

"I've always found it pleasant," Kyra said, demonstrating once again that werewolf ears work rather better than most humans'. "Not too many people around. Plenty of space."

"Well, yeah," my cousin said dryly. "You can see in the dark." She didn't know Kyra real well, but she'd spent enough time around her to be comfortable talking with her. I didn't visit Wyoming, however many times Edward or Kyra invited me—too many memories, all of them tainted by the way I'd left—but she'd come back to visit a few times.

"So can you," I pointed out. "Consider it an incentive to practice more."

"Easy for you to say," she muttered. "You've got air. Being able to sense electric charges hardly helps me."

"So fake it," I suggested cheerfully. "You could always try echolocation."

"You can do that?" Kyra asked me.

"I can't, personally, because I never saw enough use in it to learn how. But theoretically, there's no reason you shouldn't be able to do it. I mean, conceptually, you could actually learn to use the same principle for any kind of sensory stimulus. I've always thought UV light sounded cool; nobody can see it, *and* there's no time lag."

"God, you're nerdy," Aiko said disgustedly. "I think we're going to have to stage an intervention or something."

"Says the person who collects Weird AI albums and plays independently produced video games."

Ooh, epic burn! Snowflake said, her mental voice excited. *You just pwned that noob! Woot!*

The resultant laughing fit put an end to the conversation for several seconds. It was obvious everyone was wondering what was so funny, but they knew better than to ask and I didn't think I could really explain anyway. I found myself feeling suddenly sympathetic for Bryan, which was an interesting revelation but not immediately important.

Besides, we were there.

Edward's house, a one-story affair crouched on top of a small hill, wasn't terribly large. It didn't really have to be; he isn't the type to spend much time in the house, in any case. But it's big enough to serve as a meeting place for his pack, which makes it bigger than most people's homes, and he has a really nice garage out back. I was somehow unsurprised to see that none of those things had changed. This wasn't the sort of place where change was welcome.

Bryan opened the front door without knocking and didn't hesitate as he walked in. He still hadn't said a word since greeting us, if you could even call that a greeting. Kyra closed the door behind us.

We walked straight to Edward's study, a room where he spent as little time as he could get away with. It showed, too; the bookshelves, which were largely empty, had a thick layer of dust on them. But the massive desk, a relic that looked to be almost as old as Edward, was just as impressive as I remembered, framed by the floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over the town. Edward himself was seated behind the desk, and in terms of visual impressiveness he was definitely overshadowed by it. He looked to be a dark-haired, well-tanned man in his late twenties, kinda short and with an unfashionable amount of facial hair, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt.

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He put down the paper he was reading immediately when we walked in. "Winter!" he exclaimed in a surprisingly deep voice, coming around the desk. He swept me into the kind of embrace that tells you why they called it a bear hug in the first place. A moment later, though, he drew back. "What the hell are you wearing, boy? Armor?"

I grinned and let my cloak slide aside a little to expose gleaming metal underneath. "Don't leave the house without it," I said, only halfway joking.

He shook his head. "Good Lord, son. You've grown." He sounded almost sorrowful.

"It happens," I said, shrugging.

He sighed, then shook himself briskly. "Enough of that," he said firmly. "Who's your friends?"

"Right," I said, quite willing to leave that topic far behind. "This is my cousin, Alexis Harrison." Alexis started slightly at that; I don't normally make any mention of our family relationship, for perfectly valid reasons. "Then Snowflake, and Aiko Miyake."

"Well met," he said, nodding to each of them in turn, and actually bowing slightly to Aiko. "And I must say, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Miyake. I've heard a great deal about you."

"I'll bet," she muttered, seeming unable to decide between smirking and kicking me in the shin. Predictably enough, she settled on both, although the impact was largely mitigated by the aforementioned armor.

"Okay," I said, dropping into one of the hard, almost stool-like chairs. "I think that's enough introducing. What's the deal?"

"Wow," Kyra said. "I think you've actually gotten *worse* at small talk in the last few years. I would have sworn it was impossible."

"Maybe later. It's already been a long night. Also," I said as an afterthought, "I can't help but notice that the rifle on your wall's freshly oiled, Kyra's dressed for a quick shift, the keys were left in your truck out front, there's a revolver in the top right drawer of your desk, and oh yeah, *freaking Bryan Ferguson is in town.*" Although not, I noticed, in the room; he must have left once we were safely here. "I think I've got reasonable cause for concern and then some."

Wait a second, Snowflake said. How did you know about the revolver?

There's always a revolver in Edward's desk, I admitted. I'm betting it's still there. But Edward might not remember that I know about it.

Edward exchanged a significant look with Kyra, then sighed, and walked back around the desk to slump in his office chair. "War," he said heavily.

"It doesn't have to be," Kyra said sharply. "That's the whole point."

"Won't work," he said bluntly. "Trust me, Walker. I know these folk. They ain't gonna back down."

"Wait, what?" The three—well, four, but nobody else heard Snowflake—of us said it at more or less exactly the same time. I think we were about equally confused.

"A legal dispute—"

"What's that have to do with war?" Aiko interrupted.

"—with the fae," Edward finished smoothly.

"Oh," I said. That could be seriously nasty; not for nothing do the fae have a reputation for an obsession with bargains and promises, or a reputation for horrifically out-of-proportion responses to people who break the rules thereof. "What happened?"

"One of my wolves was in a fight with some fae jackass," he said in a near-growl. Edward wasn't much given to mild emotional states. "Everyone agrees it was the elf's fault, but one thing lead to another and now he's dead and my man's in trouble for it. Worse trouble, because he has a contract with them."

"You let one of your wolves make a deal with the fae?" Aiko asked incredulously.

"I looked it over first," he said. "It shouldn't have been a problem. Definitely not anything like this. Anyway, I'm saying he's mine and they got no leg to stand on. They're saying he should be tried in their courts, which we know won't end well for him."

"Probably not," I agreed. "So, I have two questions. First, why call me? Second, what the hell have Bryan and Dolph got to do with this?"

Edward sighed. "Comes down to the treaty Conn signed with them. Now we have to worry about causing a 'diplomatic incident,' so I can't just tell them to go screw themselves. Dolph's here to make sure nothing goes south. Bryan, well. Hell if I or anyone else can figure out what he's up to."

"Fair enough," I admitted. "And me?"

Kyra cleared her throat. "This part was my idea," she admitted.

I closed my eyes. "You had to say that," I groaned. "I was just starting to hope this *wouldn't* turn into one of your disaster stories."

"If you think about it," she said, ignoring me, "you're a neutral party. You aren't officially involved with us. So I suggested you as a neutral arbiter."

"See, that's exactly the sort of thing I was hoping not to hear. You realize I can't exactly just throw in with you, right? I mean, I wish I could, but I can't. There'd be way too many consequences, for way too many people."

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"If nothing else," Aiko pointed out, "you could *be* a genuinely neutral mediator, which is way more than anyone they suggest will do."

I glared at her. "Thanks a lot. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

She shrugged. "I calls 'em like I sees 'em. Besides, this sort of thing that could pay, like, really *really* well."

I sighed. "Fine. I'll stay long enough to talk to Dolph. After that, well, we'll see."

"Fair enough," Edward said. "If nothing else, it's good to see you, boy. You should visit more often."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I don't suppose there's somewhere we could spend the night? If you want me to look neutral, it would probably work better if I don't stay here."

"There's a bed-and-breakfast in town," he offered. "Down at the old Carlton house."

"I remember where it is." It hadn't been a B&B when I lived here, but I used to know the Carltons. They'd been humans, but Edward had been friends with the family for the better part of a century. I had no idea what happened to them after I left, though.

"I'll tell them to expect you," he said. There was no question of whether they would be open; in Wolf, you were open when Edward Frodsham told you to be. "Good night, Winter."

Kyra drove us to the bed-and-breakfast. She didn't make any further effort to convince me on the way, and dropped us off at the door.

A few minutes later, we were unpacking in a small two-bed room on the second floor, a process made significantly easier by our lack of luggage. I dropped my backpack on the floor, stretched, and locked the door behind us.

"I am so confused right now," Alexis said. "Do we finally get to talk about what happened out there?"

"Not quite yet," I said, crossing to the window. I couldn't see any activity, so I opened the window wide and popped out the screen.

"What are you doing?"

"Just wanted a little fresh air," I said, sticking my head out the window and looking around. I still couldn't see anyone. I took my cloak off, rearranging the shadows it was made from into the shape of a long, thin rope. I had to empty the pockets to do it, but that wasn't a huge problem. Alexis started to ask what I was doing; Aiko, who'd figured it out, shushed her.

Snowflake went first, disdainful of the rope and just jumping out the window. It takes more of a fall than that to annoy her. Once she'd given the all-clear, Aiko slid down after her almost as quickly. Alexis, who wasn't anywhere near as physically competent as either of them, took longer, but eventually the rope slackened and I knew she'd made it down. I pulled the rope back in and twisted it back into its normal shape, replaced the gear in the pockets, and climbed out the window.

Magic works in interesting ways. Most people—well, most mages; most *people* don't have any magic worth noticing—can only use it in a few, very specific ways. It doesn't even matter all that much how skilled you are, or how long you've been practicing. Nobody ever manages to get good at more than the tiniest fraction of what magic's capable of. On the other hand, within those few specific categories, you can learn to do some really neat tricks.

I've got three talents, in that regard. First, I've got a kinship with predators. Second, I have a minor talent with darkness and shadows—my cloak is the height of what I've managed in that line, but I occasionally find another use for it. And, finally, I'm passable at manipulating air and wind.

It was that last one I was counting on right now.

I can't fly with magic. Almost no one can. It's way too difficult and way too dangerous, and it has a very steep learning curve. It's hard to learn something when it takes a lot of practice and your first mistake has a tendency to be your last. But one of the first real applications I learned for air magic was altering the density and movement of air to slow falling. I've had a lot of practice at it, and by now I can pretty much jump out of a plane without a parachute and consider it little more than a thrill. Well, one of the things I'd figured out more recently is that there's only a relatively small difference between convincing the air to support some of your weight and convincing it to support *all* of your weight.

Granted, that little difference makes it a lot more challenging.

But, while my new job has a lot of downsides, I have to admit that there are also certain perks. Namely, tons of resources and ample free time. One of the things I'd used that time for was rethinking and improving my gear. While I'd been reinforcing the leather boots that matched the armor, I'd also made them into a spell focus.

That can have a lot of meanings. Basically, a focus is just something you use to cheat the system and make magic simpler and less draining. For the most part, my foci were simple, general tools designed to help with handling a broad spectrum of energies. But this time, I'd gone for something much more specific: a pair of boots that did nothing but make it easier to thicken and strengthen the air directly underneath them. The downside is that they're absolutely useless for anything else, except in the sense that any pair of boots is useful. The upside is that a focus that specific can be pretty good at what it's designed for. Under normal circumstances I'm pretty terrible with air magic, relatively speaking, but with that focus I could manage to more or less hold my own weight.

It isn't flying; all the motion is still being generated by me, and it can be a pain climbing what's effectively a very steep staircase while also concentrating on even a simple magic. I can't move faster

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than I can walk, either. And it's pretty draining; even with the focus, it's a lot of magic, and I'm not skilled enough to pull it off without a hell of a lot of inefficiency. But *I can stand on air*. That, right there, is worth it.

I made sure the curtain was closed and shut the window, then let myself drop. I rolled when I hit the ground, having no more trouble with the fall than Snowflake had, then stood and looked around. We were all still here and nobody had showed up to kill us yet, so I was going to tentatively call it a success so far.

"We aren't staying here?" Alexis asked.

"Sure we are," I said, walking off in a random direction. "But it's even money that Edward has the place bugged, and I don't feel like letting him in on this conversation just yet."

"I thought you trusted him."

I shrugged. "For a certain value of trust, sure. Edward's got a proven track record of lying to me 'for my own good,' remember? And there's something they aren't telling us here."

As much as I hate to encourage your paranoia, Snowflake said reluctantly, I think you might actually be right this time. And I don't like it that Bryan knew where to find us.

That had been worrying me, too. Well, if I was going to be honest *anything* involving Bryan Ferguson worried me more than just slightly, but this worried more than that.

"So...is that a yes or a no on the trusting?"

I thought about it for a moment. It hadn't ever really occurred to me to put it in such simple terms. "I guess I trust Edward to be Edward," I said eventually. "I'm fairly confident he has my best interest at heart. He's seriously protective about his people, and he'll always think of me as one of his people. But I don't trust him to know what my best interests are." I shrugged. "And I might be being too hard on him. Okay, moving on. We only have so much time before someone notices something."

"So who was the creepy bastard with Kyra?" Aiko asked. She sounded cheery, but I noticed that she hadn't argued about leaving the room, and now that we were outside she was looking around watchfully with one hand on her sword.

"That was Bryan Ferguson."

She froze, then stared at me. "*The* Bryan Ferguson? The Man in Black? The Lone Wolf? *That* Bryan Ferguson?"

"Yup, pretty sure. Don't think there's another Bryan Ferguson they'd call something like that."

"Well, shit."

"I guess you've heard some of the stories," I said dryly.

"Wait a second," Alexis said. "Who is this guy?"

"Well," I said, "that's kind of a complicated question. You remember I told you about the Khan, right?"

"Sure."

"Well, his name is Conn Ferguson. He lives in North Dakota—I lived there with his pack for a while. He's a pretty nice guy, so long as you stay on his good side."

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

"Of course there is. You're just mostly meeting spooky people because I introduce you to them, which skews the sample. Anyway, Conn has three children. The youngest one, Artemis, is an assassin. She kills people who get in his way, and she does freelance work. She's about two hundred and fifty years old or so."

"That's the *youngest* one?" Alexis said incredulously.

"Yup. There's a reason people are scared of them. The second one is Rudolph, but everyone calls him Dolph. I recommend you not make fun of his name in any way, because he could eat you alive. He does a lot of diplomatic and political work, which I don't know very much about because I try to avoid high-level politics. He's five hundred, give or take a few decades."

"You're really annoying when you get into lecture mode, you know that, right?"

"Yeah, well, the next part is where it gets good." I grinned at her. "See, nobody knows how old Bryan is. Except Conn, presumably, and he isn't talking. But I know it's over a thousand years."

"A thousand years."

"At least. At a guess, fifteen hundred isn't unreasonable." I shook my head. "Bryan's...scary. Really scary. He doesn't work like a normal person, and he doesn't follow the rules."

"What do you mean?" Aiko asked, cutting Alexis off—although, realistically, she was probably going to say the exact same thing, so it hardly matters.

I frowned. "It's...hard to explain. Look, everybody knows what a werewolf can do, right? You've got superhuman strength and speed, unnatural healing, functional immortality, mental effects, weakness to silver, you can just go down a checklist. Well, he's got all that. But he can do all sorts of crazy other things too. He disappears, and *no one* knows where he goes, and then he shows up anywhere from a few hours to a few decades later somewhere else. Or there's the way he just...*knows* things." I shivered. "Don't look in his eyes, by the way. Really bad idea."

"How does he do it?" Alexis asked, sounding fascinated.

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"Well," I hedged, "keep in mind that asking him stuff isn't exactly a productive thing to do, so this is all my best guesses. But I'd say that he's like me, a hybrid of multiple factors that all combine in ways that aren't necessarily predictable. Werewolf's one, obviously. But my bet would be that the other is mage, and if I had to say specifically I'd guess shaman."

"Shaman?" Aiko sounded surprised. "Why?"

I shrugged. "Just a guess, really. I haven't seen him do anything that falls into one of the other categories. And some of the things Alexander said imply that accessing weird sources of information is one of the things shamans are really good at. But all I really know is that I don't know what all he can do, and his psychology is so freaking weird I can't even guess what he *will* do."

"So how do you think he knew where to find us?" That was Aiko again. She's had more experience with how enormous and varied the supernatural world was, so she was more inclined to just accept that Bryan was an almost totally unknown variable and move on to practical matters.

"Felt the gate forming? He already knows where my gate locations are? Tracked the people who met us there? Saw the future?" I shrugged again. "Too many possibilities, too many unknowns."

"Fine," Alexis said, "but while we're on the subject, who *were* those people? I was getting, like, a *really* freaky vibe off them."

I frowned and thought back on it. "I'm not sure," I said slowly. "Their smell was...really weird." I hadn't taken the time to really analyze their magic, probably because I was still disoriented from the portal and not thinking very clearly.

"Half-breed fae," Aiko said with a distant look in her eyes.

"You sure?"

She gave me an unamused look. "I ran with the Courts for almost a decade, Winter. I know a half-breed when I see it."

I forget sometimes that Aiko is older than me, and in some ways vastly more experienced. It's easy, most of the time, because she lives so much in the present, but sometimes—like this one—I get this feeling of how alien she really is, and as much as I love her it still makes me want to shiver.

"I couldn't say what their fae sides were," she continued, once again seeming like she was looking through me rather than at me. "But I'm sure that's what they are. Well, that's what the leader was, and most of the rest. I think a few of the others might be changelings."

"What's the difference?" Alexis asked, beating me to the punch. Good thing, too; asking questions like that hardly makes you look the knowledgeable and experienced mentor figure.

"A half-breed has human and fae blood," Aiko said, snapping back to the here-and-now. "A changeling is full-blooded, either way, but they were raised in the opposite world."

"And that makes a difference?"

"Oh, yes," she said. Something about her manner made me suspect that she'd had a less than pleasant experience with a changeling in the past, and it had stuck with her. "Fae-born changelings are almost like really low-level mages; they know there's something odd about them, but it's minor enough they just dismiss it as being lucky or something, and they'll almost never catch on unless someone points it out to them. Human-born ones are a little more...unpredictable. They aren't citizens there, and they don't fit here. Makes them dangerous. Desperate, a lot of the time."

"Do they have any actual powers?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Sometimes. They're not as powerful as a real faerie, but they can do some things normal people can't. Like I said, they're unpredictable. You never really know what a changeling's got."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "Think there's any chance it's unrelated?"

"Nope," she said brightly. "That's why I was telling you to take the job. So who'd you kill that they're so upset about?"

"Not sure. I haven't killed any faeries recently. You?"

"Just the one last month, but that was self-defense." Aiko paused. "Not that they would care about that."

"Yeah," I agreed, "but it was also a female. The one tonight very clearly said I'd killed a 'him.'"

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that."

I sighed. "Okay. So, in summary, we don't know who they were with any specificity, we don't know what they want beyond the obvious, and we don't really know what's going on here. That about right?"

"Pretty much!" Aiko said excitedly. "This is great news, Winter, it really is. It's been *way* too long since something exciting happened around here. I was starting to get bored, and we all know what happens then."

Yeah, Snowflake agreed. I haven't gotten to kill anything bigger than a rabbit for weeks. This is shaping up to be so much fun!

You're both frigging crazy, I muttered as we walked back to the room. But I couldn't deny, as I climbed up with my nifty air-walking trick to open the window and drop the rope for the rest, that I was looking forward to the next few days. Whatever happened, it could hardly be worse than beating my head against the wall that was authority.

Chapter Three

The next morning I woke up, went through my usual morning routine, and put on the armor (I wasn't quite paranoid enough to sleep in it, at least not unless things were a lot more imminently threatening than this). Then, having thought things out a bit, I picked up my phone.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Sveinn," I said brightly. "It's me."

You could practically hear the jotun snapping to attention when he realized who was calling. "Good morning, Winter jarl," he said, drill-sergeant crisp.

"Good morning. Listen, I want you to meet me outside Utgard in two hours. Bring Vigdis, Kyi, and...oh, let's say Kjaran. Can you do that?"

"*Já, minn herra.* What should we bring?"

"Hmm...let's say just your usual kit. I don't expect this to turn into a serious fight, but it's possible. If so, major combatants will probably be werewolves and some sort of fae, and we'll most likely be backing the wolves. Mostly I want to make a show of force. Clear?"

"*Já.*"

"Excellent. I'll see you in a few hours. Oh, and bring some food." I hung up.

"Calling in the troops?" Alexis asked quietly. She'd been sleeping—I'm almost always the first one awake, probably because I don't seem to need much sleep anymore—but Alexis sleeps lightly, much more lightly than Aiko. I've never been entirely sure whether that's natural, or a consequence of her experiences. Alexis isn't very old, by most any scale, but she's packed a surprising amount of misfortune into that time.

"I decided if I'm going to do this I'd rather have minions on hand."

Yay, minions! Snowflake exclaimed. *Maybe this time we can make them fight someone to the death for our amusement.*

You'd be bored watching someone else fight, I told her. *You know you'd want to jump in.*

Too true, she admitted. *But I'm sure you could work something out.*

Twenty minutes later we were crouched under a tree watching Edward's house, having once again exited the bed-and-breakfast via the window. Hopefully it would take them some time to realize

we were gone and notify him. Between that and the fact that we were about a hundred yards away and I was wearing my cloak while lying in the shadow of the tree, I didn't think anyone would notice us.

"What do you see?" Aiko whispered. Since neither she nor Alexis had thought to bring binoculars, I was currently the only one who could actually see what was going on. Needless to say I was feeling rather smug about that.

"Not much," I said. "Edward's truck is still in the driveway. Kyra's car is, too, so she's most likely there waiting for us." I frowned as another vehicle moved into sight. "Ooh, this is interesting. Looks like a rental SUV pulling up. And...yep, that's Dolph getting out." He didn't look in our direction, walking straight to the front door, so I was assuming he hadn't seen us. "All right, they should be calling us soon. Start the timer, would you, Alexis?"

Less than a minute later, I got a call from Kyra saying that Dolph was there. I told her we'd be there in a few minutes. For them to call me so soon was a definite good sign. It implied that they didn't have a whole lot they didn't want me to hear.

"Why wouldn't Edward call you himself?" Alexis asked.

"Edward knows how I feel about him," I said absently, still looking through the binoculars. Nothing appeared to be happening. "Having Kyra call instead was a diplomatic gesture." I paused. "Probably he's also busy talking with Dolph. They'll want to get their plans lined out before I show up." I put the binoculars away. "Come on, we'll want to circle around and come at it from the front. Less suspicious that way."

Dolph met us at the door. He's my favorite of the Khan's family, in terms of who I'd rather deal with. He's still scary and dangerous, don't get me wrong, but he's more human than Bryan, he doesn't give me the weird masklike feeling Conn tends to, and he doesn't treat death and violence with the utter casualness Artemis does. (He'll still kill you, mind; he just pretends to care about it. It's some improvement, anyway.)

He also invariably manages to give off the impression of being harried and careworn; he looks almost as young as his father, in his early twenties, but the constant stress makes him seem twenty years older.

After starting to dabble in politics myself, I have a lot more sympathy for Dolph. His job is nine kinds of awful, and he's been doing it for a few hundred years.

"Winter," he said. "And...Aiko, right?"

"That's me," she confirmed. Given that they'd only met briefly several years back, I was fairly impressed he'd remembered her at all.

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"Good," he said with a relieved grin that made him look momentarily like a different person entirely. "And you are?"

"Alexis. I'm Winter's cousin."

"Ah," he said, shaking her hand. "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure. Come on inside, we were just talking about how to make this work."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked, genuinely curious. "I thought this was a local problem."

"It is, and I'm not. I'm only here for a day, then I have a meeting in Stockholm, and there's a conference in Montreal next week. I'm just setting up the talks and letting the fae know we're taking this seriously."

And that sort of thing is why Dolph always looks so stressed. If there's someone more familiar with jet lag and tight deadlines, I've yet to meet them.

"How much do you know about the situation?" he asked as we walked down the hall. Surprisingly, he didn't turn towards the study, instead going into the large vaguely lounge-like room used for pack meetings. We were the first ones there, evidently.

"Very little," I said cheerily. "Edward only gave me a really rough outline, and I thought it would be simpler to wait until you got here to ask for details." I dropped onto one of the large couches, and Snowflake promptly curled herself around my ankles. "Something about a trial of some sort."

"Right," he sighed. "Well, the story I heard is that a werewolf killed some Sidhe noble. It was self-defense, so our law says it's fine. They say it's a matter of hierarchy and he didn't have the right to do *anything*."

"I suddenly remember why I quit that shit in the first place," Aiko commented.

Dolph smiled without much humor. "Oh, it gets better. It happened in a nightclub in Munich that's claimed as territory by the Zhang clan."

"So what you're saying," I said slowly, "is that a werewolf got in a fight with a faerie in a German club run by Chinese mages and now you want a half-breed Norse giant to mediate the dispute?"

He paused. "It does sound rather absurd, when you put it that way," he admitted.

I broke down laughing. "Hey," Aiko said in an offended tone. "Don't forget me. You could add a whole new continent to the mix."

"I did say they were *Chinese* mages, didn't I?"

"China doesn't count," she sniffed.

"Yeah, well, it's sort of a problem," Dolph continued, paying no attention to the byplay. "The mages are claiming authority, on the basis that it happened on their turf and both parties were obligated to abide by their rules while there."

"Can they do that?" Alexis wondered aloud.

Dolph shrugged. "Their argument has a certain amount of weight," he admitted. "And the clans are backing it. The Twilight are tentatively indicating they might go along with them, so there's a definite possibility."

Suddenly I had no desire to laugh. "This is Twilight-level stuff?" I asked. Obviously anything involving the fae in this world was Twilight Court business, but the way he'd said it suggested there was at least one actual Twilight Prince involved, which wasn't good. Not good at all.

"I mentioned he was nobility," Dolph said dryly. "I don't know if there's a Prince involved, but it's possible." He sighed and slumped, looking even more haggard than usual. "The Zhang clan hates werewolves, and it's common knowledge that they're on excellent terms with both Courts. It won't go well if they get jurisdiction."

"How bad could it be?" I asked. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm sure it'll be horrible for the guy, but why would Conn worry about it?"

"The Twilight Court's still pissed at us for pulling a fast one with the treaty," he said. "And renegotiations are in progress now. Then the clans are upset that we even flirted with going public. Between them...well, it's pretty likely this will turn into a big deal, or else they might try to use it as leverage somehow."

"Which would be bad?" Alexis asked.

"Quite." Dolph didn't look away from me. "You see now why it's so important this go right?"

"I guess so," I said reluctantly. "But why in hell would they want to give this to me, even if I were dumb enough to jump into the middle of it? It's common knowledge that I'm not exactly impartial."

The old werewolf frowned. "You know, I'd have thought the same. But apparently Kyra's instincts were right this time. The fae were tentatively open to the idea of you as an arbiter. The Zhang were more hostile, but they changed their tune yesterday. I don't know why."

"Are you saying," I said slowly, "that you talked them into this without asking me first?"

"Etiquette," Aiko said, impatiently, before Dolph could respond. "You don't waste a neutral party's time unless you already have an agreement to consider them. Where's the preliminary meeting scheduled?" At my surprised look, she snorted. "I *have* done this sort of thing before, you know," she said dryly.

"The meeting's here, at noon today. I'll stay for that, then leave tonight."

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"Okay," I said, very reluctantly. "I guess I'll at least meet with the people. So that only really leaves one question, which is what part your brother's playing."

I'm not sure what response I was expecting, but it wasn't the one I got. Dolph froze, looking almost stunned. "Bryan's here?" he said, sounding shocked.

"He was last night."

"Damn," Dolph muttered. "Nobody's heard from him almost since you left." He shook his head, expression grim. "That isn't good," he said. "I have no idea what he wants, or whose side he's on."

"Me either," I said, then glanced at the clock behind him. "Oh hell, I've got to go. I'll be back for the meeting."

"We kind of need to talk about this more," he said.

"Sorry. I need to leave *right now*. Minions to fetch."

"You have minions?"

"Absolutely," I said. "Try not to worry about it too much. They can smell fear."

He paused. "You're joking, right?"

I grinned and walked out. "Probably."

I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who saw Bryan sitting under the clock. I'm not sure how he did it, because normally I would have said I was, like, the single person in the room who was *least* likely to see through a mask of that sort, with the exception of Alexis. He was clearly aware that I saw him, though, nodding calmly when I looked at him. He didn't seem to care about his own brother talking that way about him. Nothing much ever seemed to really bother Bryan.

I didn't tell the others about it. It would just have worried them, and provided no useful information. Besides, they might have figured I'd finally snapped, and I was reasonably confident this had no more to do with my dubious sanity than anything else that happened to me.

It took the better part of an hour to get to Utgard. It wasn't particularly difficult, though, or dangerous, beyond the problems you run into whenever the Otherside is involved. Aiko shifted us from the forest near where we'd come in to a section of Faerie, and then I opened the next portal to Jotunheim, not far from the fortress proper. There wasn't really any need for Aiko or Snowflake to be there—I could get to Faerie, and even if I couldn't going to Jotunheim directly wasn't impossible. It wasn't pleasant, but then Otherside-based travel tends to the distressing anyway.

I wasn't willing to leave them behind, though. This was shaping up to be yet another dangerous situation filled with unknown but threatening variables, and that meant taking certain reasonable

precautions. As anyone with a brain and about ten seconds of experience in the field (even vicariously) could tell you, using any variant of the phrase "let's split up" was pretty much top of the list of things to go. You *never* split up.

Utgard is an enormous fortress, so huge that it's genuinely difficult to grasp the scale of it. But it isn't a very welcoming place. Not many people can visit, and even fewer would want to. It was not, therefore, particularly hard to pick out the housecarls waiting for us outside. They were a diverse lot—well, in some senses, at least. Obviously they were all jötnar, which is such a relatively tiny slice of the supernatural population that it's about the definitional opposite of diverse. But they don't look alike, for the most part.

Kjaran was the biggest of the lot. Haki was as tall, but he wasn't nearly as muscular. Kjaran stands close to six and a half feet tall and looks like he could lift a small car. He was aggressively hirsute, as most jötnar tend to be, and his hair was a reddish blond. At the moment he was wearing a simple, scarred leather vest, trousers, and boots. He was carrying a large spiked war hammer over his shoulder, and had a large knife stuck through his belt.

Sveinn was shorter, but almost as brawny. He was also even more obviously dressed for a fight, wearing a coat of scale armor and a simple steel helmet. A straight, unadorned sword hung at his side, and he had a large wooden targe on his back. Appearance-wise, I had to admit he was pretty much the most unremarkable of the bunch. But then, that, generally, was Sveinn. He was the kind of guy you didn't notice much until it was too late.

Vigdis was carrying a pair of small, one-handed axes. She told me once that she chose those weapons because it made defense of any kind difficult, and that reminded her to focus on killing the enemy faster rather than protecting herself. I don't know if she was serious. Certainly she didn't look particularly concerned with her own safety, given that she was wearing only a knee-length brown tunic and sandals. It looked very unsuited to all the weaponry on display, but it was actually a sound tactical decision; Vigdis was a shapechanger, and anyone with that skillset typically prefers something they can change out of quickly. All of them could look human—that was kind of my biggest entry requirement, and it wasn't much of a stretch for most jötnar anyway—but Vigdis had a few other shapes she could take. It was useful more often than you might think.

Kyi was standing a ways away from the rest, and even at a glance you could see that there were some very significant differences between them. She was leaner, for one thing—still a fighter, but less bear and more wolf, or cat. She was built for stealth and speed, not brute strength.

Her most distinctive feature was her tattoos, which were quite extensive. A band of intricate, angular black lines wrapped her head like a crown, half-obscured by her short black hair. Dense, thorny designs in black around her deep blue eyes made her look vaguely raccoon-like, and a line of Elder Futhark runes formed a loop along her collarbone and shoulders. A geometric pattern composed mostly of interlocked circles and triangles covered her right forearm, culminating in an ornate multicolored star on the back of her hand. It was overwritten with a shorter runic phrase on her inner forearm in black, severe against the colorful background. A serpent followed a convoluted path down her other arm, its

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fanged mouth spread across her fingers. Each of her palms was marked with a single rune in vivid blue-green—hagalaz on the right hand, isaz on the left. Depictions of wolves and serpents covered her back and abdomen, mixed with more geometric designs, representations of ice and snow, and more runes. The runes followed a looping pattern across most of her body, and were actually a stanza from a very old poem.

Of course, I couldn't see most of that at the moment. In marked contrast to her fellows' vaguely medieval garb, Kyi was wearing a hoodie, tight-fitting gloves, jeans, and athletic shoes, all in shades of mottled grey and black. An aggressively modern compound bow was slung over her shoulder, next to a quiver of arrows. She was also carrying a truly impressive number and variety of knives, and had a pair of kama stuck through her belt.

Coming in from the side of the great stone staircase that lead up to Utgard itself, we saw them before they saw us. Vigdis and Sveinn were talking quietly, in the manner of people trying to pass the time. Kjaran, of course, was not, and Kyi was standing maybe twenty feet away staring out over the mountains.

"Good morning," I called as we emerged from the path, cut into a trench in the omnipresent snow, onto the steps. "Did you bring that food?"

Kyi waved without turning to face me, and Kjaran just nodded. Sveinn, who always seemed to take on the role of speaking for the housecarls, bowed slightly and said, "Good morning, jarl. Where are we going now?" He also held out a plain brown paper bag.

"Wyoming, to start," I said, snatching the bag. It proved to contain several roast beef sandwiches—not the best breakfast in the world, but then I didn't choose them for their culinary skills. (I didn't choose them at all, really, but if I had it wouldn't have been for culinary skills.) It was enough to keep you alive, and that was good enough for the moment, so I passed them around and chowed down while I explained.

"It isn't too far from Colorado. I'm considering mediating a dispute between a werewolf pack, a mage clan, and a fae interest. The preliminary meeting is scheduled at noon. I want you on hand as a show of force and in case violence becomes necessary. If so, unless I tell you otherwise, we're siding with the werewolves, but don't do anything that could provoke a diplomatic incident. Any questions?"

Sveinn had to translate some of what I'd said for Kyi, but once she understood it was generally agreed that there were not, in fact, any questions. I thought that said something important about their collective psychology. The housecarls quite simply *did not care* about the whys of the situation. It didn't matter to them what the dispute was, or why I would want to mediate it, or why we were treating the werewolves preferentially. All they wanted to know was what was necessary for them to do their jobs.

I wasn't sure whether I was happy to have such good minions, or a little freaked out.

In any case, this wasn't the time to do something about it—if, indeed, I wanted to do anything about it at all. So rather than think about that any further, I started working on another gate. We were

going straight to Wyoming, this time; I didn't want to drag the jötnar through any more domains than I had to. Someone might take exception to it; most places are fairly egalitarian on the Otherside, but bringing in what was essentially a small but heavily armed military detachment of an insular and possibly hostile rival group might tip them over.

There was no question of them providing their own transportation. My housecarls were the people willing to work for *me*, which meant they weren't exactly the high-powered elite of jotun society. I'm not quite sure how it works—some sort of advanced resonance theory, I think, which involves way more math than I'm ever likely to bother with—but a true jotun can pretty much always find a way back to Jotunheim. Opening a gate to anywhere else was another kettle of fish entirely.

Of course, at least half of them were probably spies, or lying about their own incompetence, or both. So I suppose at least a few probably *could* open a portal to the Otherside. But I didn't know which half, and even if I did I wouldn't want to give it away, so in functional terms that wasn't terribly important.

"Winter!" Kyra hissed at me. She'd been standing just outside Edward's front door, but she'd hustled right over when she saw me coming, and was currently standing about a foot away. "Where have you *been*?"

"Fetching minions," I said brightly—although not too loudly, because if Kyra was whispering there was probably a reason for it. "Minions! Come! Introduce yourselves!"

"The fae are here already," she hissed.

"And Edward's got them on a runaround, correct?" She hesitated, which I took to be as good as a yes. "Then there's no problem. Besides, the meeting isn't for almost an hour. They can wait."

The various housecarls appeared from around the corner of the building down the street, in all their strange and eclectic finery. I'd deemed it best if I approach alone to introduce them, considering how tense things were around here at the moment. I hadn't spoken particularly loudly, but—whether by exceptionally keen senses or some jötnar weirdness regarding the jarl-housecarl relationship—they seemed to have heard, and reacted instantly.

Kyi was the exception. She wasn't here as an enforcer, and I expected she'd already started on her task. She was probably the least visually intimidating of the lot anyway, so it wasn't a terrible loss.

"Holy crap," Kyra muttered. "These people really work for you?"

"Yup," I confirmed, which was a half-truth at best. The relationship was rather more complicated than that in reality, but it wouldn't do to say so when they'd just demonstrated that they could hear what I said. I mean, I think it's pretty much free advice to aspiring overlords of all stripes that, if you should for some reason be forced to deal with minions you have only tacit control over, you *don't*

acknowledge that fact to them directly. That's as good as admitting that they don't actually work for you, and you don't want to encourage that attitude.

"Damn. Makes my old crew look pretty tame."

"Oh, you have no idea," I sighed. Aiko sniggered and muttered something that sounded like "True dat," although I couldn't say for sure.

"This," I said when they were close enough for me to pretend they wouldn't have heard me farther away, "is Kyra Walker. She is an old friend of mine. You will treat her with all due respect. Clear?"

There was a chorus of various affirmatives. Vigdis wasn't bothering to pretend that she wasn't bored, but Sveinn sounded fairly pleasant.

Kjaran, of course, did not speak. He smiled, showing teeth just a touch too sharp to pass for human at close range. It didn't look like a particularly friendly smile, but it didn't look actually rebellious either, and I wasn't all that concerned about Kjaran disobeying me in any case. I had a lot of worries about the Silent, but that wasn't one of them.

"Okay," I said to Kyra. "How much do you know about the fae who are here, specifically?"

She shrugged. "Not much. I saw five of them, but I couldn't tell you anything about them." That was actually reassuring; the fae are past masters of deceit and misdirection, and if she'd felt confident of *anything* I'd have gone into a paranoia-fest about why they wanted her to think that and what they were concealing—more so than I was already, even.

"All right, then. Might as well get this over with. We'll set up in the meeting room, if that's all right."

She shrugged again. "Whatever you feel like. You should have time to scope things out. They were chatting in Edward's study when I came out here. It was getting pretty...*intense* in there."

I found that quite easy to believe, somehow.

As it turned out, we did have all the time we could have asked for to arrange things. The room didn't allow for even a vague approximation of the setup in my throne room back in the Springs, for which I was grateful; I've never had any taste for sitting in a goddamn throne handing out judgments as though I had a right to judge *anyone*. If I had the balls to go against Skrýmir's implicit commands, I'd have changed it a long time ago. As it was, I wouldn't regret the lack of it here.

The end result of our arrangements was an ordinary chair on one side of the room for me, with a loose semicircle facing it. Aiko had another chair just next to mine, and Snowflake would sit (or sleep, depending on how long the negotiations took) at my feet. The housecarls, who were only present as my muscle, would stand against the wall behind us. Alexis was standing there, too, although in her case it was more because I didn't want her attracting attention to herself—if there's one thing I've learned the hard way it's that coming to the attention of major players like Twilight Princes and mage clans never

ends well. I don't even need to qualify that statement, and if I'm going to be entirely honest werewolves are barely any better.

I'm not sure how they knew, but the first of the fae didn't walk in until *just* after we'd finished setting up the room and gotten into positions. I mean literally just after it, too, somewhere in the vicinity of a second and a half. I took one look at him and sighed. "What are you doing here?" I asked. I should have been astonished at the coincidence, but somehow I wasn't even surprised. It just fit too well with my luck.

The fae walked straight to the leftmost side of the semicircle and took a chair next to the wall, a little behind the handful of other chairs in that little clumping. He didn't even look at me. "Contract," he said with no particular emotion, pulling a brand-new deck of casino cards out of some pocket or other. He started shuffling the cards, every motion quick and neat and so perfectly, impossibly precise it was creepy to watch.

"Do you know this jotun?" asked the next fae, who walked in precisely three seconds after the first. (I'd arranged the seating so that I could see the clock. I could also see both doors, and although there wasn't an obvious exit near us we were against the exterior wall. There *is* a reason I'm not dead yet, after all.) This one looked like a female human, perhaps sixteen years of age, with waist-length blond hair and sky-blue eyes.

She (appearance means nothing among the fae, but most of them seem to pretend to human genders, and considering how little difference it made convenience alone dictated I simply think of them all as whatever sex they present themselves as) was more beautiful than any human, but I hardly even noticed that. I mean, let's be honest here, there's only so much you can see of a thing before it ceases to impress. I'd seen the uncanny beauty stuff a *lot*. It's pretty much the oldest trick in the book. Between that and the fact that her appearance had less to do with what she looked like than with what she wanted to present herself as, it didn't really influence my opinion of her.

Actually, scratch that. It made me assume she was dangerous. I mean, she looked like a teenage girl. She was wearing a plain white dress and had wildflowers braided in her hair, and she was barefoot. Anybody who makes *that* much of an effort to look innocent and harmless can only be hardcore scary.

"Yes," her apparent escort said. And nothing else. As I watched, he began dealing a solitaire pattern. I'd wondered how he would manage that, but he simply placed the cards against the wall, where they remained, without any visual means of support. A man of many talents and few words, was Samuel Black.

The female, evidently realizing that further questioning on the topic would never produce useful results (and it wouldn't; I might not have spent that much time around Black, but one of the few things I knew about him was that he was less interested in small talk than *I* was) made a sort of genteel harrumphing sound and stalked across the room. She sat in the chair directly in front of and next to Black's, supporting my guess that he was her bodyguard.

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Not that she probably needed one. That was the paradox of the fae. Anyone who actually needed someone like Black to protect them couldn't pay his price, while anyone who could afford him didn't need protection. Odds were good he was here more as a statement of power than anything.

They sat there for around twenty minutes, the only motion Black's continuous solitaire. He played in an almost disturbingly regular, consistent fashion, with never a false move or pause for thought. They didn't say a word, and neither did I. I didn't know a whole lot about dealing with the fae, having mostly been clever enough not to interact with them much, but I didn't think I could go wrong waiting for the meeting to formally start.

About twenty minutes later—which was still fifteen minutes before noon—more people started wandering in. Dolph came first, sitting on the right side of the room, with Edward close behind. Kyra followed Edward—I presumed because I was involved, since I was confident she wasn't dominant enough to be his chief lieutenant. Behind her came a werewolf named Ryan I didn't know as well. He used to be Kyra's go-to guy for violence, when she was still the Alpha in Colorado Springs, and he'd followed when she migrated to Wyoming. I wasn't sure why he was here, given that he was much less dominant even than she was. They all sat in the same section of seating as Dolph.

Directly behind them came another clump of fae representatives. I didn't recognize the first one. He was a little above average height, which was pretty much just a style decision for the high fae, and less visually distinctive than most of them that I'd seen. Looking at him, I got the impression that I would find him both likable and terrifying, and I had no idea why. I could smell his magic, a strong base of the indefinable odor I associated with faerie critters overlaid with aromas of sweat, blood, and death. He was followed closely by another fae, whose features and gait were slightly *wrong*, as though he were trying to pretend to humanity but didn't quite know how. I couldn't smell his magic over the first one's, which was strong enough to mostly drown other scents out.

Not the most auspicious of omens. But the next person to walk through the door was much worse.

He didn't look all that impressive. He was a little shorter than me, five-three or -four, with medium-brown hair and eyes and a slightly swarthy complexion. He was garbed in expensive silk garments and looking profoundly uncomfortable in them, like he would much rather be wearing leathers, or failing that armor.

Aiko felt my sudden tension when I saw him. "Who's that?" she murmured without moving her lips noticeably, quiet enough that werewolf hearing would barely pick it out from two feet away. That might not be quiet enough to avoid detection—some of the higher-level players are scary good, and it's hard to predict what they can and can't do—but it was enough to maintain propriety.

"Carraig," I said back just as softly. "Midnight Court." Aiko didn't quite stiffen—she was too smart for that—but I knew her well enough to see her pause, and I saw the wave of tension go over her. I'd told her about Scáthach's champion, and I knew she would remember how close he came to killing me. A few times.

Oh yeah, and he was the one who shot her in the gut with a poisoned arrow. It almost killed her, and the aftereffects had only recently finished fading. If they were gone at all; she wouldn't talk about it, but I had my suspicions that it was still affecting her, and likely always would, and she'd simply learned to compensate. That probably had something to do with her wariness.

He winked at me, and sat a short distance from Samuel Black, who took no apparent notice of his presence. The other two took a position a little closer to the werewolves, with his odd-looking companion close nearby.

I was somehow not surprised that the mages were the last to arrive. I mean, I hadn't ever dealt with a mage clan before, but somehow it just didn't shock me. There were three of them, two male and one female. The female and the older-looking male were wearing plain black robes, and looked vaguely Asian. The younger man, evidently more of a modernist, had opted for a serious, somber suit. All three of them carried the distinctive disinfectant-like odor of human magic, but I couldn't get any more precise of a read than that through the interference of the various energies already present in the room.

The three of them sat in the central section of seats, not so much as glancing to either side. The man in the robe, clearly the leader of the group, positioned himself directly in front of me, arranging the skirts of his robes with the sort of fussiness that bespoke borderline OCD. "It would seem that we are all here," he said. His voice was a little high-pitched, and while he spoke understandable English he had enough of an accent to make me pretty sure it wasn't his usual language.

"We are not scheduled to begin yet," I told him.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, turning an already impressive set of wrinkles into a truly prodigious one. "There is, perhaps, someone with need to be here of whom I do not know?" His voice was belligerent.

"That is irrelevant," I said calmly. "We will be conducting this meeting in accordance with proper procedure." I didn't want to give the fae, who were notoriously finicky about procedure and also notoriously liable to break any bargain that was no longer advantageous to them for any excuse, anything more to work with than necessary.

The odd-looking fae smiled and bowed his head slightly. I was pretty sure he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Of course, that was only part of the reason for what I was doing. More of it was because I wanted to make the right sort of impression. First impressions are very important for this sort of thing, after all. It was clear that this mage was accustomed to getting his way. I've learned from experience that if you let a person like that tell you what to do, even on a relatively small thing, you're sending them the message that they can push you around. I didn't want that.

As it turned out, though, someone actually *did* show up. More than one someone, actually, although I wasn't entirely sure how to count them under the circumstances.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

Bryan was either wearing the same clothes as he had been last night (and also this morning, assuming that hadn't been a hallucination) or their twin. He drifted soundlessly to the back wall of the room and stood there. Following in his wake like an unusually strange shadow was the being I knew as Ash Sanguinaria. She looked pretty much the same as the other time I'd seen her—a humanoid girl, albino-pale with longish raven's-wing hair and big dark eyes. I might have guessed she was about fifteen now, rather than thirteen, but given that that was more or less consistent with the passage of time it probably didn't mean anything. Once again she was carrying a small, vaguely cougar-shaped doll patched together from scraps of various white fabrics.

"What is this?" the mage leader said as soon as they walked in. "What is this? Are these intruders here for a reason?"

"We are observing," Bryan said in his peculiarly lifeless way. "That is all."

"This is not an open forum, so you have to leave," the mage said, glaring at me as though this was both my fault and a personal offence to him.

"Let 'im stay, and the lass wit' 'im," Carraig said. He might well have been Irish, but the accent was an affectation; in my experience, you could tell when Carraig was stressed or excited, because he forgot to keep it up. At the moment, he mostly just sounded cheerful. Knowing what I did about him, I found that distinctly unsettling.

"Seconded," Dolph said, although he didn't seem happy about it.

"Agreed," I said. "Unless you have a specific objection, they can stay." The mage glowered at me. He had a pretty good glower (unsurprisingly; he seemed to get plenty of practice), but given that he didn't actually state an objection I was calling it a win.

"All right then," I said briskly. "This meeting is now officially begun. I am Winter Wolf-Born, jarl of Colorado Springs, favored vassal of Fenrisúlfr, knight-banneret of the Order of the Mistletoe, and wielder of the blade Tyrfinn." I did not introduce any of the others with me. The reason for this was pretty straightforward.

I didn't know much about the customs and traditions that united the Twilight Court—I'm usually smart enough to avoid Court business. But one of the few common-knowledge level tidbits of information I did have was that they weren't exactly big on notions such as inalienable rights and equality. Under Court law, there was absolutely nothing wrong with slavery.

Okay, slavery isn't quite the right term for the relationship I'm talking about. It has more in common with vassaldom. The idea is that you can owe loyalty to someone, and if so then what you do while carrying out their instructions is their responsibility, not yours. The fae have no issues with the "I was only following orders" defense. Which, in this case, meant that as far as they were concerned, the people with me quite simply did not matter. They were present only as extensions of my will, which meant that in a legal sense they didn't qualify as *people* for this meeting at all.

Likewise, only the significant individuals from the other parties introduced themselves. I found it interesting to note how much I could tell about them just from the introductions.

"Rudolph Ferguson," Dolph said in the mild, slightly absentminded tone of someone already planning their next task. "I'm here representing my father, the Khan."

"My name is Edward Frodsham. I am the Alpha of this town." The werewolves, presumably, got to go first because they were hosting the event. After that, the pecking order got slightly more interesting.

"I am called Gwyn ap Nudd. The one called Stefan Morgenstern was in my service." That came from the male I hadn't recognized. Interestingly, I wasn't the only one who had to work to keep my poker face at that. Aiko blinked, Dolph got the blank look he uses when he's trying not to show a reaction, and both of the younger mages reacted visibly. Even Samuel Black almost looked interested for a moment.

This was a justified reaction. Gwyn ap Nudd was a big name. I hadn't had dealings with him personally, of course, and my knowledge of him was entirely apocryphal, but if a fraction of what they said about the guy were true he was probably Twilight Prince level. Not the nice kind of Prince, either, if there is such a thing. Even to a werewolf, most of the stories they told about Gwyn were of the scary variety. He's typically portrayed as leading the hounds of death in their hunts.

"I am Anja Morgenstern," the female fae said crisply. "Stefan was my brother." She didn't say anything more, nor did she particularly have to; a blood connection was pretty much a self-evident statement of interest, particularly for more old-fashioned groups such as, oh, everyone in the room.

"Call me Carraig," Carraig said with a yawn. "I'm 'ere on behalf of Scáthach, to whose Court Morgenstern owed allegiance."

"My name is Zhang Qiang," the leader of the mages said. "The incident occurred on my property."

To my surprise, the younger man also spoke up. "I'm Moray, here on behalf of the Watchers." His voice was calm and dispassionate, the voice of someone doing a job. He wasn't used to hiding things from werewolves, though. There was too much tension in his posture for it to be that simple. He had a stake in this, somehow.

Well, wasn't that interesting. The Watchers were primarily an internal affairs department, policing other mages—and he hadn't expressed a connection of any kind with the Zhang clan, which couldn't be an oversight. For the Conclave to have sent a Watcher to this meeting strongly implied that they weren't entirely happy with Zhang, although whether that concern was specific to this event or not was unclear.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

Bryan and Ash did not introduce themselves. I found that noteworthy. Neither of them should have had to do so, given that they had disavowed any stake in the proceedings, but I would have expected Zhang to complain, if nothing else. I wondered why he hadn't.

"Is that everyone?" I asked, purely for form's sake—once again, I wanted to provide nobody any opportunity to screw me on a technicality. It made me look a little dumb, but that was a price worth paying. Maybe even a benefit; lots of people have noted that it's often valuable for people to think you're stupider than you are. Although that would be quite difficult in my case. "Excellent. Now, if you all would be so kind, I think we should begin by discussing what happened."

"There is nothing to be discussing," Zhang said, gesturing sharply with one hand. "The wolf is guilty. He admits it himself. That is all there is. Punish him appropriately."

I smiled at him. It wasn't a friendly sort of smile. "Indulge me," I said.

He huffed. "Very well," he said with a glare. "Four days ago the werewolf came to my place of business. My staff, they say he drank much alcohol. Morgenstern approached the werewolf and was speaking to him. Then he was stabbed, and the werewolf escaped in the confusion. There are many witnesses who will say the same."

"Pardon me, Master Zhang, but may I infer that you were not present for this yourself?"

He glowered, but he couldn't really avoid the question. "I was not. This establishment, it is not my only occupation. I cannot be there at all times."

I raised my hand. "Peace, Master Zhang. No one is accusing you of anything. I only wanted to make certain I understood. Mr. Frodsham, would you like to add to this?"

Edward nodded stiffly. To my surprise, though, it was Ryan who stood up and cleared his throat. Even at a glance, you could tell he was ex-military; his parade rest was distressingly precise. "As Master Zhang said, I was in the nightclub four days ago. However, I had only had a few drinks, and my capacities were not impaired."

Wait a second, he was the werewolf they kept talking about? Why didn't Kyra tell us this? Snowflake sounded quite confused.

Beats me, I said, not letting any sign that I was communicating with her show. *But I think it's a safe bet that the things we aren't being told here could fill a book.* I paused. *Well, a pamphlet, anyway.*

"Mr. Morgenstern showed up shortly before midnight and started making advances toward my girlfriend while I was in the restroom. She informed him that these advances were not appreciated; however, he did not appear to be listening. The bartender intervened in the situation before it could escalate, asking Mr. Morgenstern to leave. He refused. He appeared to be heavily intoxicated. He purchased a round for everyone present, saying something about having gotten lucky. He then resumed speaking to my girlfriend, offering her an unspecified reward if she would associate with him."

Wow, Snowflake said. I like this guy. He can actually summarize a situation without getting all emotional.

"As I had returned by this point, I told Mr. Morgenstern that he was unwelcome and should leave. He attempted to shove me, but his coordination appeared to be severely impaired. I then hit him in the face."

Now that I hadn't expected. "You hit him?"

"Correct."

"With what?"

"My fist," he said dryly.

"I see. What prompted you to respond with violence?"

"Although it was clumsy, Mr. Morgenstern's shove was stronger than I would expect from a human of his build. As such, I felt that it was wisest to end the confrontation before it could escalate further."

"And you didn't know before that that he wasn't human?"

"I did not."

"Thank you. Please continue."

"Certainly, W—jarl, but I don't know much else. We left at that point."

"Why did you leave?"

"It seemed the prudent thing to do. Mr. Morgenstern had been rendered unconscious, but it was possible that he would wake up, or that he had friends in the crowd." He shrugged. "The mood was gone, anyway."

"So you claim you didn't stab him at all."

"That is correct. I didn't know anything about it until the next morning."

"This is ridiculous," Zhang interjected. "This werewolf, he clearly is lying. His story is patently absurd."

"Your pardon, Master Zhang," I said coldly, "but by your own account you cannot confirm or deny his claims. Your staff would not have been able to identify him as a werewolf, and therefore would not have known that the drinks he had consumed would not have an appreciable effect on him. Is that the case?"

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

The mage looked like he was about to have a fit. Then, quite suddenly, the anger ran out of him, too quickly to have been genuine. He looked down at the floor for a moment, and when he looked back up his expression was cold and calm. "That is correct," he admitted.

"And furthermore," I said, "you have already said that there was significant confusion during and directly after this incident. If he left directly afterward, it is possible that no one would have realized he was gone until after Mr. Morgenstern's death had already had been discovered, at which point his absence would have seemed quite suspicious."

"True enough," Zhang said. "But you must admit, whether I was there or not, the evidence is damning. Mr. Peterson was seen to have means, motive, and opportunity, and has admitted to the use of violence. Surely you see that the simplest, most likely answer is that he is guilty of this murder. To ignore the evidence is insanity." Peterson, huh? I'd never heard Ryan's last name before, but it fit pretty well.

"A fair point," I agreed. "But it is equally foolish to allow preconceptions to blind you. The art is to maintain a position between extremes. Ms. Morgenstern," I said, turning my attention to the other side of the room.

She cleared her throat politely. "It's Dame, actually," she said. Her tone wasn't friendly, exactly, but it wasn't openly hostile either, and at this point that was about all I could hope for.

"My apologies, Dame Morgenstern, please excuse me. Would you say that the behavior Mr. Peterson described was typical of your brother?"

She actually paused to think about it. "No," she said after a long moment. "I wouldn't. Stefan was always a gentleman."

"And yet every account I've heard agrees that he initiated the conflict with Mr. Peterson," I noted. "In fact, that's nearly the only thing they all agree on."

"What are you suggesting, jarl Winter?" Zhang said. He didn't sound openly confrontational, which I took to be a good sign.

"Simply put? I think everyone here has a stake in learning the reality of what happened. If Mr. Peterson is, in fact, responsible for Mr. Morgenstern's death, then he dishonors all of us with his lies. If not, then the guilty party has offered a grievous insult, which must be redressed."

"Are you offering to adjudicate this dispute?" Dolph asked, smooth as butter.

"I am," I said, not having to feign reluctance in the extreme. "If all of you are willing to agree to such?"

"No objection," Anja Morgenstern said. Strangely, of all the people in the room, she seemed least upset by her brother's death.

"Scáthach makes no argument," Carraig drawled. He hardly seemed to be paying attention. "You've always been a friend to her Court." Which was, in true Sidhe tradition, a remarkably polite ultimatum.

"Aye," Gwyn ap Nudd said. It was the first he'd spoken since introducing himself, and a couple of people jumped as though they had forgotten he was there entirely. (For once, I wasn't one of them). "You come well recommended."

"I have, regarding your impartiality, some concerns," Zhang murmured. "But I am willing to trust you will come to the correct conclusion."

"The Watchers have no doubt in jarl Winter's ability to investigate this matter," Moray said, still sounding pretty bored. I found that phrasing interesting. There were all kinds of meanings in that, and I wasn't at all certain whom most of them were targeted at.

"The Khan also has great confidence in the jarl, and is willing to overlook his past associations with the defendant. I trust that they will not contaminate his opinion against Mr. Peterson," Dolph said smoothly, like the expert diplomat he was. If you weren't listening carefully, you wouldn't have noticed that nothing he said in any way actually indicated that I felt any antagonism toward Ryan. Quite the opposite, actually. I found it sort of amusing for someone to be using the "true in a *technical* sense" gambit *against* the fae, considering that was pretty much their signature move.

"I am willing to accept his adjudication as well," Edward said. He wasn't nearly as smooth about it—Edward is a lot of things, but good at deception's never really been one of them. His voice was relieved, but hopefully nobody else would notice—and if they did, they'd already agreed. I didn't doubt that was why Edward (probably at Dolph's request) had waited until everyone else had already spoken.

"Wonderful," I lied. Everyone there would know I was lying, of course, but I didn't expect any of them to call me on it. It wouldn't be polite. "I will begin looking into this matter immediately. I will, of course, keep you all informed regarding anything I find." With that polite cue, everyone stood up and began filing out in order of seniority. Gwyn ap Nudd went first, followed by Dolph and Zhang. Once the chief representatives of each faction were gone, the pecking order got more interesting. I didn't pay very much attention, something else having caught my eye.

"That wasn't a very smart thing to agree to," Aiko whispered.

"Probably not," I agreed, similarly quiet. I murmured to Snowflake, who stood up and yawned, then ambled towards the door. I'm pretty sure nobody noticed the slight breeze as she did; I've been getting better at subtlety. Precise manipulation of air at a distance was tricky, but I wasn't moving very much weight, and I'd been practicing.

A few minutes later, almost everyone was gone. The werewolves, though, hadn't left, and once the room was otherwise empty they came over to talk to me. (Not Bryan, though. He and Ash had left at some point, though I was not entirely sure when.)

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

"That went well," Edward said. I couldn't quite tell if he meant it sarcastically or not.

"Could have been worse," I agreed, presuming he had been being sincere. "You might have told me ahead of time who they were upset about, though." I looked pointedly at Kyra.

She shrugged. "You didn't give me much of a chance," she said. "And I wasn't quite sure how to phrase it."

"How are you planning on going about it?" Edward asked before I could reply.

"Ideal would be to find the person who actually did kill the guy," I said. "So I guess I start with figuring out why someone would have offed him. I should probably check out this nightclub, too; it definitely sounds like there's something funny there." I glanced at Ryan. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to come help?"

"I'm pretty invested in this, too," he said dryly. "But I'm not sure what you think I can do to help."

I shrugged. "Can't hurt to have you along. Could be you saw something and didn't realize it was important."

"I'll come too," Kyra announced. "I haven't had any of your patented kind of fun for ages."

I considered arguing with her for a moment, then decided it was unlikely to be a productive course of action. Dominant werewolves tend to be protective, and Ryan was one of her people before he belonged to Edward. "All right, then," I said. "Go pack your stuff." The two of them skedaddled without any further prompting. Edward paused just long enough to give me a rib-straining hug before following them.

I waited until Snowflake told me that both Ryan and Kyra had exited the building before looking at Dolph, who had snuck back inside at some point. "Okay," I said. "Give."

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, you haven't got all day. You couldn't have *made* it any more obvious there was something you wanted to talk about without them around."

He glanced significantly at the housecarls lining the wall behind me. "Do you want to talk here?" he asked me.

"Of course not," I said cheerfully. "But I'm not following you into a secluded back alley, either, and you don't have time to waste arguing about it." I gave him a bright, cheerful, and entirely false smile.

Dolph was not amused. "Your paranoia has gotten somewhat excessive," he said. "And when *I'm* saying that, you know you have a problem." He sighed and rubbed his neck in a manner which suggested he had a headache. "I'm somewhat...concerned by how much attention this is attracting."

I frowned. "I thought you were expecting this to turn into a big deal. That's the whole reason you're *here*."

"Well, yes," he said. "But I definitely was *not* expecting for a Twilight Prince to show up in person. And for someone to owe loyalty to Gwyn and Scáthach at the same time is...highly unusual."

"Scáthach's not big on sharing," I agreed thoughtfully. "Honestly, though, I have a difficult time understanding fae loyalties, and I'm not even going to try to predict a Twilight Prince's activities. If you ask me, that's only the third most concerning thing going on here."

"Oh? And what are the others?"

"First off," I said, "why did the Conclave send a Watcher here? I keep trying to think of something the Watchers might want with this, and I'm coming up blank. There has to be something, though; they don't have enough manpower to have sent him without a reason. Second, what the *hell* is Bryan doing here?"

Dolph frowned, and I got the impression he wasn't really seeing me anymore. "I can't say I've ever understood why Bryan does the things he does," he said distantly.

"Likewise. But somehow, I think it's going to be important this time."

"I hope you're wrong about that. Because if you have to understand my brother to work this out, I'm afraid we're doomed before we've started." Dolph glanced at his watch, then muttered a curse in what I was pretty sure was Greek. "I have to get moving. Good luck, and let me know if there's anything we can do to help you."

"Thanks," I said, gesturing slightly. My housecarls, who were pretty good at figuring out what I wanted by now, started drifting towards the exit, bringing Alexis with them. I was pretty sure nobody had noticed her presence, which had been another of my goals with bringing the minions; it's a lot easier to fade into the background when there's a background to fade *into*. Events like this were good for her education, but it was probably better if said education didn't proceed *that* fast.

Chapter Four

Once outside, Dolph got into his rental car and drove off at a moderately unsafe speed. I was guessing he had only the slimmest margin of time to get to his next appointment. I looked around carefully, but if anyone else was present they were beyond my ability to detect.

All right, I said to Snowflake. *Let's have it.*

About time, she grumbled, appearing from a small bush near the building. You would not have guessed a husky could fit into that bush, but I wasn't surprised, having seen Snowflake hide in much less likely places. She has a gift for it, which may or may not be supernatural in nature. *You have any idea how freaking hard it was to keep anyone from seeing it without looking suspicious?*

You're the bomb, I said, kneeling down to scratch her ears. I also slid one hand under her broad leather collar, palming the scrap of paper I found there. I didn't think that anyone noticed. I stood back up and stretched, dropping the paper into my cloak as I did.

I probably still had a few minutes before Kyra and Ryan were ready—Ryan would want his full set of military gear, and unless Kyra had changed more than I could imagine she would know better than to go *anywhere* with me without being prepared for a fight—so I walked quickly around the building to a location a short distance away that wasn't visible from any of the windows, which was nicely shaded by a small conifer. Aiko, Alexis, and Snowflake all came with me. The housecarls, prompted by another subtle gesture, did not.

As I'd expected, Kyi appeared out of the shadows less than five seconds after we got there. I don't really know how I didn't see her before then, but that's sort of Kyi's specialty. "Did you see them?" I asked her.

The jotun nodded vigorously. "Yes. There was one faerie lady with her man, the hunter and his hound, and the Maiden's knight. Three magic people also and a werewolf."

She hadn't commented on Bryan and Ash. Interesting. "How did they leave?"

"One of werewolves, he drives away. Magic people also have car. I saw not how hunter leaves, but knight only step in shadow and gone, and lady goes to Otherside."

I parsed that, with only moderate difficulty. "Did all three of the mages leave in the same car?"

She shook her head vigorously rather than answer verbally. Wasn't *that* intriguing. "Excellent work," I said. "Did you get a look at the werewolf Alpha here?"

"Yes, I see well. He has big windows."

I grinned. "Yeah, he does. It's convenient, isn't it?" My smile faded. "I want you to stay here for the next few days and watch him. If you see any of the people who were here today, or you notice

anything else strange around town, call me. Unless I tell you otherwise, if you think someone is trying to do him physical harm, you should try to stop them, or failing that give him a warning. Can you do that?"

"Should he know, that I here am?"

"No. Try to keep him from seeing you. If he does notice you, get out of town and call me as soon as you can. Don't let him get near you." Edward could have a volatile temper, and I didn't want either of them getting hurt. I also didn't want Edward to learn that I'd put a spy on him; I couldn't imagine that going over well, whatever my intentions. "You'll have to camp out here. Do you have supplies?"

Kyi gave me a deeply offended look. "Is not hard. And much food here, is easy to steal. I will good be." A brief, predatory smile passed over her face. "Much prey here. They know only werewolves, know not me. I eat *well*."

I grinned and nodded. "Excellent. Thank you." She faded back into the shadows. I'd warned her, but I really wasn't very concerned that Edward would notice her. Kyi Greyfell was remarkably skilled at hiding—better than Snowflake, even.

"Did I understand that right?" Alexis asked me quietly once the jotun was gone. "Did you just tell her to spy on Edward?"

"I'm more concerned with people who might come to visit him, actually," I said, pulling the scrap of paper out of my cloak. "There's something deeply fishy about all this. I don't *think* that anyone will try to take him out, but it's always a possibility." I unfolded the paper, which turned out to be a folded index card.

"What's that?" Aiko asked, leaning in to peer over my shoulder.

"Something Moray dropped on his way out," I said absently. "I'm pretty sure he meant me to see it. Don't think anyone else noticed, though. I had Snowflake snag it on the way out." It had actually been much harder to push it under her collar using only magic than that made it sound, of course, but that was beside the point.

The note was not hard to interpret. It read, in simple block letters, ZHANG KNOWS.

"How cryptic," Aiko said delightedly. "Knows what, I wonder?"

"Hard to say. I mean, obviously he knows a lot more than he's saying, but I actually don't think he knows much that's relevant to this specific situation." I frowned. "Of course, that *is* what he would want us to think. If nothing else, it's hard to believe he didn't have some way to monitor that club if it caters to supernatural critters on a regular basis. This can't have been the first incident he's had."

"Not everyone is as obsessively prepared for disaster as you are, Winter," she said patiently.

"No, but the fact that there was a Watcher there to watch him strongly indicates that he's up to *something*. Besides, it's safe to assume that you don't get to be a high ranking clan mage without being

at *least* as paranoid as I am. I mean, they really are out to get you, and competition for that kind of position must be fierce. It's a safe bet that he makes me look stable and well-adjusted, and he's just hiding it trying to get the drop on us."

"You do realize that argument makes you sound like a textbook case study of paranoid schizophrenia, right?"

"Well, obviously. Come on, we should get back out there before the werewolves come back."

I pulled a lighter out of my pocket and burned the index card before we left, though, and scattered the ashes to the wind. It wouldn't do to have someone find it.

As it turned out, my timing was pretty good. Kyra and Ryan were within sight less than a minute after we were all back standing by the front door with the housecarls. As I'd expected, Ryan had switched from his business-casual clothes into BDUs and a tactical vest. He had an ugly, old-school trench knife on his belt and appeared to be carrying a pistol in a shoulder holster, although it wasn't clearly visible under his trench coat. Kyra was still wearing sweats and a T-shirt, probably because she wasn't as inclined to combat in her human form as Ryan, but she was carrying a large backpack.

"Don't you guys think you're a little overdressed?" I said curiously.

Kyra snorted. "Said the guy wearing a suit of armor?"

"How can you tell?" I asked her. It was true, but the helmet was still in my bag, and everything else was covered by the cloak.

"You move differently when you're wearing it," she said. I was going to have to work on that, clearly. "Where are we going?"

"Not sure," I said, taking off down the street. The entire bizarre horde came along with me. "I need to drop a couple of these guys off at home, then it's probably to Germany to check out this nightclub." I frowned as something occurred to me. "Aiko, do you think the scumbag might know anything?"

"You mean the Italian?" she said, catching on immediately that I didn't want to mention Jacques by name. "Probably. He's got dirt on pretty much everyone. You want me to go ask him?"

"It's probably better if we don't all go," I said, attempting to banish the vision of this entire crowd packed into Jacques's filthy apartment. "And he likes you more than me."

"You'll have to back me. This kind of info ain't cheap, and the family cut off my funding."

I snorted. "Yeah, I don't think that'll be a problem. Besides, he'll probably need time to get it. If you have him start on it, I can come with you when it's time to negotiate pricing."

"Sounds good. I'll make the first crossing with you, then split. Meet in the Wood in an hour and a half or so?"

"Works for me. That patch of trees should work." I nodded to a small, windswept clump of aspens.

"Christ, Winter," Kyra sighed. "You just love it when nobody knows what you guys are talking about, don't you?"

"It's better than catnip," I agreed. "Oh shit," I said a moment later.

"What is it?" Alexis, Kyra, and Ryan asked more or less simultaneously.

"Bryan's standing there waiting for us. Looks like he has the girl with him, too. Oh, this should be good."

Indeed, the old werewolf was standing at the edge of the trees. He looked like he'd been there for hours without moving, which made it hard to guess whether he'd been tailing us or somehow predicted where we would go. Ash Sanguinaria was standing behind and just to one side of him, holding that creepy stuffed cat in her arms. Both of them, needless to say, were staring directly at me.

Actually, make that all three of them. I'm pretty sure the cat was staring too.

"Good afternoon," Bryan said in his toneless way as we approached. "It is good that you are doing this."

"Good afternoon," I said, keeping my voice pleasant. "I am glad that one of us is confident of that."

Bryan did not, of course, smile, but I nevertheless got the impression that he was amused. "As am I. You are going to Germany."

"Yes," I answered, although it hadn't been a question. "Investigating the club myself seems like a good way to get more information."

"Correct. I want you to take Ash with you."

"This is likely to involve some danger."

If I hadn't known better, I would have thought Bryan's lips twitched at that. "She can take care of herself. This will be good for her education."

"Do you actually *want* to come?" I said, addressing the girl directly.

She considered the question for a few seconds. "Yes," she said eventually. "An education is a valuable thing. I do not consider the possibility that this excursion will cause me significant harm to have an appreciable probability of coming to pass."

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

"I would take it as a personal favor if you were to do this," Bryan said. His voice held no more emotion than it ever did, but it still set off warning bells in my head like crazy. Personal favors were hard currency in my world, and *extremely* serious business. If Bryan was offering a favor in trade for this, odds were excellent that it would turn out to be much bigger and more dangerous than it looked.

On the other hand, being owed a favor by the likes of Bryan Ferguson was the kind of thing small wars have been waged over. It probably wouldn't actually be worth it (I had no real reason to distrust Bryan, but I'd been burned on deals like this a couple times in the past, and that was the sort of thing that left you skittish in the future), but still.

Besides which, I liked the little of Ash that I'd seen. Which probably just made me a sucker, but there *are* limits even to my paranoia. If she needed assistance that I was capable of providing, I was more inclined to help than not. And I was already mixed up in this mess deeper than was in any way safe, so it really didn't matter that much if I got into another level. Right. I believed that.

"Fine," I said, attempting not to sound reluctant about it. "You can come."

"Thank you, Winter jarl," she said seriously. "I will endeavor not to cause unnecessary hindrance to you in your objective."

"I appreciate that," I said, looking towards Bryan. I wasn't entirely sure what I was going to say to him, but it turned out not to be particularly important, because he had already disappeared. I had no idea how he did it. It really didn't matter for my purposes; like I said to Aiko, I didn't worry too much about what Bryan could and couldn't do. You could drive yourself crazy, doing something like that.

I introduced Ash to everyone present, briefly. She was, as seemed distinctly her norm, serious and formal to an extent that was almost creepy, particularly when combined with her youthful appearance. It was, I had to admit, rather appropriate; with that addition, we represented a nearly complete spectrum of psychological dysfunction. You had to imagine that a psychiatrist would go into fits of ecstasy if they saw us coming.

Once that was done, I started working on the first portal. I was somewhat uncomfortable with so many people watching—my concentration was totally occupied with the magic I was working on, leaving me vulnerable—but, logically, I was actually fairly safe. Sure, I couldn't trust anyone present with the exceptions of Aiko, Snowflake, and maybe Alexis and Kyra, but the probability that all the rest would betray me at the same moment was pretty small. I was still too valuable to too many of them, and until that changed even the traitors would defend me against treachery.

I was still uncomfortable, though. It ended up taking me four tries to get it right, and Kyra and Ryan were getting noticeably impatient by the time I got it together. Fortunately, I got my act together before they got bored and wandered off.

Kyra's expression when the gap between two trees faded into absolute darkness was priceless (and holding back laughter doesn't do you any favors when it comes to perfect concentration, let me tell you). Fortunately, the rest of them knew what to expect, and hustled the werewolves through quickly

enough not to strain my capabilities. Ash, interestingly, didn't appear confused at all, and needed no encouragement. I staggered through last of all.

I came to on the other side in a more-than-usually awkward position. I wasn't sure how I'd gotten there—as usual, there was a blank spot stretching from the moment I stepped across to a minute or two after I reached the other side—but I was sprawled across Snowflake, Aiko, and Kyra, all of whom were in turn on top of Kjaran. Alexis was tangled with Vigdis and Sveinn at the base of a tree a few feet away, while Ryan was slumped against a fir just past them.

Ash seemed entirely unaffected, and was standing a short distance off, waiting patiently. I would have been seriously unnerved by that, but I didn't have the attention span at the moment.

I crawled off the pile and rolled off onto the ground, not feeling up to standing currently. It hadn't been *too* awful a transfer—nobody had vomited, for one thing, and my headache was only unpleasant rather than crippling—but that's a hell of a relative statement. Snowflake curled up next to me a few seconds later, and not long after that Aiko moved off of Kjaran as well.

Much like anything else, Otherside travel gets easier the more times you do it. It wasn't, therefore, surprising that the jötnar were the next to recover, followed by Ryan and then Alexis, with Kyra last of all. (Kjaran came to early on, but didn't move. Kyra's weight didn't seem to bother him, which wasn't that remarkable considering their respective sizes.)

"Good Lord," Kyra moaned, without opening her eyes or moving. "What the *fuck* just happened?"

"And now you know why I don't visit more often. It's over quicker than flying, at least."

The werewolf opened her eyes, blinked a couple times, and then clearly realized where she was. She immediately scrambled off of Kjaran, obviously trying not to harm him (she might as well not have bothered, considering it was *Kjaran* we were talking about). She was then immediately and violently ill, to no one's real surprise. You soon learn not to move that quickly that soon after you regain consciousness from a portal.

I glanced at Ryan, who didn't appear to be reacting nearly as badly as Kyra. That was very interesting. I debated keeping it a secret that I'd noticed, but after a few seconds decided the possibility of gaining information outweighed any possible value I might gain from hiding it. "Have you done this before, Ryan?" I asked, keeping my voice free of any trace of accusation or hostility. You don't want to make a stressed werewolf feel defensive. It isn't a good idea.

"Yes, sir, on several occasions." He hadn't moved from his slump against the tree, and yet he *still* sounded drill-sergeant crisp. That was just weird.

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"Thought so. How'd that happen?" A moment later I remembered, and felt a strong desire to smack myself in the head. "Oh, shit. Ryan, please tell me what Edward said about you having a contract with the fae was wrong."

"I think the term 'contract' might be somewhat excessive, sir," he said instead.

I groaned. "Please tell me you didn't agree to any unspecified favors."

"I'm not stupid," he said, accidentally showing a trace of personality. "It was just an agreement with my girlfriend. We only even told them about it so that her family would have to recognize it."

I closed my eyes. "Ryan, *please* tell me you aren't implying that you're dating one of the fae."

"Actually, sir, I'm not. I'm outright stating it."

"I suddenly regret this decision even more, which is a remarkable feat on your part. Congratulations. Do I want to know how this situation came about?" That was actually a serious question; I never seem to learn not to ask questions I don't want to know the answers to, but at least I've made *some* progress.

"Actually," Kyra said before Ryan could respond, "you already do. You remember that thing I made Ryan help you with, just before we left town?"

"You mean the one that ended with him waking up naked in a field in Kansas?" I said.

"Right, and—"

"Don't remind me," I interrupted. "My psyche is still healing from the first time."

God, no. That was ein ätzend verflucht Scheibenkleister. You aren't paying me enough to think about that story again. Snowflake sounded like she was only with difficulty restraining a shudder.

"So," I said, ignoring that comment with the ease of long practice. "You actually called that number, eh?"

"What else was I supposed to do?" Ryan asked.

"Pretty much anything, actually. I don't suppose you know what specific fae variant she is?"

"Of course," he said promptly. "She's a selkie."

A selkie, Snowflake said. *Aren't those the ones that turn into seals?*

Yes, and I am so not asking him about that. I don't even want to know what's going on there. Out loud, I said, "Wonderful. Ah, well, I guess I can't really point fingers. At least a selkie might wait until you're dead to eat your liver."

"I'll have you know that was an isolated case," Aiko said hotly. "It was hardly her fault that the human liver happens to be highly nutritious, including several important vitamins, and also delicious. Strictly coincidental. Any stories claiming otherwise are pure malicious slander."

Ryan waited for a moment. When it became apparent that an explanation was not forthcoming, he cleared his throat diffidently. "Um, sir? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't worry about it," Kyra advised him. "Those two love their ridiculous in-jokes. Especially when no one else gets them."

"What she said," I agreed. "So. You're dating a selkie. Do you know what her affiliation is?"

"She's unaffiliated. But her family's in pretty big with Midnight."

I grunted. "Well, that's something." Most selkies weren't affiliated with the Courts (according to what I'd heard, anyway; I hadn't met one before), but it isn't unheard of. The Midnight Court was already involved, of course, but anything that decreased the amount I had to deal with those lunatics could only be a good thing.

"I should get going," Aiko said abruptly. "Meet you in the Wood in an hour and a half, right?"

"Right. You want anything from home?"

"You might grab a bit of cash; I'm not carrying any euros."

"No problem," I said, standing up and stretching in preparation for another round of work. We'd spent enough time sitting around, and everyone looked recovered enough for the next stage.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing around back in Colorado. The trees weren't as impressive as the ones in Faerie, and it was a hell of a lot colder, but other than that the two locations were actually fairly similar.

"Ugh," Kyra said, opening her eyes. She promptly squinted against the light—it wasn't actually that bright, but migraine-like sensitivity to light was a fairly common symptom of crossing over. "How can you stand that?"

"You get used to it," I said absently, watching Ash. She had once again failed to show any reaction to the portal, which was even creepier now that I'd had time to think about it. At first she'd appeared cold, which wasn't surprising considering that it was maybe fifteen degrees in this shady little meadow, there was a breeze, and she was standing in three inches of snow. It probably didn't help that she was wearing a thin brown jacket over her long-sleeved white shirt, a black wool skirt, and plain black shoes barely adequate to keep the snow out where she was standing. Not beach-going dress, granted, but not really adequate for the conditions either.

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Less than a minute after I became cognizant of my surroundings, though, she took two steps sideways to stand next to an aspen tree and rested a hand on its bark. Less than ten seconds later she was no longer shivering or showing any other signs of discomfort, and the light, forest-like smell of her magic had intensified slightly. I would say that the stuffed cat dangled from her other hand, but I'm pretty sure "dangled" isn't the right word; it wasn't hanging in *quite* the same way that gravity should have placed it.

Fascinating. Ash was an increasingly interesting enigma.

"I don't see why you'd want to," Kyra groaned.

I shrugged. "It's a quick way to get from place to place. And there are some places you can't get any other way." I paused. "Well, I can't. There are ways, but they tend to be difficult, dangerous, or very expensive."

"It actually isn't that bad once you've done it a few times," Ryan interjected. He glanced at me. "This was worse than I remember it being with Unna, granted."

"So I'm not very good at this trick," I muttered. "Bite me. Still beats the shit out of flying."

Kyra managed to sit up and look around, although she looked like she regretted the decision immediately afterward. "Wait a second," she said. "Do I recognize this place?"

"You ought to. You must have seen it a few hundred times at least."

"Why did you bring us *here*?"

"You need to know a place pretty well to use it as a destination for that spell," I said. "I only know a few in the city. This seemed like the most convenient one."

"You only know a few," she said slowly. "And you picked *here*?"

"Yup."

Kyra was quiet for a few seconds, taking that in. "Why on earth," she said at last, "did you pick a random spot in the trees out back of my shitty old apartment?" Said location being a truly awful studio apartment at the edge of Manitou Springs. She hadn't lived there for quite a long time now.

"It's convenient to Manitou," I said cheerfully. "And relatively easy to blend into, since nobody really watches it closely. Plus, if I ever need to hide out, it's also easy to get into the forest." I didn't see any reason to mention what everyone already knew, which was that once I got into the forest I was gone. Pretty much nobody (with obvious exceptions, such as gods and Twilight Princes) could take me in my forest.

"Goddamn. You really have gotten paranoid."

I grinned without much humor. "Believe it. Ready to move on?"

"Depends," Kyra said cautiously. "Does it involve another of those things?"

"Not right away, no. Although that is how we're going to Germany."

"I guess so, then," she said dubiously.

"Wonderful! Sveinn, Kjaran, I want you to head back to the house. Sveinn, you're in charge of things until I get back. I expect there not to have been any disasters in the interim."

The jotun snapped to attention. "*Já, minn herra,*" he said crisply.

"What about me?" Vigdis asked.

"You're coming with us. I want to have a thug along, just in case."

Her face split into a wide grin. "I love it when I get to be the thug."

"What, am I not scary enough for you anymore?" Kyra said, mock-indignantly.

I glanced back and forth between the werewolf and the giant. Neither of them really looked like the sort to inspire fear; Kyra was around average in size, with nondescript blue eyes and dark brown hair. Vigdis mostly looked like she was extremely ill-prepared for the weather; if it weren't for the axes, you could easily fail to notice her walking by on the street.

Having seen them both in action, I knew that those appearances were extremely deceptive; I wouldn't care to fight either of them, and I'm pretty decent in a fight. But I also knew that Kyra wasn't nearly as scary as Vigdis. Kyra was mostly sane, and Vigdis...wasn't.

Rather than explain any of that, I just grinned. "Tell you what. If it comes to that, you can both terrify the poor sucker." I looked at Vigdis. "I don't want you drawing attention to us, though. Go switch into your blending kit and meet us at Pryce's in forty minutes."

"I hate blending in," she sulked.

"Not optional this time. Go."

Vigdis pouted, but she went. One of the things I'd made very clear to all of my minions was that there were things I was willing to compromise on, and things I wasn't. It's important to set clear boundaries for your minions; as any good boss knows, clear and consistent expectations are integral to maintaining an efficient working environment.

Granted, I don't expect most bosses do it in quite as violent and authoritarian a way as I did. But their minions probably also don't perform kidnappings, search-and-destroy attacks, or military assaults, so I suppose it evens out. Alas, jötnar seldom offer respect to anyone not capable of violence, and they see laxness of discipline as a sign of weakness.

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Not unlike werewolves in that regard, actually. Ryan and I once had a very interesting conversation about how Kyra's lack of dictatorial behavior and general niceness had impaired her ability to lead the pack, simply because it gave them the subconscious message that she was weak and unfit to govern. He's ex-military and studied sociology in college, which gives him an interesting perspective on it and fancy vocabulary to describe it with, but it was nothing I hadn't known my whole life.

"You know," Kyra said once Vigdis was gone, "watching that makes me realize how much worse my job could have been. What the hell are those guys?"

"Jötnar. Norse frost giants. I've got half a dozen of them following me around now that I'm technically one of their jarls. They're supposed to be my enforcers." I started walking, in a direction at roughly right angles to the one Vigdis had taken. My bizarre entourage trailed along after me.

"Half a dozen?" Ryan asked. "That doesn't seem adequate."

"Yeah, well, you haven't seen 'em in action. They're quite a bit scarier than the average werewolf."

"Enough scarier that six of them is enough to maintain dominance over an entire city?" Ryan sounded skeptical.

"Yes. But my power is more political than military anyway. If someone seriously tries to oust me, I've already screwed up on an epic scale."

Kyra shook her head. "I honestly never would have seen you being a politician."

"Me neither. But *somebody's* got to do it, and what else was I supposed to do when you dropped it in my lap?"

"What, so now *that's* my fault too?"

"Everything else is," I said, grinning. "Why not this?"

"You," she said, "are such an ass." But she was smiling when she said it.

It was a bit of a walk to my house. Werewolves tend to be physically fit, though, and I insisted that Alexis maintain decent conditioning. Ash concerned me slightly more, but seemed to have no difficulty keeping up.

"So let me get this straight," Kyra said when we stopped outside of the building. "You're, like, the boss. You've got minions. You've got money. And you still live in this piece of shit?"

I grinned. "Trust me," I said, walking up to the battered front door. "It's nicer than it looks."

In all fairness, Kyra had reason for complaint. The building my mansion connected to was a ramshackle old house in ill-repair, in the middle of the closest thing Colorado Springs has to a slum. It looks like it's been abandoned for twenty years, and twenty generations of rodents had been squatting in it in that time. Looking at the place, you really had to wonder why it hadn't been condemned as a public health hazard.

Granted, that would require that you see it in the first place, which almost nobody did. The building had come with some very nice wards that guaranteed that pretty much everybody's gaze skipped from one side to the other without really registering the building itself. I didn't have to worry much about door-to-door salesmen.

Of course, I didn't trust that to protect me. So I also had another layer of wards on it which were, shall we say, a little less passive. Try to break in, and you could expect a serious retaliation. Continue after that first reprisal, and it goes to lethal force. I take my privacy seriously.

It took me only a minute or two to temporarily lower the wards and unlock the half-dozen or so locks I had on the door. I opened it, revealing a small and unlit antechamber. It looked like it hadn't been used for years, with a thick layer of dust on every available surface.

"Yeah," Kyra said, "still not feeling it."

I grinned. "Trust me," I repeated.

It was a little tricky getting Kyra, Ryan, and Ash inside. The magic connecting this doorway to the mansion on the Otherside was incredibly high-powered and complicated, and I didn't have the first idea how Fenris had done it, but I knew how it worked fairly well. Anyone I specifically keyed to the magic could use it just fine. That included both Snowflake and Alexis. If you weren't on the approved list, you could walk back and forth across the threshold all day and not go anywhere. Fenris wasn't stupid, though, and he'd programmed in a way for me to bring in guests without extending them the trust involved in putting them on the list of people to let in automatically. If someone was in skin contact with me when I crossed, the magic would bring them with me.

So yeah, slightly awkward trying to maintain skin contact with all three of them at once. But that was forgotten once we were across.

The front door of the mansion opens into an enormous entryway, consisting mostly of polished white marble, three tall stories and larger than a lot of buildings. The furniture, which was adequate for a small stadium, was all fine dark woods, upholstered with velvet, silk, and leather in cold colors. A large marble throne dominated the room from its dais on the opposite side of the room. Hanging on the wall over it, in what was probably a deliberate echo of the throne room across town where I (infrequently, and with great reluctance) held court, was my coat of arms, a rough-edged white wolf's head on a black background.

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The motto underneath read *Grimmir ok Svalbrjóstaðir*, in ornate Gothic script. It was a phrase in Old Icelandic, which meant *Grim and Coldhearted*—and no, I didn't pick it. I'm not entirely sure who did, or why that was what they chose. It seems like a bit of a strange thing to aspire towards.

"...The hell?" Ryan said. "What is this?"

"Home," I said grandiosely. "Try not to touch anything. We keep the place pretty well booby-trapped."

"You booby-trap *your own house*?" Kyra sounded like she couldn't decide between amusement and disgust.

I snorted. "Yeah, well, wait until you see the rest of it. You could fit a small town in here. There are whole wings we don't use at all."

"Excuse me, sir, but you haven't answered my question," Ryan interjected. "What the *hell* is this place?"

"That's sort of complicated. The short answer is that it's a pocket of space that isn't actually a part of our world, but it's permanently connected to that house. You don't get in without really specific credentials, which is why we had to come in the way we did."

"It is not an uncommon practice," Ash said, sounding totally calm. "Although such grandiosity is atypical in my experience. Who designed it, if I might ask?"

"Of course you can," I said. "And it was designed by Fenris." I paused. "Well, he was the one who gave the place to me. I don't really know whether he built it or not."

"Ah," she said. "I suppose I might have expected such, considering your association with Fenrisúlfr."

"Probably so. But I think it can be forgiven, considering how many people I have an association with." I glanced at the time and muttered something impolite when I saw how late it was already. "Okay, we need to get moving. Remember, don't touch anything unless I tell you. You don't want to learn what Aiko's idea of a good booby-trap is, trust me."

Chapter Five

"Wow." Ryan sounded almost awestruck.

"Not bad." Kyra covered it better, but I could tell she was impressed.

"The display is impressive," Ash allowed. "However, it strikes me as being slightly excessive."

"Probably so," I admitted, wandering over to the table of stored spells and assorted other toys. I keep the armory OCD-level organized. The way I look at it, when you need a weapon you *really need a weapon*. You don't want to be digging through clutter trying to find the one you want. Granted, our house was an incredibly hard target, but if you only prepare for the problems you expect to happen you die quickly. Redundancy is the most important part of emergency preparations.

"I don't even recognize most of these models," Ryan said, looking over the gun rack. It was fairly sparsely occupied; just three shotguns, a carbine, a couple hunting rifles, a military-grade sniper rifle, and around half a dozen pistols of various types.

"A lot of them are custom makers that cater to our crowd," I said absently, scanning the room. I grabbed a bag of anti-nasty dust from the table and dropped it into a pocket, followed by a short length of chain and a ball of twine. After a moment's consideration I added a couple bits of crystal, a pair of rune-inscribed steel disks, and a small spool of wire. "I can have a few of them give you a call if you want. Would you toss me that carbine?" Aiko hadn't brought it to the meeting, because that was a wee bit more openly hostile of a look than we'd been going for, but she would want to have it on hand.

"No problem," he said, doing so. "These things aren't loaded, right?"

Kyra broke out laughing. "You're joking, right?"

Ryan looked offended. "Of course not. Why would I be joking?"

"You do realize we're talking about Winter here, right?" she said, still laughing. "Winter 'Paranoia' Wolf? Mr. Have a plan to kill everything in sight? The guy who booby-trapped his own house on the off chance that someone might make it through his ridiculously extreme exterior defenses? Of course the guns are loaded."

"Well, yes," I admitted. "Speaking of which, the ammo's in the cabinet to your left, if you would...?"

Ryan gave me a look suggesting that he was in no way amused by this. He then removed an appropriate box of ammo (we kept them all clearly labeled, for obvious reasons) and handed it to me with exaggerated care.

"Thanks," I said, dropping it into my pack and slinging it over my shoulder. "You two are good for gear, right?" Both werewolves indicated in the affirmative. "Good. Ash, do you have a weapon?"

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The girl smiled her most disturbing smile and gently stroked the stuffed cat, which she was still carrying. "I highly doubt that will be necessary, jarl."

"Call me Winter. And you should at least carry a knife."

She shrugged, the motion almost invisible. "If you insist," she said, walking over to inspect the available choices. The swords had their own rack, but the shorter blades were set out on tables. The tables were padded with plush emerald-green velvet, and each knife nestled into its own spot in the lineup. The result was surprisingly decorative.

I've got a lot of knives—like, a whole lot. I've never done a count, but I think it's somewhere between fifty and a hundred. There's a lot of variety in that. I mean, I've got something for just about everyone. But Ash picked one of the strangest of the items in my collection. It was modeled on the classic Italian stiletto, about eight inches long, narrow, and very sharp. The blade was round in cross-section, and had no cutting edge at all—a purely thrusting weapon.

All of that was fairly normal. What set this particular piece apart was its choice of material. Rather than metal, the dagger was made from what seemed to be bone or ivory, except that it was incredibly strong, difficult to damage, and inflexible. I have no idea what kind of magic was involved in its production. I'd originally purchased it as a curio of sorts, from a stranger in Pryce's whom I'd never seen before or since.

Ash looked over the dagger with surprising competence for someone who didn't like weapons, then looked up at me and nodded.

I considered that for a moment, then shrugged. I grabbed the matching leather sheath from a drawer and tossed it to her. The girl promptly sheathed the weapon and tucked it away under her jacket. "Okay," I said. "Everyone ready?"

Everyone indicated that they were. I smiled with satisfaction. "Good. Oh, one more thing. Alexis, I want you to stay here."

"What?" my cousin said indignantly. "Why?"

"Because I'm responsible for your safety and this is a really horrible way to go about that. Also, there are enough of us that one more is unlikely to make a significant difference. On the other hand, I really want someone in town to keep an eye on things and let me know if things start going south—which, given that I've gotten myself mixed up with the fae *and* the mages, they will. I trust you, you know your way around this house, and your local contacts are current. That makes you the best choice for that."

One of the things I'd learned about Alexis over the past year or so was that she *really* hated being told what to do without an explanation, but once she understood she didn't have a problem with taking on a subordinate role. She looked upset when I mentioned the safety thing, but her expression cleared when I got to the part about her having an actual job that I needed done. Alexis also hates

feeling like she's standing by while other people do the dangerous work, which was why I'd phrased it that way.

That left just me, Kyra, Ryan, Snowflake, and Ash to go meet Vigdis. It was comforting—the weight of numbers can accomplish a lot, after all—but also kind of disheartening. It seemed like most of what I did these days was give orders for other people to carry out; I would much rather go back to the days when the team consisted of just me, Aiko, and Snowflake, and people weren't depending on me.

Which, really, probably just goes to show how dumb I am.

Vigdis, as planned, met us outside Pryce's. She was wearing a light blue sundress which, although incredibly inappropriate to the weather, was a lot less likely to attract attention than her previous garb. She could also get it out of the way equally quickly if she decided to change shapes. That was the plan if we got into a fight, since carrying around a pair of axes would pretty much negate any blending in she might otherwise do. If shifting wasn't an option for some reason, she would have to fight barehanded or hope that someone could throw her a weapon.

You might think it was unfair of me to insist on Vigdis blending in, when the rest of us were so conspicuous. But we were actually less obvious than you might think. Kyra, between her apparent youth, casual dress, and backpack, mostly looked like a college student. Ryan was a little worse, but the trench coat covered pretty much everything. Suspicious, but not ridiculously so. Ash just looked like a teenage girl who happened to be carrying a stuffed animal. A little odd considering the company, but we could always pass her off as my little sister or something. I was wearing armor, but the helmet and gauntlets were in the pack. The rest was covered by the cloak, and the leather boots looked more expensive than martial. I could probably pass myself off as another college student from a wealthy background—an art student, maybe, to explain the odd dress.

Amusingly enough, Snowflake was probably the most visually remarkable of the bunch. She was wearing a plain black leather eyepatch and matching leash, but you just don't see that many one-eyed huskies. The extremely pierced ears, one of which was deeply notched, and heavy leather collar covered in semiprecious stones and bits of bone just added to the effect. I really wasn't sure how to pass that one off as normal. I suppose I'd just have to explain it with the "art student" bit and hope nobody reported me for animal cruelty or something.

A short while later, the whole gaggle of them waited while I opened the portal to Inari's Wood in the alley out back of Pryce's. It wasn't fun—there was an enormous difference between this place and the destination, metaphysically speaking, and that always makes things both difficult and unpleasant. I didn't feel like trying to find a better location, though, so we'd just have to cope.

We came out in the same small clearing by the river that we had passed through on our way to Wyoming. I only know one location in Inari's Wood well enough to gate to it, which made that a pretty much foregone conclusion.

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"About time," a disgusted voice said before I'd managed to get my eyes open. "You're ten minutes late."

"Yeah, I know. Took a little longer to get my stuff than I was expecting." My voice was a little slurred, but not as much as I would have expected. I forced my eyes open a moment later (fortunately, it never got very bright in Inari's Wood) and sat up. "Grabbed these for you," I said, tossing Aiko her carbine.

She snatched it easily out of the air and spent a moment petting the weapon in a moderately unsettling way before slinging the strap over her shoulder. She caught the wakizashi I tossed her a moment later with equal adroitness and clipped it to her belt.

Those of us with more available concealment potential would have to carry them for her once we were out in the "real" world, of course. But I didn't blame her for wanting to have them on her person as long as possible, particularly on the Otherside. You don't want to look vulnerable there.

As before, Ryan and Kyra were the worst affected. It was nearly another five minutes before Kyra started stirring. Ash seemed immune to the effects, and Vigdis was only a little worse off than Snowflake and I.

"So," I said, once everyone appeared to be in adequate condition to understand spoken English. "Aiko, you know a spot in Germany, right?"

"A couple, actually," she said. "But Leipzig is the closest to Munich. It'll be, oh, maybe three hours' drive?" She shrugged. "Somewhere in there. Add a little to rent a car."

"Three hours?" I said indignantly. "You couldn't come up with anything closer?"

"What can I say, I've never seen a need to go to Munich all that often. Look, it's about five thousand miles closer than you'd get otherwise, are you *really* going to complain about the last two hundred?"

"I suppose not." It was a bit hypocritical of me to complain, really, given that I wouldn't have been able to get us to the same *continent*. I keep meaning to establish a couple portal destinations in Europe, but I never seem to have the time for it.

"Good," she said, starting to spin magic out into the appropriate shape. "You did grab the money, right?"

"Of course I did." I'd run up to the bedroom and grabbed it while we were at home. We keep about ten grand worth each of dollars, euros, pounds, and yen on hand, because why not? At this point, my expenses were pretty near to zero, and my income was in the half-million range.

It's sort of bizarre, really. A couple months after I started the jarl gig, people started paying me for it. I'd say it's a protection racket, except I never even *asked* them to. Pryce alone gives me five thousand dollars or more every month for no apparent reason, and he's far from the only one. In

addition to that, thanks to my moderate notoriety, the things I make fetch obscenely high prices these days. The result is a surprising amount of income. Add in that I didn't have to pay for housing, taxes, or food, and it adds up fast. I can't even keep track of the money anymore; Tindr basically runs my finances. I have no idea what he does, except that it involves several shell corporations, stock accounts, and investments, and that somehow his laundering regularly returns more money than I put into it.

I find it difficult to think of things I can do with that kind of cash. For the most part, I've already *got* everything I want that money can buy. More would just be an annoyance. So I stash money, buy the occasional indulgence, pay for the upkeep of the housecarls (they don't get wages, as such, but I'm expected to arrange for food and other necessities), and give the rest to various charitable causes.

As far as I know, I'm the only person who's ever needed to establish a money laundering system for the cash I've accidentally extorted from people, for no other reason than so that I can give it to charity without them reporting it to various federal agencies. The irony is rather amusing.

Aiko led us through two more Otherside domains on the way. The first was a layover in Faerie, and the second was El Dorado. Aiko goes further out of her way than I do to avoid more difficult, unpleasant crossings, for some reason. It's almost like she doesn't enjoy mind-numbingly horrible experiences or something. Finally, after a fairly decent hike, she came to a stop in a tight alley between two skyscraper-like structures and started work on the last portal.

It took around fifteen minutes—longer than Aiko normally needs, but she'd opened a lot of them today, and that was the sort of thing that fatigued a person. We all waited for her to finish with almost unsettling patience—no talking, no complaining, hardly any fidgeting. When the oval of nothingness finally formed, we trooped across in an orderly manner.

I was starting to get worried by now. If something didn't go catastrophically wrong soon, I didn't know what I would do.

I came to in a small, twisty alley. This wasn't much of a surprise; Aiko has a real fondness for small and twisty alleys, and most of her urban connection points seem to involve them. This one was a little smaller and twistier than most; it was fairly crowded with all of us there. I'm just glad nobody happened to be passing. I don't even *want* to imagine what they would have made of that.

"Welcome to Germany," Aiko said. She sounded a little tired, and was leaning against the wall. She was also the only one except me (and Ash, naturally) who was conscious, though, so I didn't think she was feeling *that* poorly. "Where to first?"

"Food," I said decisively. "I'm starving."

"Gosh," she said dryly. "How did I guess." Which, in all fairness, was a valid point. Aiko has been known to comment that if I (or most any other werewolf, really) were to miraculously recover at my own funeral, the first thing I would do was raid the buffet. She's being facetious, obviously, which

doesn't change the fact that she's probably right. "Gonna have a hell of a time getting this crowd in the door."

"You know you'll enjoy it, though," I pointed out. "I mean, come on. How often do you have this many people around to make up stories about?"

"Good point. Oh, hey, it looks like they're waking up."

They were indeed. Snowflake was already slumped across my feet, moaning slightly; she hadn't enjoyed this trip. I've never yet figured out why the experience is so variable, and I frankly hope I never do. Some questions you just *know* you don't want answered. Other than that, Vigdis was sitting upright, and both Kyra and Ryan were making inchoate noises. It took only a few minutes to get them gathered up and moving; like I said, werewolves will do most anything for food, and jötnar are hardly any better.

Lunch (technically it was late dinnertime, because we'd jumped a few time zones, but subjectively it was a late lunch, so whatever) was at a small restaurant that just so happened to be within walking distance of Aiko's connection point. It was an interesting neighborhood, mostly dominated by a large and impressive church. There was a lot of old, stone architecture, spotted with entirely modern buildings.

I'm not entirely sure what Aiko said to the waiter to get us all inside. I mean, this wasn't the sort of party you got wandering in around ten o'clock every night, or at least I sincerely hope not. It took her quite a bit of conversation in German, which the rest of us apparently weren't expected to contribute to. He was smiling by the end of it, though, and didn't say a word about Snowflake coming in with us.

"I wish I knew what story you just told him," I grumbled once he was out of earshot.

"I'd tell you," Aiko said. "But whatever I said would almost certainly be a lie."

"Well, obviously. That's why I didn't actually ask you to."

"She said that she's home from college for her birthday," Ash said in her usual calm, quiet way. "You're her American boyfriend. Kyra and I are your younger sisters. Kyra is dating Ryan, and Vigdis is his cousin."

I blinked. "You speak German?"

"Languages are considered an important area of study. I am not as practiced with German as with some languages, but I have studied it for several years."

Aiko pouted. "That's no fun. How am I supposed to mess with Winter's head if you tell him what's actually going on?"

"My apologies for spoiling your entertainment," Ash said, sounding like she genuinely meant it. "However, in this case, I considered the amusement you gained insufficient to justify lying."

"What, because lying is wrong?" Aiko scoffed.

"On the contrary, I see no moral obligation to tell the truth in this situation. My objection was predicated upon entirely practical reasons. A deception of the sort you are performing requires the active participation of everyone involved. It would be difficult for your confederates to play the appropriate roles if they were not aware of the scheme's details, making it likely that the intended victim would become aware of some discrepancy in your story."

That stopped all conversation for a while. There's just something very strange about a teenage girl giving you pointers about constructing elaborate lies using legalese vocabulary and sentence structure.

You know, Snowflake said, that girl kind of scares me. Also, I think I smell blood sausage. Think you could get me one of those?

No. But I can ask Aiko to.

Aiko ordered for everyone except Ash, because generally speaking it is not a good idea to try and order food in a language you don't speak. I didn't ask what I was getting, either, because it is *never* a good idea to find out what was in a foreign dish until you've already completely digested it. Particularly where Germany is involved. If there's one thing Germans love more than beer it's sausage, and you do *not* want to know what went into making a sausage. Ever.

In my case, sausage wasn't involved. My food appeared to be some sort of fried schnitzel, in a tomato sauce of some kind. It tasted pretty good, and that was all that I wanted to know about it. We kept up a lighthearted conversation, on the off chance that somebody was overhearing us, and the meal generally appeared to be going fairly well.

That lasted up until we were just about finished eating, at which point Snowflake suddenly said, *Shut up for a second.*

I relayed her instruction immediately, because when Snowflake says something in that particular tone, you act *now* and figure out what's going on later. *What do you hear?* I asked, glancing warily around.

Some sort of...whispering or...something? She glared around in frustration. *And I could swear I just saw something out of the corner of my eye. What the hell is going on?*

I didn't see or hear anything. A moment later I did, however, smell something familiar and very much unwelcome. It was too faint to be sure, but I wasn't inclined to take chances. "Shit," I said out loud, standing up. "Aiko, please pay and then meet us outside."

Aiko is neither stupid nor suicidal. She gives me a lot of crap, and under ordinary circumstances she wouldn't be happy about me acting like I could give her orders. But when shit gets real, she's all business. She nodded tersely, without question or complaint.

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Granted, I would probably suffer for my peremptory attitude later. But she would save it for when there weren't any pressing concerns.

The rest of us filed quickly outside. "Vigdis," I snapped as we reached the street, looking around. There was nothing unusual in sight, and the smell seemed to have decreased in intensity. "I want you out of sight and ready to move on my signal. I think four-footed is best for this task, but use your best judgment."

The jotun snapped to attention. "*Já, minn herra!*" she said, moving quickly down the street and behind a construction barrier where one of the buildings was undergoing renovation. The street was blocked off in the other direction, where they appeared to be replacing a sewer line or something. Fortunately all the workers were already gone for the night.

"Kyra, Ryan, stay here. These people can probably screw with your heads in all kinds of ways, so if you see something weird tell me. Do *not* go chasing after them; you probably won't get lucky enough to wake up in Kansas twice."

"Gotcha," Kyra said. Her voice was level, and if I didn't know her so well I would have thought she was quite calm. "Should I start changing?"

"Too overtly hostile," I said. A moment later I saw a familiar face, and sighed. I'd really been hoping this was just my paranoia acting up. "We don't have enough time anyway."

The changelings and half-breeds were moving slowly down the street, perhaps expecting a trap of some sort, and Aiko emerged from the restaurant shortly before they reached us. She immediately tensed upon seeing them, and took her wakizashi from me gratefully. (The carbine would probably have been a better choice, tactically, but it would also have attracted more attention. Besides, this was shaping up more like a brawl than a duel, and I didn't want her shooting anyone on our team.)

"What do you want?" I said to the half-breed leader. I didn't really feel very hopeful—these wackos hadn't seemed too big on telling me what was going on the last time around—but I wasn't sure what else to say. I mean, nobody ever really told me how to most appropriately interact with a gang of armed lunatics following me around. Unless you count violence, I suppose, but they seemed like they were still willing to talk and I'm trying to cut back on the murder. It's high in sodium.

Her reply was measured and calm. "I," she said, "want to watch you bleed."

"I got that, thanks," I said, glancing over my shoulder. Nobody appeared to be sneaking up behind me, which was a relief. I was starting to wonder whether these six or so were all the people they had. It seemed crazy, but I couldn't come up with a better explanation. "You mind telling me why?"

"You killed him." Her expression didn't change a bit, but she was literally growling. That was more impressive than you might think. I mean, have you ever actually tried to make growling sounds with a human throat? Not as easy as you'd expect.

Winter? Snowflake said hesitantly. *I think we're about to have a problem.*

Hang on, she's starting to actually communicate. "I've killed quite a few of them," I sighed aloud.

"I'm not surprised," the half-breed said, taking another step closer. She was maybe eight inches out of knife range now, with her coterie not far behind. "You seem like the type."

Winter, I think the problem is getting closer.

Okay, hang on one second and keep an eye on it. I think I can talk her into—

These people are not what I was hearing, now look the hell up!

I repeat: When Snowflake takes that tone, you do what she says and ask questions later. I looked up.

There was something on the building at the end of the street.

At first I thought it was just, like, a really creepy gargoyle or something. I mean, the lighting was poor, and the architecture in this neighborhood was of the sort where a gargoyle or two wouldn't have been out of place. Then it dropped to the ground and started walking towards us.

The thing was roughly humanoid, but built on a very different chassis than any human. It must have stood nearly seven feet tall and about as wide. Its neck was as thick as my waist, and three or four people could have stood side-by-side on its shoulders. I couldn't see any real detail—the thing was wearing a freaking cloak, *why* do people keep copying my style—but I really didn't need to in order to know that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with it.

"Aiko," I hissed. "How fast can you hotwire a car?" I'd never learned the trick myself, but I knew that she was pretty good at it.

"Sixty seconds." She sounded almost as spooked as I felt, and I had no idea why. I mean, sure, there were six psycho fae beasties within five feet and a small mountain walking down the street, but that was pretty much par for the course. Things like that normally make her excited at the prospect of imminent violence, not freaked out.

"Go. I'll stall the lunatics and we are skedaddling."

"You realize I can hear everything you say, right?" the ringleader of said lunatics said in a disgusted tone.

"You know," I said conversationally as Aiko took off in search of a fast, easily stolen automobile, "this is an interesting position. I mean, I never thought I would really need to say this, but in all seriousness, you should look behind you. Now."

She sneered. She opened her mouth, likely to say something snide. And then the thing walked into them from behind.

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I realize that makes it sound rather casual, but it's also the only accurate way to phrase it. The thing did not speed up. It did not slow down. It did not vary its speed or gait in any way. It didn't even look aware that they had gotten in its way. It simply kept walking.

The hindmost of the fae turned around just in time to catch an idly swinging arm in the chest. It quite literally sent him flying through the air, his feet six inches off the ground, to impact a streetlight almost ten feet away. The thing did not break stride. A moment later it reached out, picked up the ringleader by the scruff of the neck in one hand, and flicked her aside. The handful of remaining half-breeds and changelings scattered, presumably trying to figure out what had just happened.

Well, shit.

Up close, the thing did not look any more pleasant. It was every bit as massive as it had looked at a distance, the size of two or three big people put together. It had skin the color of toffee and small, piggish black eyes. They went well with its nose, which would have looked quite at home on a wild boar. The left side of its face was covered in an ugly blue tattoo of some sort, and the right side was pierced in around thirty places with bits of bone and metal. It reeked of musk, sweat, urine, and dried blood, an overpowering stench so thick you could see it. I wasn't sure how much of the miasma was physical and how much magical, but either way it was not going to be winning any compliments.

This thing did not look interested in talking. It didn't look like it knew how.

And its attention was obviously and fixedly directed towards me. Clearly today was not my day.

I didn't wait to see what it was going to do, because by that point it might well be too late to do anything about it. I backed away from the thing immediately, summoning Tyrfin, and stumbled over Snowflake. I didn't quite fall, but I was off balance for a half a second or so. As you might expect, the thing took advantage of said lapse, reaching out and grasping my right hand.

I didn't think I'd ever encountered a grip that strong in my life. It crushed my fingers so hard to Tyrfin's hilt that I heard little popping noises, and when it tugged it jerked me into the air with no struggle at all. Its other hand drew back and clenched into a grotesquely oversized fist.

Ryan, who was apparently quicker on his mental feet than the rest of us, stepped up from the side and stabbed the thing in the arm that was holding me. He sank that nasty little trench knife in its forearm to the hilt, adding a tone of fresh blood to the mix.

The thing did not seem to notice, or at least not to mind. It grinned, exposing flat blocky teeth that were somehow much more disturbing than fangs would have been. Its fist started forward, a deceptively ponderous motion which I was sure would soon become very quick indeed. Judging by how strong it was, if this thing hit me my face would resemble a shovel in the worst way possible.

Fortunately for me, before it could do so a wolf landed on its back. It was a lovely specimen of the breed, roughly the size and shape of a Great Dane and silvery-grey in color. It was also Vigdis, who excelled at both timing and vertical leap.

The transformed giant started tearing at the thing's back and shoulders, biting and kicking and clawing and generally shredding its flesh. The injuries were probably not serious—relative to the sheer bulk of the thing, Vigdis's claws and teeth just weren't big enough to inflict more than shallow wounds. But they were painful and distracting, and her position was such that it couldn't easily remove her. It was too heavily muscled to easily reach behind its own head.

She distracted it from punching my face in, giving me time to switch gears from talking to fighting. It shouldn't have taken as long as it did, but apparently there's a certain point at which your train of thought refuses to resemble a roller coaster any more closely than it already does.

Anyway, I drew my heavy Bowie knife left-handed (it was slightly awkward, but that's why I practice) and stabbed it into the back of the thing's hand. I seriously doubted that it did any real harm, but it loosened its grip enough for me to pull my hand away and stumble backward.

At about that point, the thing finally managed to get a good grip on the scruff of Vigdis's neck and pull her off. Ryan was standing there, having just pulled his trench knife back out of the thing's arm. Kyra, who wasn't armed, looked like she couldn't decide between changing to the wolf and going at the thing barehanded, neither of which was likely to be particularly useful. Ash was holding that stuffed cat in one hand and the bone stiletto in the other, but looked disinclined to approach the thing any more closely. I didn't blame her for that; this was *not* her fight, and asking her to get involved in it would have been incredibly unfair. Aiko was shouting something but I wasn't sure what.

Wait a second, what?

I risked a quick glance backward and saw Aiko leaning out of the window of what looked like a delivery van parked around ten yards away. She couldn't get any closer because of the road construction. The engine was running, and it seemed clear this was our escape car. Just in the nick of time, too; I didn't like our odds in a protracted battle with this thing. So far it was kicking our collective ass, and we couldn't afford to attract too much attention if we wanted to get to Munich tonight.

"Run for the car," I snapped, turning back to the fight and drawing Tyrfin. Ash, showing entirely characteristic calmness under pressure, did so immediately. Kyra hesitated for a couple of seconds before Snowflake, who seemed uncharacteristically eager to leave a fight, managed to drag her into motion. I do mean that literally, too; the husky got Kyra's jeans in her teeth and just started pulling until Kyra had to move or fall down.

The thing grinned wider, dropping Vigdis unceremoniously, and took a lumbering step forward. Ryan stabbed it again, in the side of the ribcage. It backhanded him away and kept advancing.

Just the two of us, then.

I was armed and it was not, but it was still a fairly even fight. I couldn't afford for this thing to get its hands on me, even for a moment, which meant I had to play it defensive. Even with its freakishly long arms the sword gave me the advantage in reach, but I couldn't afford to trade hits with it. That left me pretty much dancing away from it, waiting for an opportunity to strike a lethal blow, while it kept

advancing and waited for an opportunity to close with me. It was a high-intensity, low-action sort of duel.

"Ryan," I said, as evenly as I could manage. "Can you move?"

"Yeah," he said, slurring slightly.

"Good. Get up and go for the car. We'll be right behind you." I ducked away from another grab, barely escaping. I managed to slash at the thing's hand on the way by, but didn't do any real damage. It was starting to get close.

Glancing back again, I saw that I'd managed to back away to within around fifteen feet of the van. Close enough. I took a last slash at the thing's legs and then turned to run, shouting something more or less coherent at Vigdis as I did. She must have gotten the idea, because she passed me within three steps. Four legs can be convenient that way.

We got lucky. The thing didn't catch us. Vigdis dove into the open back of the van, which Ryan promptly slammed shut. I scrambled into the passenger seat, and Aiko was back out on the road before the door was closed.

"Looks like we lost it," Ryan said a few seconds later, staring out the back window. "What the hell just happened?"

"No idea. The first group's been following us around for a couple days now. It sounds like they're upset because I killed some dude, but I don't know what they're talking about. The second guy, well." I sighed. "I've got no clue. Any of you recognize him?"

"Half-troll," Aiko said, casually running a red light. "They aren't fast enough to catch us."

"Wonderful," I groaned. "Just wonderful. That would make him a Midnight guy, then."

"Not necessarily," she said. "They're pretty common muscle. They grow up faster than real trolls, and they aren't as vulnerable to iron. Much more tractable, too. They don't have anywhere to go. Makes 'em desperate. A lot of people hire them as thugs."

"How do you know all this?" Kyra asked, sounding slightly disturbed.

"I used to hang around with a guy who bred them. It's pretty big business, actually. He had to kidnap women off the streets to keep up with demand."

"And you hung out with this guy?" Kyra sounded both shocked and disgusted now.

Aiko shrugged uncomfortably. "I...haven't always been a very good person. Plus I spent most of that decade drunk out of my mind, and it turns out I make really bad decisions when I'm drunk. If it's any comfort, the relationship devolved rather spectacularly. I ended up stabbing the guy in the kidney when he tried to get in my pants, and then he almost broke my fucking neck before I cut his throat. Good times."

"Oooookay then," I said. "That was actually a little more information than I needed. Moving along. Will this thing get us to Munich?"

Aiko shrugged. "Should. We've got a full tank of gas. I dunno how long it will be before they call it in stolen, though. We might want to ditch it for a rental at some point."

"Up to you. We shouldn't have to worry about them catching us, though, right?" I was more than slightly concerned by that. It's hard enough to investigate something like this when there *isn't* some freak about to try and kill you.

She shrugged again. "I don't know how the half-breeds are tracking us, so I don't know. The half-troll, well, he can't run fast enough to catch us. But whoever hired him can arrange for transport, and they probably know where we're going. So no guarantees on that one."

"Fair enough. Wake me when we get there, then."

Chapter Six

I did not actually go to sleep.

This should not be taken to imply that I didn't want to go to sleep. I did. It was still fairly early in the day, from my perspective, but it had been fairly active. Besides, I thought I could use all the rest I could get right now, because things probably weren't going to get any calmer for a while.

Unfortunately, there was something I had to do. Something I really didn't want to do.

So, I said to Snowflake, leaning back and closing my eyes. *How did you know that guy was coming?*

I just kept hearing things, she replied. *And then I looked up and saw him on that rooftop.*

Uh-huh. And how could you hear him when he was at least, what, two or three blocks away? He wasn't making that much noise.

I don't know. Hell, I don't even know if he's what kept bugging me. It might have been something else.

I sighed. *Snowflake?*

Yeah?

You're a terrible liar. You said they weren't what you were hearing right before you told me to look up. That implies that you knew what you were hearing, and the context implies that it was him.

There was a long moment of silence, both literal and figurative. *Oops*, she said at last. *I didn't think about that.*

Why did you try and hide it? I said, genuinely confused. *You're my best friend, Snowflake. You don't need to hide anything from me.*

Maybe I just don't want to talk about it, she said, with an edge to her mental voice.

And that's fine. But you could have just said so. When have I ever pressured you to talk about something you weren't comfortable with?

You're no fun to argue with, you know? she sighed. *I mean, it's like eating a baby squirrel. It accomplishes nothing but making me feel bad.* Snowflake was quiet for several seconds. *You remember when Carraig crucified you, right?*

Yeah. It wasn't the sort of thing you forgot. I mean, I've done some fairly unpleasant things, but being tacked up with silver spikes was definitely among the worst. The feeling of helplessness was almost worse than the pain. And the pain was pretty damn bad.

Well, so do I. You were fighting him in that park, and then he just grabbed you and disappeared. I tried to track him, but there was just nothing there, you know? I was freaking out. I was sure he'd killed you, or he was going to, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I didn't even know where you were. It was pretty freaking awful.

I can imagine.

Yeah, well. After about ten minutes of this, some guy comes up and says, "He's still alive." At first I thought I was just hearing things or something, but he kept talking and it was pretty clear he was talking about you. He could hear me, too.

Wait, he could hear you? There were not very many people who could hear Snowflake's mental voice. Fewer than a dozen that I'd encountered, in fact, and most of those were pretty scary people.

Yeah.

Damn. Who was this guy?

Snowflake gave the impression of a shrug. No clue. He looked like just some old dude in a hat. He didn't have any smell, at all, and I didn't hear a heartbeat either. So definitely not human, or at least not a normal sort of human.

No, it doesn't sound like. What happened next? I had no idea how this story related to what we'd been talking about, but I was confident she would get back around to it at some point.

He offered me a deal. I'd be able to find you, and then I'd owe him a favor at some point. Well, I knew it was a pretty stupid idea, but I was desperate. So I said yes.

Oh man. There was no way this story ended happily. It is never a good idea to make a deal like that with something powerful enough to follow through on it. Never, never, never ever a good idea.

I mean, I can't really talk on that one. I've done stupider things. I agreed to owe a favor to frigging Loki, even if I didn't really know it at the time. I am in no position to throw stones. But still.

Right after that I knew where you were, same as usual. Except you were a lot further away, and I knew I shouldn't be able to feel you at that kind of distance. And it felt weird, too, like I was using a part of my mind I normally didn't. Well, I didn't really know what to do, so I went and got Kyra. You know the story from there.

Yeah. So do you still owe this guy a favor?

Yes. I've never seen him again to pay it back. There's one more part, though. When the Wild Hunt rode through town right after that, I could sorta feel them the same way. I mean, I didn't know what I was feeling at the time. But I knew there was something out there, something big. It felt like it was talking to the same part of me that knew where you were, telling me to come out and take a look. So I did, and that part of me took over.

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I see. I presume this is the same part of you that knew that guy was coming a few minutes ago?

Snowflake gave the impression of a shrug. *I guess so. I knew there was something out there, but that's about it.*

Fair enough. Tell me if you get any more weird feelings, all right?

No problem. After a brief hesitation, she continued, You aren't upset at me, right?

I sighed. *I wish you'd told me sooner. And I'm upset that you didn't think you could trust me. But, hell, everybody makes mistakes. I mean, I of all people should know that, right?*

Good, she said with a distinct tone of relief. I'd hate to piss off the only guy I can have a conversation with. Talk about awkward.

"So do you have a street address for this place?" Aiko asked. It was quite a while later. We were still in the same stolen van, which had crossed a significant portion of Germany this night. It was beginning to edge on to morning now, and the city had that predawn stillness to it.

Ryan rattled off an address, to which I paid no attention. Aiko might not have felt a need for a transfer point in Munich, but she'd evidently been here a few times, because she didn't need any further directions.

She eventually parked—illegally, I was pretty sure—in front of a tall, gleaming office building. "It's in the basement," Ryan said.

"Okay," I said, climbing out of the van. "Vigdis, you didn't happen to grab your dress after you changed, did you?" She growled a negative. "Guess you're going canine, then. We don't need the attention you wandering around naked would bring."

"Should I change too?" Kyra asked. She looked jumpy, and kept glancing up and down the street. I didn't particularly blame her; being simultaneously ambushed by two distinct factions of lunatics had my nerves going too.

"Not unless you really want to," I said doubtfully. "We shouldn't have to fight anybody anyway. And if we do, we've got quite a bit of thugpower on our side already."

"Gotcha."

"Okay," I said, looking at the building. A set of sunken stairs led down to the door of the club, which was plain, unmarked steel. It didn't have any sort of advertisement as to the nature of the place inside. "Vigdis, Snowflake, stay outside. Let me know if anyone comes in after us. If you see the half-troll or the changelings raise hell and then hide or run. Don't try and fight them alone."

Vigdis made a sort of resignedly complaining whining sound. Snowflake said, *Why do I have to wait outside too?*

Because you're the only one I know can alert me from outside. Besides, I trust you.

I get all the boring jobs, she muttered, slinking off into the mouth of a nearby alleyway. I could tell she wasn't that upset, though.

"All right," I said, doing a quick headcount to make sure everyone was present and accounted for. Fortunately, we were down to just me, Aiko, Kyra, Ryan, and Ash; trying to keep track of any more than that would drive me crazy. Crazier. "I have no idea what to expect once we get inside, so we're playing it by ear."

It took several minutes of pounding before anyone answered the door, to a width of about three inches. There was a fairly heavy chain keeping it from opening further. A short, somewhat tubby, middle-aged man glared out from the opening. He was bald, with a neatly trimmed black goatee, and wearing a moderately expensive suit. "Who are you?" he said in the absent tones of a busy person already planning the next item on the agenda after a nuisance is dealt with. He had a thick Germanic accent, but I could understand him well enough.

"My name is Winter Wolf," I said with my most winning smile. "I'm here to investigate the recent...unpleasantness."

"On whose authority, might I ask?"

"My own, primarily. However, I was also authorized by Zhang Qiang. I understand he owns this establishment?"

The bald man made a sort of displeased grunting sound. "Do you have this in writing?"

"No," I admitted.

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to leave, then."

I sighed. "Cut the crap. You knew I was coming or you wouldn't be here at this time of night." It was well past the time I would expect even a nightclub to close.

He had a pretty good poker face, but not great, and I was watching. I saw his lips tighten and his eyes narrow infinitesimally. He knew, all right, and he wasn't happy that I'd worked that out. "Mr. Zhang told me to be expecting someone," he admitted. "Whether that person was you remains to be seen. You have identification, I presume?"

I rolled my eyes. "What, you get people pretending to be me often? Random guys walk up at five in the morning asking to investigate things, is that it? And these people happen to know the name of your super-secret boss?"

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"That is immaterial. If I don't see some identification, I can't let you in. I'm sorry, Mr. Wolf, but that's simply how it is."

I sighed again, then fished around in my cloak until I came up with my license. He looked somewhat disappointed when I presented it.

"Very well," he said. "And these people are...?"

"With me," I said firmly. "That's all you need to know. Now are you going to let us in? Or am I going to inform Mr. Zhang that his employees were needlessly obstructive of my investigation?"

"There is no need for that sort of thing," he said disapprovingly. "You are, of course, welcome to come inside. I will be quite pleased to show you around." He removed the chain and opened the door, revealing a very dimly-lit antechamber.

"Thank you," I said, stepping inside. The rest followed me in. "Would you mind starting by explaining what exactly your position is here?"

"Not at all. My name is Karl Schulz. Mr. Zhang is, as you might imagine, far too busy to directly supervise operations here. I manage things in his absence."

"Right. And by 'manage,' you mean...what, exactly?"

"About what you might expect. I supervise the staff here, ensure that things go the way they're supposed to. I even make some financial and personnel decisions, although naturally Mr. Zhang has the final word."

"It sounds like you pretty much run the place," I noted, as Schulz led us through the antechamber and down a short flight of stairs into the club proper. I imagine that, when it was full of dancing and music and mood lighting, it was a fairly glamorous place. At the moment the music was off, and the lights were of a bright fluorescent variety that left little to the imagination. The only people in sight were a pair of janitors cleaning up the spilled booze and complaining to each other in German. The room stank of alcohol and cleaning products, with a hint left of sweat and smoke from the previous night.

The glamour was much reduced, when you looked at it from behind the scenes. Friday night at the club turns out to be a bit more exciting than dealing with the wreckage of Saturday morning.

"Oh, no," Schulz said. "No, Mr. Zhang runs everything. I just make sure things operate smoothly in his absence."

"Strictly middle management, then."

"That's exactly right," he said, beaming.

"And how many people do you employ here?"

"We employ four bartenders full-time, and six waitresses, plus three bouncers. For tax reasons there are also several members of our staff who work as independent contractors."

"Just checking, but we are talking about strippers, right?" Aiko asked nonchalantly.

Schulz's flush was made very visible by his lack of hair. "I...ah...yes. Yes, ma'am," he managed eventually. "And also the custodial staff. We hire a cleaning service."

"I see," I said as we reached the main bar. "This is where the, ah, *incident* occurred, correct?"

"Yes, it is," he said, trying and failing to suppress a quick glance at Ryan. "Very unfortunate for everyone concerned."

"I'm sure. Would you mind telling me what happened?"

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Wolf. As I recall, the incident occurred shortly after eleven. Mr. Schneider came in and ordered his usual."

"Would you say Mr. Schneider was a regular customer here?" I interrupted. I was guessing that was Morgenstern's alias, although if they kept throwing names at me I'd need to start taking down notes. How embarrassing would *that* be?

"Oh, yes," Schulz said. "Came in at least once a week."

"Did he ever cause any problems?"

"Not here."

"Thank you. Please continue."

"Of course. There was another customer here, a Mr. Peterson, as I recall. I don't believe he'd ever come in before, although I might be mistaken. They got into an altercation soon after Mr. Schneider came in."

"Do you know what the fight was about?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Wolf. Something to do with a woman, I believe, but I don't know the details. Mr. Schmidt—that's one of our bartenders who was on duty at the time—Mr. Schmidt said that Mr. Peterson had already been drinking for some time. I expect that contributed something to it."

"I see. And is this Mr. Schmidt here?"

"Unfortunately not. All of our employees leave when we close for the night."

"You don't," Aiko noted.

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Schulz acknowledged her with a patronizing smile, which immediately made me dislike him a little more. "I often find it's easiest to do paperwork when things are quiet," he said blithely. "Besides, I have to be present to supervise the cleaning staff."

"And you're also here every night?" she asked.

"Every night we're open, yes. We close for holidays."

"Hella schedule you got." Aiko sounded like she wanted to straight-up call him a liar. She wouldn't do so under the circumstances, of course, but tone can work wonders.

"No rest for the wicked," he said cheerfully. "To return to your question, Mr. Wolf, I'm afraid Mr. Schmidt isn't here. Tonight is his day off, but he will be back on Monday. You can return then and speak with him if you like."

"He doesn't work weekends?" I asked incredulously.

"Everyone needs a rest sometimes," Schulz said affably. "Mr. Schmidt is our only bartender most weekdays."

"I see. I apologize for the interruption, Mr. Schulz, please continue."

"Thank you, Mr. Wolf. Where was I? Ah, yes. As I was saying, Mr. Peterson had already had several drinks. The argument became rather heated, I understand, and one of our bouncers was already on his way. Unfortunately, he did not reach them before things became violent."

"Did he see who initiated the violence?" I asked.

"No, he didn't. We were rather crowded that night, and as I'm sure you can imagine it can be difficult to keep track of the details under such circumstances. As a matter of fact, the conflict was over before he reached the bar. There was another disruption at the same time, near the door, and as there appeared to be no immediate need for his services at the bar he made his way in that direction. It wasn't until he heard another of our customers screaming that he realized what had happened at all."

"So he didn't actually see what happened?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I see. And this other disruption, what became of that?"

"Nothing, Mr. Wolf. It turned out simply to be a pair of inebriated men attempting to enter without paying the cover charge. One of them distracted our doorman, and the other attempted to sneak in."

"Ah. And did any of your other employees witness the actual violence?"

"Apparently not. Most of them were busy with other tasks, and the man seeking entry was evidently quite noisy about it."

"Now hang on a second," Kyra interjected. "I used to work in a bar, okay? And there is *no way* that a dude sneaking in is gonna distract you from a brawl. Not a chance."

"As I understand it, he tripped on his way down the stairs."

"Funny. But still not that good."

Schulz cleared his throat awkwardly. "I believe you mistake my meaning, ma'am. As he was falling, he grabbed at one of our waitresses in an attempt to remain standing. As you might imagine, our waitress's uniforms were not chosen for their sturdiness, and hers proved, ah, inadequate to withstand this treatment. Several other people were also knocked down. I am given to understand that the resulting scene was...quite distracting."

"Oh," Kyra said, sounding almost embarrassed. "Yes. I can see how that might happen."

"What happened after the body was discovered?"

Schulz shrugged. "Well, it seemed quite clear that Mr. Peterson was responsible," he said, once again not *quite* managing to hide the glance at Ryan. "As he was no longer on the premises, however, we couldn't do much about it. We informed the police immediately, of course, and gave them what information we had about him. I believe there's still a warrant for his arrest. We shut down, naturally, and remained closed for some time. Tonight was actually our first night reopened."

"Why did you close?"

"It was a highly stressful event, Mr. Wolf, for both the staff and our customers. For us not to acknowledge that would be deeply inappropriate."

"Understood," I said, nodding. "Would it be all right if we took a look around your establishment?"

"Of course, Mr. Wolf," he said. "Please, follow me."

The tour was about what you'd expect. He showed us the bar area, the dance floor, the stage, the restrooms, all fairly standard in appearance. The back room was equipped with a coffee maker, a microwave, an empty fridge, and not much else. Schulz had a small office, which was clean enough to use as a surgery and contained just as much personality. There was a desk with absolutely no hint of individuality—no knickknacks, no family pictures, not even a coffee mug—on which sat a laptop computer, currently turned off.

The office also contained the first thing we'd seen that was even slightly suspicious: a plain steel door, unmarked in any way except for the large keypad lock. As though that weren't enough, there were

also a pair of heavy padlocks keeping it shut, one a combination lock and the other requiring an actual key.

"What's through there?" I asked, nodding at the door.

"Our storeroom," Schulz said. If he was concerned by my interest, it didn't show. "We keep a sizable stock of liquor on hand."

"Could we take a look at it?"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

I stopped and turned to look at the man. To his credit, he didn't shy away from making eye contact; a lot of people are bothered by my amber eyes, but if Schulz noticed it at all he didn't show it. "You are aware that that could be construed as obstructing my investigation," I stated. "To say nothing of how suspicious it is that your storeroom should have such an abundance of locks in the first place."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wolf, but you misunderstand me. Mr. Zhang does not allow anyone but himself and me to enter the storeroom. Without his specific permission, I quite simply cannot show you around the storeroom. "

"Not even if you're standing right there?" I said skeptically. "That must be inconvenient when you need to get more alcohol out of storage in a hurry."

"We try to avoid such extremity," Schulz said calmly. "Some of our stock is highly valuable, Mr. Wolf. Mr. Zhang wishes to ensure that it remains that way."

"So let me get this straight. He relies on you to run the place. You make employment decisions. And he doesn't trust you to keep the help from drinking up the profits?"

"Trust is not the issue under consideration. Mr. Zhang does not allow access to the storage area in his absence as a matter of course. The specific individual in question is immaterial."

"I see," I said, not bothering to hide my disappointment. "And there's no way I could look around? You're sure of this?"

"Quite sure, Mr. Wolf. I'm sorry, but rules are rules."

"Well, then. If there's nothing else, we'll let you get back to work."

"What?" Kyra exclaimed. "Come on, Winter, this is obviously—"

"An unfortunate oversight," Aiko interjected in a singsong. "I'm sure Mr. Zhang simply forgot to arrange matters with Mr. Schulz."

"I'm sure that's all it is," I agreed, staring at Schulz. Now he did look away, clearly made uncomfortable by the blatant hostility in my gaze. "Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Schulz. You were most...helpful. We can show ourselves out."

"It was no trouble," he assured me. "I apologize for the misunderstanding. Good evening."

Chapter Seven

"I can't believe you let him get away with that!" Kyra exclaimed. "There's obviously something in that room!"

"I know that," I growled, slamming the door of the nightclub. "It doesn't matter."

"What kind of bullshit is that? Either he's hiding something, or his boss is, or both! In what way does that not matter?"

"It doesn't matter because I can't do anything about it," I said sourly. "I can't actually break into Zhang Qiang's club, not without a lot more reason than I have."

"He's right about this one," Aiko said quietly. "I hate to say it, but he is. We aren't actually investigating Zhang, remember. It wouldn't matter if that asshole openly admitted they were storing cocaine and dead bodies in there, we couldn't do anything about it. It isn't our business."

She snorted. "Since when has that stopped you?"

"Since I have responsibilities now," I sighed. "If I go barging around on his turf without permission, it has consequences. Best-case, Zhang immediately rejects me as arbiter, accuses you of trying to rig the system, and says this is proof of guilt. Ryan gets killed, you're probably in a lot of trouble, and my reputation is shot to hell. Worst-case, all of that happens but it somehow gets even worse. There's nothing I can do here, Kyra."

Kyra opened her mouth to continue protesting, then shut it without saying anything. A moment later, Snowflake and Vigdis both trotted into sight, Vigdis from the alley and Snowflake from under the parked van. Thanks to a small miracle (or, more likely, the late hour) it hadn't been ticketed or towed. "Is everything clear?" I asked—out loud, so that everyone would know the answer.

Vigdis whined an affirmative. Snowflake, who was in my case less language-challenged, outright said that it was. "Excellent," I said. "We'd probably better leave before our luck breaks."

"On it," Aiko said, pacing over to the alley entrance. She started the process of making a portal to the Otherside.

"Ugh," Kyra said once she was capable of speech again. "That was a very unpleasant waste of time."

"Not entirely wasted," I corrected her, leaning against the wall. We were in a small, nasty alley in the same slum-based domain I'd wanted to avoid. The alley was dark, narrow, and crowded. It stank, too, a nasty odor that combined rotting garbage with vomit and piss to make a uniquely unpleasant whole. It was unfortunate that we'd come here, but not surprising; it was much closer to where we'd

left, metaphysically speaking, than El Dorado or Faerie. That made it a much quicker portal, and considering how much of a rush we'd been in to leave I couldn't blame Aiko for choosing this destination point.

"We got nothing but the runaround," Kyra groaned. "My head hasn't hurt this bad since I was human with my last hangover. And the only thing we know is that they aren't gonna tell us shit. In what way was this not a waste of time?"

"If nothing else," I said dryly, "we know that they have something worth hiding. Aside from the locked door, did anybody notice anything noteworthy?" I wanted to compare notes as soon as possible, before things could fade.

"Well," Aiko said immediately, "for starters, there's that distraction. I don't care who you are, you don't get drunks stumbling in at just the right time to draw everyone's attention without a hell of a lot of planning on the front end."

"He recognized me," Ryan said quietly. He looked like he was feeling rather paranoid, constantly glancing up and down the alley, and under the circumstances I could hardly blame him. "I didn't see him when I was there, and they didn't get a copy of my ID. So how did he recognize me on sight?"

Which was a very good point. I'd noticed that Schulz kept looking at Ryan in a way that strongly implied he knew who the werewolf was. If what Ryan was saying was true, the manager had no reasonable way to have recognized him. I suppose that Zhang could have handed out photos or something—but, if so, *why?*

"The janitorial personnel were not speaking German," Ash contributed. She sounded, as usual, perfectly calm. "I am not sure, but I believe it was a dialect of Turkish. Combined with their menial positions, it seems likely that they are immigrants, possibly illegal."

What makes you think Schulz actually works there? Snowflake asked suddenly.

What do you mean?

Well, she said slowly, he never provided identification. Zhang didn't mention him at all, and the only other people there were a bunch of cleaners that didn't know English. These things don't exactly scream "trustworthy," do they?

That's pretty circumstantial, I pointed out.

Granted. Still worth keeping in mind, though.

"See?" I said to Kyra when it became clear that no one else had anything to contribute. "We know that the club's manager is hiding something, and Zhang probably knows about it. We know the club itself has some sort of other business going on. *And* we know that, whoever actually killed the guy, it wasn't a spur of the moment kinda thing. There was a plan, involving at least three people."

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"Okay," she admitted. "So it wasn't a *total* waste of time. I still feel like I'm about to puke up my toenails."

"You'll feel better after some sleep," I assured her. "Speaking of which, if I send you two back to Colorado, are you good to find a hotel on your own?"

"Sure. Why?"

"We have to go talk to a friend," I said, glancing at Aiko. "There's no need for you to come along when you could be getting some rest. Besides, he doesn't really like strangers. It'll be simpler if you aren't there."

"Okay," she said. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

"I'll call you in the morning. Hopefully we'll know a little more by then. Vigdis, I want you to go with them and make sure they get to a hotel all right. Then go home and take the rest of the night off."

"What about me?" Ash asked.

"I'm responsible for your safety at the moment," I told her. "Unless you object, I'd rather you came with us. You can stay in one of our guest bedrooms tonight."

The girl did not visibly react, but I got the impression that she was startled all the same. "That would be...good," she said after a moment. "Thank you."

I am not fond of Jacques. He's unpleasant to deal with, and his personal hygiene is so incredibly bad as to be unbelievable. He's also expensive, and I'm quite sure he sells information about me to his other customers. Dude's a sleazebag, basically, and I try not to have anything to do with him.

Unfortunately, he's also a decent information broker. He's got dirt on everyone, and if he doesn't know something he can probably find out. He's never given me all the info I needed about something, but he almost always comes up with enough to put me on the right track. That's valuable enough that, occasionally, I have to suck it up and pay him a visit.

That is why, some time later, I found myself standing in the hallway of a high-class apartment building in Milan pounding on a door. It took us a while to get there; first I had to open a portal to Colorado Springs for Vigdis and the werewolves, and then Aiko insisted upon walking to a more appropriate location before crossing to Milan. It's almost like she was getting tired or something.

Walking through a world which was deliberately designed to epitomize the shady neighborhood is not a very safe idea. Surprisingly, though, no one tried to accost us. Possibly they remembered how things went the last time we were there. Once we were in Italy, we took a cab to the high-rise apartment building where Jacques made his pigsty of a home.

It took almost ten minutes of pounding on his door before Jacques responded. (None of the other inhabitants reacted. I wonder sometimes if Jacques is actually the only person that lives there, and all the other apartments are camouflage.) It took him another minute or two to undo the various locks and chains and open the door, at which point we were confronted with the sight of Jacques in all his glory.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. He carried with him a stench of alcohol, spoiled food, and unwashed clothing so vile that a goat would find it nauseating. I had to fight down a gag, and my eyes were watering—a sharper sense of smell than humans possess is *not* always a benefit.

Visually, the information broker was equally distasteful. His black eyes were so bloodshot they looked red, and his black hair was matted almost to the point of being dreadlocks, and stained with a variety of substances which I had no desire to contemplate further. He was currently wearing a brown robe (what color it might have been originally was impossible to determine) and nothing else. Apparently we'd woken him up.

"Cupcake," he said sourly. I barely managed to keep myself from wincing away from his breath. "It's too fucking early to deal with you. Who's the kid?"

"This is Thorn," Aiko supplied immediately, before Ash could respond. We all used pseudonyms with Jacques, although I'm sure he knew who we were. It was an etiquette thing, which can have very different meanings with the supernatural criminal community than mainstream society.

"Shrike. Spike. And now Thorn," he said in disgust. "Your sense of humor's broken, Cupcake."

"Well, talking with you sure as hell isn't going to fix it," she countered. "Do you have the info?"

He shrugged. "I got it, but you won't like it."

"I'll cope. Come on, I'm not talking business out here."

Ash gave me a deeply doubtful look as we stepped inside Jacques's apartment. I couldn't do much but shrug in a hopefully-reassuring way, because that was pretty much how I felt about it too. Snowflake was making a quiet growling noise—being closer to the ground, she gets even more upset by Jacques's lack of cleanliness than I do. I wasn't too concerned; the way I saw it, if he was bothered by their reactions then he probably shouldn't be running his business from a hovel.

"Start with the general biography," Aiko suggested once the door was safely closed and locked. (I wasn't concerned about being locked in. We outnumbered him, and even if we hadn't I've yet to meet a door that I can't unlock, break down, or cut up if sufficiently motivated.)

"Give me a minute," Jacques said sourly, picking his way through piles of discarded food, clothing, and bottles to his couch. It squelched when he sat down. It took him three tries to find a bottle that wasn't empty, at which point he took a long drink of whatever alcoholic concoction was in it and belched. Loudly.

I hate this place so much, Snowflake said. Do you think he would even notice if I threw up?

I considered the state of the floor. *Probably not. I don't think you'd be the first.*

"All right, Cupcake. So this guy you were asking about, Stefan Morgenstern? Well, he was fae through and through. Pureblood Sidhe, from an old family. Morgenstern is actually a family name, which most Sidhe don't do. They're closer with this world than most, especially Europe."

"Which Court are they?" I interjected.

"Both. It's a big family, they've got branches fucking everywhere. Stefan was from the Midnight side of things. His mother was pretty high with Scáthach."

"Was?"

"Don't interrupt me," Jacques said. "And yes, was. She got whacked almost fifty years ago, maybe five years after his younger sister was born. I dunno who did her, but Scáthach was *pissed* We're talking, like, epic levels of annoyance." He took another drink. "Anyway, nobody knows who the father was, so that's about it. Only family was the sister, Sidhe called Anja. She moved out when she was around twenty, married a knight from the Daylight Court."

"I remember that," Aiko said. "There was a huge scandal at the time."

"Yeah, well. Ain't every day you get a twenty-year-old Sidhe from an old family marrying anybody, let alone a knight from the other Court. People talked about it. Then she didn't invite Stefan to the wedding, and *that* stirred up some shit. Word is, they haven't even spoken since she left."

I thought of Anja's coolly dispassionate attitude and total lack of outrage regarding her brother's death, and had no difficulty believing that.

"So anyway, that left Stefan pretty much alone. He's still pretty young by Sidhe standards, no close family, but he's got all the money he could want and respect for his family name. Not much of a surprise that he fell in with a bad crowd. He started hanging around with the Tylwyth Teg, which was another scandal, actually went so far as to go on hunts with Gwyn ap Nudd. Spent time with people that weren't any kind of fae, too, which is worse. He was into some shady stuff."

"Why wouldn't Scáthach kick him out on his ass at that point?" Aiko asked.

Jacques shrugged. "I dunno. General consensus is that she liked his mother, and now she's dead she doesn't want to disrespect the memory or some shit like that. Personally, I have a hard time believing Scáthach would be that sentimental."

I was with Jacques on that one. It's hard to imagine a Queen of the Midnight Court—one of the three most powerful figures in a Court composed of the nastiest, most dangerous, most predatory faeries around—as being *sentimental*. They'd have eaten her alive a long time ago if she were that much of a romantic.

Aiko made a thoughtful sound. "What happened to him after that?"

Jacques shrugged again. "Not much. Got gutted in a club in Germany a few days ago."

"You know who did it?"

"Official report isn't out yet. Grapevine says it was a werewolf. Personally, I don't believe it. Might have been a werewolf that held the knife, but it's a sucker's bet that it was one of the fae behind it. My bet is the person responsible was one of his kin, trying to keep the bastard from degrading the family name. More than he already had, I mean."

"That isn't very useful," Aiko noted.

"I said you weren't gonna like it, Cupcake. That's all I've got."

"A minute ago," I said, "you said that Stefan was involved in shady business. What kind of business, exactly, do you mean?"

"Smuggling," he said simply. "Did a little rough stuff, too. Always on the periphery, but it was there. And he was selling secrets. Bastard was one of my sources in the Courts." Jacques chuckled, a mirthless sound that hinted at the iron in him. "Guess I'll be needing a new sucker in Scáthach's court, eh?"

"I see," I said. "And that's all you know?"

"Yep. Sorry to say, Shrike, but that's it."

"All right. I'll get you your money within the next two weeks. Ten thousand dollars."

"Oh, I don't know, Shrike. This is some pretty valuable—"

I met the information broker's eyes, and jaded soul though he was, what he saw still convinced him to shut up. "Jacques," I said quietly, "I have had a long and confusing day. I am not in a pleasant mood right now. Do you really want to irritate me further by haggling when I've already offered you ten grand for a few scraps of information you already knew?"

There was a moment of silence. "Ten thousand is fair," he admitted sullenly. "But I gotta say, Shrike, your negotiation methods are fucking awful. I mean, damn."

I smiled. "Thank you."

And then we left.

"Damn, Winter, that was awesome," Aiko said once we were back out on the street, laughing. "I've never seen Jacques get his head handed to him like that."

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"Your phrasing seemed needlessly confrontational," Ash said. "Was it wise to antagonize one of your allies in that manner?"

"Jacques won't care," I said confidently. "He's a professional. He isn't about to let a potentially valuable contact go over a little annoyance." I shook my head. "Besides. He isn't an ally of mine."

"It still seems like an unwise decision. Even if he is not your ally, treating him in that way makes him more likely to act in opposition to you, does it not?"

"You're probably right," I admitted. "On the other hand, did you see the look on his face? *Priceless.*"

True dat, Snowflake said. *It's about time he got his comeuppance for making me smell that godawful apartment.*

"Your priorities seem rather irresponsible," Ash said chidingly. But she was smiling when she did.

"Irresponsibility is our collective middle name," Aiko agreed cheerily. "Speaking of, you want to go get drunk and set fire to someone's house?"

The worst part is, I'm pretty sure it was a serious offer.

"It sounds like a great way to end the evening," I sighed. "Unfortunately, Jacques's information isn't enough."

"You want to talk to another broker?" she asked doubtfully. "I know a couple guys, but I'm not sure anybody knows more than we got."

I smiled crookedly and without much humor. "Oh, I know someone who does. Come on," I said before they could ask, walking towards a nearby park. "I'll drive home."

A little more than half an hour later, we stepped in the front door of the mansion. Getting there had actually been fairly simple, just a quick jaunt through El Dorado and then another portal to an alley near Val's shop. It was a bit of a walk from there, but not terrible.

"Hey," Alexis said when we walked in. She was currently lying on a padded bench in the entryway reading a book, on the opposite side of the room from the throne—she took it to heart when I told her how many booby-traps were on that thing. "Everyone still alive?"

"Yep. Ash is staying here for the night, if that's all right."

"No problem," she yawned. "There's some dinner in the kitchen."

"You know you don't have to cook for us, Alexis."

She snorted. "News flash, Winter. I cook for *me*. You just happen to eat some of it." She shrugged. "Besides, this place is a chef's wet dream. Fresh ingredients I don't have to buy, all the best equipment, and I don't have to do any of the cleaning. Those guys on the cooking networks would kill for a setup like this."

"You know," I said after a moment, "I find it inexplicably distressing when you talk about the kitchen in a tone more normally reserved for describing societally unacceptable fetishes."

"Cooking is one thing. I refuse to be your shrink too." She yawned again and stood up. "I'm going to bed. Wake me if something exciting happens."

"Your cousin seems quite pleasant," Ash said once Alexis had left.

"Yeah, she is. We got off to a bit of a rough start, but I think we're actually doing fairly well. She hasn't tried to kill me again, at any rate, and that's gotta count for *something*, right?"

"Tried to kill you *again*?" Ash must have been feeling pretty incredulous, because it almost showed in her voice.

"Yeah, it was a bit of an awkward situation. Do you want some of that dinner? I'm starving."

"Christ, Winter," Aiko muttered. "You ate an entire schnitzel less than five hours ago."

"So?"

"So I'm not entirely comfortable with the prospect of you weighing three hundred pounds!"

"Said the person who can drink a gallon of soda in a day," I said wryly. That was the literal truth, by the way. I'd measured it once.

"That's different," she protested.

"How?"

That one stumped her for a minute. "Well, it's *me*, for one thing," she managed eventually, stalking off towards the kitchen.

Have you ever considered acting? Snowflake wondered. *I'm sure that if you asked nicely Conn could set you two up with a sitcom.*

I don't think that would end well.

Well, obviously, Snowflake said. *But it would be hilarious.*

Dinner was spaghetti with meatballs and Italian sausage—proving my cousin's claim of self-centeredness at least partially false, given that she was vegetarian—several loaves of freshly baked bread, a large and varied salad, and split pea soup. There were also cannoli and brownies, because

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Alexis knows that I'm addicted to chocolate and Aiko's capacity for sugar would make a hummingbird blush.

It was, as Ash said, a kind gesture on her part. We—me, Aiko, even Snowflake—were never very good at expressing our emotions, and so most of the time it wound up being conveyed by actions instead. I'm sure you know the sort of thing I'm talking about. Make extra dinner. Stay up to make sure everyone gets home safely. Stick a knife in somebody's back and then shoot them repeatedly.

Dysfunctional in the extreme? Absolutely. But if you're going to be psychologically broken, and evidence indicated that we were all pretty much basket cases, you might as well have company.

A short while later Aiko and I were sitting by the fire in the library, while Snowflake slept on my feet. We'd set Ash up in one of the guest bedrooms—there were about a dozen, not counting the one Alexis had taken over—and removed most of the booby traps. Not all of them, because some were just a pain in the ass to disarm, but most of the serious ones were gone, and Ash was smart enough to avoid the rest.

"Okay," she said. "Have you been holding out on me, Winter? 'Cause I don't think you know a better broker than Jacques."

"Well," I said slowly, "there's a funny thing about that. See, Jacques has good information. But he's looking in from the outside, which limits what he can know. If we ask someone who's actually a part of the situation, they won't be relying on hearsay."

"Please tell me you aren't talking about who I think you're talking about."

"Depends. Are you thinking of Scáthach?"

Aiko closed her eyes for a moment. It looked like she was counting to ten, or possibly praying that I would someday learn. "Yeah," she said finally. "That's who I was thinking of. Fucking hell, Winter, are you not going to be satisfied until you get yourself killed?"

"I'm not suicidal, Aiko."

"Could have fooled me. You can't just keep playing with fire and not get burned sooner or later. Sidhe politics can eat you alive before you even know what's happening."

"I know," I sighed. "But I owe Kyra, and I don't have enough time to find things out the safe way. If Morgenstern was in Scáthach's court there's not a chance she doesn't know what he was up to, in detail." I shrugged. "Besides, she owes me for returning her spear. Hopefully she'll be willing to cut me a deal."

"I guess," she said doubtfully. "It's just...this is scary stuff, Winter. And you've already got Loki breathing down your neck. I'm just worried about you."

"I am too," I said honestly. "But I'm glad that you care."

"Okay," she said after a moment. "Things are getting mushy in here. Are you planning to summon her?"

"Yeah. Tonight."

The kitsune nodded, clearly not surprised. "What ritual are you using?"

"Three Moons."

"Chancy."

"Cheap," I countered. "I have no desire to sell my soul for Ryan's sake. And I can do it tonight."

"True enough," she muttered. "Are you doing it now?"

"Right now."

"All right. You know what you're doing." She stood up and kissed me. "Good luck. Don't let her screw you over. Ryan isn't worth it." She walked out without another word.

This better not be a mistake, Snowflake said, standing and following Aiko out of the room. I don't know what I'd do without you.

Seriously, you two. Give it a rest, why don't you? You keep talking like this, we'll all develop a sense of empathy and compassion.

Truly a fate worse than death, she laughed. The horror!

I know, right? I said, also smiling.

That smile faded as I stood up. All joking aside, this really was a risky thing to do. The Sidhe are at their most dangerous when they're making bargains and spinning plots, and Scáthach was one of their Queens.

But everything I'd said to Aiko was still true. And Ryan's wellbeing wasn't the only thing riding on this. I hadn't forgotten Dolph talking about the importance this situation had to Conn's dealings with the Twilight Court, and I was sure Bryan hadn't gotten involved for no reason either. When the stakes are like that, you don't solve the problem without taking some risks.

So I took a deep breath and went out to the garden.

Chapter Eight

I do not like rituals.

When a mage talks about rituals, they usually mean one of two things. The first is ritual magic—long, drawn-out spells involving large amounts of power and lots of props. I don't do that sort of magic very often, but it's more because I don't normally have the time than because I have a personal objection to it. Ritual magic is basically just another kind of magic, and whether you do any given spell as a ritual or the fast-and-dirty style I preferred had more to do with personal preference and your talent with that type of magic than anything.

The other thing they might be talking about are actual rituals. They tend to be more specific and demanding than spells, less like a recipe and more like chemical synthesis. Instead of "Arrange representations of the four elements and meditate on what they mean," you get things like "Light a fire using rowan wood that hasn't been cut by metal, then sing Silent Night in Tahitian".

The thing people tend not to realize at first is that rituals aren't magic. They might involve magic, they might require magic, they might produce effects which resemble magic. But they aren't magic.

The simplest way to think about it is by analogy. Let's say that there's a certain building in the downtown area of a certain city. If you go there, and you go to the thirteenth floor, you will find a serious person wearing a serious suit, black or possibly dark blue. If you talk to this person, and you know the right words to say, and you show this person the right objects, and you make the right marks on a piece of paper, then the person will give you money. How much money is difficult to predict, but one thing you know for certain. Within a given amount of time, you will have to return this money, with a certain amount extra, to the man in the suit. If you don't then things will happen which...may be very bad for you.

What I'm getting at is that the process of applying for a loan is every bit as arcane and arbitrary as any summoning. It doesn't make any more sense. If you didn't know anything about it then it would seem just as obtuse, and you'd have pretty much no chance of figuring out the rules from the outside. If you were to see it with no experience of what the game means, then you might well describe it as magic.

Rituals are pretty much the same thing. They aren't magic, however much they might seem like it. They're a system of rules for communicating. The only difference is that the rules of the game are much, much different. They're older, for one thing, and by and large they weren't made by humans. Far from it, in fact. As a result, most of the time the rules aren't very pleasant for the mortal party.

Most rituals involve sacrifice in one way or another. Sing the right prayer and throw a diamond in the fire, and a salamander will come to guard your home for a day and a night. Drain the blood of a lamb into a silver bowl (a large one, presumably) and offer it up to Black Annis, and a hag will come to

guide you home, however far you've strayed. If you hang nine men from an ash tree in the name of the Hanged God, then Allfather Odin will come and answer any question you can think to ask.

The rewards can be considerable. But there's always a price.

As if that weren't discouragement enough, rituals also tend to have extremely specific requirements. It has to be an ash tree, for example; no other gallows will do. Only men are acceptable sacrifices; women and children need not apply. They have to know exactly what's happening, too, and go gladly to the tree. Mess up any one of the requirements, even slightly, and the best you can hope for is failure. If the ritual you're performing happens to involve more maleficent creatures, your friends might never find enough of the body to identify you.

All of that explains part of why I don't like rituals. But the biggest factor is actually something else entirely. When you perform a ritual, what you're basically doing is asking someone else to come and bail you out—admitting, essentially, that you can't solve your problem yourself. Leaving aside the implications for your pride, there's one thing that's pretty much constant.

Help doesn't come free.

There's always a price, *always*. Just what form the payment will take can be difficult to tell—even if you think you know, there's always something else hidden in the fine print—but it's usually just a little more than you can afford. The rule of thumb with rituals was that what you get is never quite what you wanted, and what you wanted is never quite worth what you pay.

As rituals went, the Rite of Three Moons was relatively pleasant. It was more annoying than dangerous to perform, and the dangers of screwing it up were mild. Of course, like anything else, there were drawbacks to it.

The tradeoff was that it wasn't a *summoning*, exactly. It was more of an invitation. By performing the ritual I was sending an invitation to a Faerie Queen. *Any* Faerie Queen—Maiden, Mother, and Crone of each Court, and I had no influence over which one answered. That was why Aiko had called it chancy. All of the Queens would know *something*, because you don't get to be that powerful without knowing something about pretty much everything. But Scáthach was the only one I could assume had access to details about this specifically. If I happened to find myself talking with one of the other Queens this wouldn't be nearly as productive.

There was a price, of course. There's always a price. The price for them to show up was minimal. The price for answers could be...almost anything.

I do not like rituals.

Our mansion is a strange place, unearthly in every sense of the word. Even ordinary spatial definitions are inconstant—several rooms would have to occupy the same space to fit, and there's one

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section of wall that can belong to three different rooms depending on which door you enter through. It's got a ton of benefits and I'm glad to have it, but it's still awfully weird, and more recently I've come to think of the garden as being the heart of that weirdness.

It started off normally enough, all things considered. It was a fairly small room by the standards of the mansion, maybe three hundred square feet and floored with dirt. Simple flagstone paths wound throughout, and there were a handful of marble planters. It had been empty, to begin with, excepting a single planter of goji and lingonberry.

These days it was bigger. A lot bigger. About a thousand times the size it started out as, in fact. I'm not sure how it grew. Somehow there's just always room for another plant.

Speaking of plants, there were also a lot of those in there now. Like, a *lot*. It took quite a bit of work to assemble them. Some of them are illegal to own—poisonous ones, mostly, but there are also a few that are listed as illegal drugs, and a handful of endangered species. More are just expensive. There are a couple of things in there that aren't even native to Earth, mostly from Faerie.

I have no idea how they all manage to grow. I mean, I'm not an expert on plants, but I'm pretty sure that orchids, cacti, and alpine wildflowers prefer slightly different environments. They all grow in my garden. The plants don't seem to need water or sunlight, either, and they all grow faster and healthier than natural. There are no seasons in my little slice of the Otherside, and at any given time you can find spring growth, flowers, and fruits all on the same plant.

Convenient, undeniably, but you can't tell me that isn't a little creepy.

Currently, I was standing in a secluded corner of the garden, with a screen of cypress and hawthorn cutting it off from the rest of the area. There was a circular patch of grass maybe thirty feet across, surrounded by a low stone wall. The grass was mostly foxtail and reed grass—not, in other words, what you might think of as typical grasses. It didn't resemble a lawn, at any rate; the stalks came up to my thighs, and would have rustled nicely if there'd been any breeze at all.

In the center of the circle was another circle of cleared dirt seven or eight feet across. There was a different plant at each corner of an imaginary triangle, on the border between dirt and grass—honeysuckle, elderberry, and nightshade. All three of the plants were decent-sized bushes, and carefully maintained. This wasn't an expensive ritual, as such things were measured, but you needed all three of those plants in the right places for it to work. That took time to arrange, and one of my favorite precepts is that when you need something, you're probably going to need it *right now*. Thus, while I'd never had any real desire to perform this ritual, I'd cleared some space and planted the seeds the day after I learned about it.

Preparation is key to the success of any endeavor. It doesn't matter who you are or what you're doing, that's pretty much guaranteed.

I was currently sitting at the center of the triangle, ordering my thoughts. There was no actual magic involved, but it still required serious concentration. I had to get all the words and actions right,

the first try—it had been made very clear that trying over after a screw-up without waiting at least a day and a night was a Bad Idea, and that was time I didn't have. Once that was done I had to successfully negotiate with a Faerie Queen and get the information I needed, which was likely to be rather harder than that made it sound.

Once I thought my head was in the right place, I stood up and picked up the sack which contained the tools I would need. There weren't many, and under ordinary circumstances I probably would have just carried them in the pockets of my cloak.

Unfortunately, that wasn't currently possible, because one of the requirements of the ritual was that it had to be done naked. I don't know why, honestly, but the recipe was quite clear and straightforward on the point. No clothes, no weapons, not even any jewelry was allowed. Mine was currently piled at the base of the trees.

At least I didn't have to do it outdoors. I mean, I'm not easily bothered by cold, but come on. Standing around naked? In *December*? Not worth it.

I started by pacing counterclockwise along the outer edge of the circle of dirt, dropping river stones at each step. The rocks were about the size of my fist and smoothed by years of flowing water. Every third stone had a simple starburst pattern carved into it—I'd used a bronze chisel, which I'd had to custom order.

Once the circle was established, I returned to the center of the circle and tossed the empty sack outside, palming the last item I would need. I took a deep breath and then stepped towards the honeysuckle.

"Crescent moon," I said clearly, feeling a little ridiculous. "Creation. Growth. By your shadows am I sheltered, by your radiance am I enlivened." I took a single berry from the honeysuckle and ate it, chewing it thoroughly. It tasted sweet. Once I'd swallowed the berry, I spat on the plant. "As your gifts to me, so mine to you. Come to me, crescent moon. Lend me your radiance, lend me your shadow."

Two steps clockwise along the circle took me to the elderberry. "Full moon," I said. My voice sounded richer than it should have, and had strange harmonics. "Preservation. Sustenance. By your gloom am I hidden, by your luminance am I enlightened." I took an elderberry and ate it, wincing at the taste. I haven't tried elderberry wine—I'm not big on alcohol in general—but the raw berries were not very good, sharp and a little bitter. Then, somewhat uncomfortably, I urinated on the bush. "As your gifts to me, so mine to you. Come to me, full moon. Lend me your luminance, lend me your gloom."

Two more steps and I was standing before the nightshade. "New moon," I said, and almost jumped at the sound of my own voice. It was deeper than it should have been, echoing for no apparent reason, with wind and wolves howling beneath the surface of the sound. I was almost shouting now, without meaning to. "Death. Resurrection. By your darkness am I ended, by your light am I reborn." I reached out and plucked a single black berry from the plant. I looked at it and hesitated for a moment. Then I popped it into my mouth and, before I could think about what I was doing, bit down on it. The

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berry tasted vile, bitter with the alkaloids that gave it its famous toxicity. I chewed and swallowed anyway. There was little point in stopping now.

The next part had to be done without the use of iron, which was slightly inconvenient. Most people used a silver knife, but—for obvious reasons—that wouldn't work for me. I had a piece of obsidian instead, smooth and black and sharper than any razor.

I held my left hand over the nightshade and slashed my wrist open with it. The ritual required a fair amount of blood—I didn't know exactly how much, but a few drops drawn with a pin wouldn't cut it. I let enough run down my fingers to coat a few leaves, then licked the blood off my hand, letting the taste mingle with that of the berry (it didn't improve it much). It was a clean, shallow cut that wasn't made with silver, and it took me only a few seconds to close it.

"As your gifts to me," I whispered, "so mine to you. Come to me, new moon. Lend me your light, lend me your darkness."

I stepped back to the center of the circle. "Three moons, hear my voice. One lost in the fog seeks your guidance. Hear my call. One troubled by ignorance seeks your wisdom. Hear my plea. One diminished by weakness seeks your aid."

Having concluded the chant, I knelt on the ground and closed my eyes. At this point, my part was done. Within fifteen minutes or so, I would know whether it would receive a response.

Less than ten seconds later, I heard laughter. It was high and sweet and sharp, and I knew instantly that it had been made by nothing human.

I stood up, opening my eyes, and turned to face the source of the sound, a Sidhe woman standing over the honeysuckle.

She was tall, as most of the Sidhe tend to be, a few inches taller than me. Her hair was raven's-wing black, with highlights of blue and green, and cut short to show the tips of her delicately pointed ears. Her eyes were a startling, vivid green, the color of emeralds and snakes, with slit pupils. She was wearing a plain black tank top and black jeans, and she was barefoot.

I bowed my head. "Lady," I said, packing as much respect into it as I knew how. The honeysuckle represented the Maiden, meaning that this was either Scáthach or her Daylight counterpart, Aoife. I was guessing the former, based on the color scheme, but it was impossible to be sure. I'd seen Scáthach before, granted, but trying to compare this to that was impossible. There was just too much difference between the two settings.

Besides, when I'd seen her last, she'd been riding at the head of the Hunt, cloaked in storm and with all the terror and beauty of Midnight drawn about her. Her physical features had hardly even registered through that.

"I always enjoy this ritual," she murmured. "Particularly coming from a werewolf. Your kind have such enviable...physique." She looked me up and down, with no evidence of embarrassment.

"And with whom do I have the honor of speaking?" I asked, acting as though she hadn't spoken.

"You are addressing Scáthach, Lady of the Isle of Shadows, Queen of the Unseelie Court," she said, her voice a strange blending of imperious and mischievous. "What is it that you seek?"

Well, damn. It really *was* Scáthach. Guess I got lucky for once. "Knowledge," I said. It was one of three acceptable replies, as far as the Rite went. The ritual itself was already complete, but the fae are big on tradition and proper form, and I didn't figure following it would lose me any points.

"Answers to questions three, is that your desire?"

"It is," I said, dreading what might come next.

"Tradition dictates," she said softly, "that you do a service for me in return."

I bowed my head. "It does," I agreed. "What bargain do you wish to strike?" One of the benefits of this particular ritual was that I got to refuse the deal if I didn't like the price she demanded. It wasn't a perfect guarantee, of course. Bargains with the high fae tend to resemble fishhooks; they go down easy and you never see the barb. But it was a hell of a lot better than nothing.

"Hmm," she purred. "I wouldn't want to make it anything too arduous. Perhaps we could find something that might be pleasant to us both." She looked me over again, more slowly this time. "Even by werewolf standards," she murmured, "you're unusually robust."

My lips were tingling, and I could feel that my heart was racing. I'm pretty sure those were the aftereffects of the nightshade, though, because all I really felt at the moment was annoyed. Bad enough when somebody tries to swindle you; when they're that *obvious* about it, it's just insulting. "Before you continue this line of thought any further, I feel I should let you know that I'm currently in a committed romantic relationship which I'm very happy with."

"So?" Scáthach said, clearly amused. "Invite the kitsune, if you so desire. I'm sure she would find it a pleasurable experience."

I debated answering politely and keeping up the courteous, traditional forms for maybe a second. Then I sighed. "Look, Scáthach," I said. "It's been a long day, so I'm going to be blunt. Number one, my relationship with Aiko is off-limits. I love her more than anything you can offer me. Number two, I am not a horny teenager. You will not get me to agree to an open-ended bargain by throwing around seductive phrases which don't actually mean anything. Number three, I wasn't born yesterday. You are not convincing me that you've gotten and kept as much power as you have without having higher ambitions than screwing random werewolves. Particularly not when I know for a fact you're surrounded by accessible men much more attractive than I am."

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The Lady of Shadows looked at me for a long moment, her eyes alien and unreadable, and I was afraid that I'd cost myself a bargain—or worse, made an enemy of her. Then, in a voice which was much more dispassionate than she'd used previously, she said, "Very well, Sir Winter. As you wish. My offer was genuine, you know. You could have paid your price with a single evening of pleasure, and I would have made it sweet. Instead—" Scáthach tapped one long green fingernail against her lips, thinking. "Kill a man in my name," she said abruptly.

"Who?" Not the most heroic response, perhaps, but a very practical one. A single murder was much less than some prices, and I thought it highly unlikely that he'd pissed off Scáthach without knowing what he was setting himself up for.

She shrugged fluidly, a motion that suggested that her spine was about as flexible as rope. "Whomever you please," she said nonchalantly. "You have, oh, a season. That is my request, Sir Winter. What say you?"

"Deal," I said instantly, before she could renegotiate. Again, not particularly heroic, but if I was being honest the chance that I would go three full months without needing to kill someone anyway was pretty miniscule.

"Bargain struck," she said with a vulpine smile. "Ask, then, and I will answer."

"Before asking any question," I said carefully, "I would like to state that your price was unusually low for this sort of exchange."

Her grin widened. "I owed you for collecting my spear," she murmured. "That debt is balanced now. After tonight, we are on even footing. Now ask, werewolf, before I lose interest."

Nothing quite like a time limit. "Statement," I said. There are reasons that every fairy tale ever emphasizes the importance of careful phrasing in situations like this one. "A male Sidhe who referred to himself as Stefan Morgenstern was until recently a member of your Court."

Scáthach said nothing, smiled wider.

"Statement," I continued. "Stefan is now dead, stabbed in the torso and left to die in a German club. Statement: this club is owned by Zhang Qiang, a mage of the Zhang clan. Statement: this club is highly suspicious. Statement: at least one person did not want me to investigate the club, and was willing to make a significant expenditure to prevent that." I licked my lips nervously, thinking. They were still numb.

I couldn't just ask obvious questions, like "Who killed Stefan?" Scáthach might well know, and she was bound to answer truly, but that wouldn't stop her from deceiving me. She could cloak her answer in riddles and metaphor until it was worse than useless, serving only to confuse me further. You always had to come at things sideways with the fae, move so far away from your goal that you snuck up on it from behind.

"Question," I said.

"Finally," Scáthach said dryly, rolling her eyes.

I ignored her. "Why does Zhang Qiang go to such lengths to keep people, and me in particular, from seeing the storage room of his club?"

"Because the nightclub's official functions provide only a small fraction of its worth," the goddess said calmly. "It is also a hub for the storage and transfer of illegally smuggled goods between your world and the Otherside."

I thought for a moment. "Statement," I said slowly. "Stefan was involved in smuggling." The idea that a fae involved with smuggling would be a regular customer at a nightclub that was actually a front for a smuggling den by coincidence was beyond laughable. "Statement: his illicit activities were well known, and made him disreputable. Statement: in spite of this, you allowed him to remain in your Court. Question: Why?"

"Stefan thought himself a suave, cunning rogue. However, in reality he was quite clumsy. By allowing him to steal a few, relatively valueless secrets I gained for myself a pawn within his smuggling ring."

I nodded, trying to fit the pieces together in my head. Nothing I'd learned was surprising, exactly, but it was invaluable confirmation of what had up to then only been suspicions.

"What," I said slowly, "was the last object or secret which Stefan was contracted to smuggle before he died?"

Scáthach smiled slowly. "Clever," she murmured. "This particular client was obsessed with security to a unusual extent, Sir Wolf, even for members of her profession. Stefan was sent with only half of the secret, the cipher that would be used to decrypt the message which was sent with another courier. That message contained a very powerful secret indeed, the identity of a traitor within my Court."

That revelation shocked me enough to make me blink. Predictably, when I opened my eyes Scáthach was gone.

Her voice remained, though, drifting through the grass like the whisper of a breeze. "Deliver the message," it said, "and you will have earned my favor."

"Well," I said. "Shit."

In addition to all the other factors in play, this was looking like a dominance struggle between Faerie Queens.

Things had just become a great deal more risky.

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When I walked into the bedroom, Aiko was lying on the bed with Snowflake sprawled across her knees. "How'd it go?" she asked, not opening her eyes.

"Reasonably well," I said, dropping onto the bed with a groan. It had been a very long day. "I got Scáthach."

The kitsune tensed, almost imperceptibly. "What was her price?" she asked, with the peculiarly hesitant tone of someone who isn't sure they want their question answered.

"Kill someone for her. She doesn't care who."

Aiko was silent for several moments. "Did you agree?" she asked quietly.

I sighed. "Yes," I admitted. "I...yes."

There was a long, ominous pause. "That worries me."

"You think I should have said no?"

"I don't know. I mean, we really need that info. And there are worse prices she could have asked for. It's just...I'm not sure how to feel about you killing people for her." She sighed. "I don't know."

"I don't either," I said. "I mean, I told myself I was probably going to be killing someone within a season anyway. And that's true. But then I have to ask, is that really a good thing? I didn't used to kill people." It was my turn for a long, uncomfortable pause. "Am I turning into a monster, Aiko?"

"I'm a horrible person to use as a touchstone for morality," she said, laughing.

"Bullshit," I said firmly. "You're a good person. You have a twisted sense of humor and no sense of proportion, but you aren't evil."

"Do you remember that vampire?" she said after a moment. "The one Katrin put up to talking crap about you?"

"Sure."

"You scared me a little when you were talking to him. With how cold you were." She was quiet for a few seconds. "You're not a monster, Winter," she said at last. "But honestly? I'm a little worried about what this job is doing to you."

"So am I," I said. "Every time I sit on that damned chair. The other day, I was pretty much telling that vampire I was going to kill him, and I mostly just felt bored. I know I should care more—but how can I do that job and care about the people I'm supposed to be judging?" I sighed. "I wish I could get out of it. But I don't see how I can."

"We could always elope," she said, only half-joking. "I have a cousin who's a priest in Cuba...."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, he's a little weird. He ran away from home to join the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, and he's been doing it since."

"In *Cuba*?"

"You know how well I get on with my family?" she said dryly. "Well, compared to him I'm the prodigal daughter. He hasn't been within a hundred miles of Japan for five hundred years."

"It's tempting," I said honestly. "But I couldn't stand to live in the tropics." A couple seconds later I continued, more seriously. "Katrin and Kikuchi would start the turf war back up if I left," I said quietly. "There are half a million people in this city, and—whether they know it or not—they're depending on me to keep things stable. I hate being jarl, but I can't just ignore that."

"I know. You always were the responsible one. It's annoying sometimes, but also strangely endearing." She grinned. "Okay, so now that we've gotten through the nauseatingly sentimental conversation, is it time for the irresponsibly-sleep-disruptive sexual hijinks?"

"Well," I said, also grinning, "when you phrase it like that, how can I say no?"

"Cool." She leaned down and prodded Snowflake, who, remarkably, had slept through the entire conversation. "Move, dog."

She stood up and stretched. *Again?* she said grumpily, padding a few feet away. *Don't you people ever get bored of this?*

Evidently not. Although we have been considering—

Gah!, she interrupted. *Do not tell me. It is disturbing enough that I sleep on that bed without knowing the details.* She jumped down to the floor. *I'm going to go get a drink of water,* she said. *A very, very long drink.*

I slept fitfully, and woke up later than was my norm feeling almost as tired as when I went to sleep. For once Aiko had gotten up before me, and taken Snowflake with her. I got dressed, yawning, and then wandered downstairs to find them.

I found them in the kitchen, along with Ash. Alexis was making breakfast, which involved chive and mushroom omelets, hash browns, three kinds of toast, grilled tomatoes, bacon, sausages, waffles, and freshly squeezed orange juice. Alexis *really* enjoys cooking, for whatever reason, and she has a tendency to go a little overboard. I don't complain, because I *really* enjoy eating. Having a ton of food on hand also meant I could regularly leave some out for the tomte, which was one of the traditional ways of buying your way into their good graces. I'd never actually seen him—they're apparently very shy, and seldom interact with humans directly—but given that he's the one who does all the housework and maintenance at no price, I figured it would be wise not to piss him off.

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Good morning, Snowflake said, not looking away from the pan of sausages. *Did you sleep well?*

No. Did you?

I didn't, she said, sounding distracted. *Bad dreams*. She hesitated.

Huh. That didn't happen to her very often—like, almost never. I wasn't sure if that was significant or not, but I usually find that, when in doubt, it's safest to assume conspiracy.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do about it. Even if it wasn't random, there were too many possible causes, and none of them were things I could do about it. So, for now, I filed it under "Stuff to look into later" and moved on.

"That smells delicious," I said to Alexis.

"Good morning. It should be done in a few minutes." My cousin didn't so much as glance in my direction, the concluding stages of food preparation being more pressing.

"Thank you. I'll be right back; I need to go make a few calls." Needless to say, there are no cell towers on the Otherside.

Outside, it was almost nine in the morning and still fairly chilly, at least by human standards. It didn't bother me, obviously, but I still walked across the street to stand in the sun. This was partly camouflage, and partly because, cold or not, the sunlight felt nice.

The first person I called was Kyi Greyfell, who answered on the first ring. "*Heill, herra*," she said. It was the traditional Norse greeting, which happened to bear an unfortunate but coincidental resemblance to the nontraditional German one.

I would like to reiterate that I don't arrange these things deliberately.

"Good morning, Kyi. How did you know it was me?"

She sounded amused. "Only person knows number, is you."

"Ah. Has anything happened?"

"No, jarl. The Alpha did not yesterday his house leave. Only one other comes, and is also werewolf."

So the only person visiting Edward was another werewolf—one of his pack, most likely. "Can you describe this werewolf?" I asked.

"*Já*. Is female, brown hair, tan skin. Smells like spices." That description left something to be desired on the precision front, but I was guessing it was Anna. She matched perfectly, and female werewolves weren't common enough that it was likely another member of Edward's pack looked and smelled the same as she did.

"And she was alone."

"Já."

"Excellent work, Kyi, thank you. Keep watching and call me if anything changes." I hung up, then dialed another number.

Sveinn answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Good morning."

Again, Sveinn went from suspicious to drill sergeant as soon as he heard my voice. "Good morning, jarl. There are messages for you."

I sighed. "What are they?"

He cleared his throat. "Katrin Fleischer lodges a formal complaint regarding your treatment of her vampire, and accuses you of overstepping your rights under the treaty."

"I expected as much," I said. I was impressed by how quickly she'd moved on it, but it was hardly a surprise. Since I'd been careful *not* to overstep, it also wasn't much of a problem—just tedious. "She'll have to wait. I have more pressing things to deal with right now."

Sveinn did not comment on that. "Next," he said. "Michael Adams requests that you take more proactive measures regarding the presence of vampires and other menaces in the city."

"Again?" I said in disbelief. "Does the man have no life whatsoever?" This was the fourth time in two weeks that Mike had lodged that particular request, even after I'd explained at length that there was very little I could do.

I respect their dedication to what is, in all fairness, an honorable cause. But sometimes I wonder whether the Inquisition have two functioning brain cells between them.

"Do you want me to reply to him?"

"Argh. No, not right now. I'll call him and Katie later and explain—*again*—why what they want isn't going to happen."

"Very well." Sveinn's voice gave no hint as to whether he approved or not. "Next, a message from Zhang Qiang. He thanks you for your assistance and politely requests a meeting in order to discuss your findings and judgment."

I'd been afraid of that. The fae might be willing to let me take my time—they're immortal, and renowned for their patience. The high fae thought nothing of waiting years or even decades for a plan to bear fruit. Zhang, on the other hand, wanted this issue resolved quickly before it could scare away any more customers than it already had.

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"Call him back," I said. "Tell him that I will host a meeting, at noon today. Did Anja Morgenstern, Gwyn ap Nudd, and Carraig all send contact information?"

"Yes."

"Good. Call them too, tell them the same thing." I could tell Edward, and Zhang would presumably contact the Watchers.

"I will do so."

"Good. Are there any other messages?"

"No, jarl."

"Even better. I'll see you at noon." I hung up on him and started to dial Edward's number.

Before I could finish, I heard an odd *thump*. Being paranoid, I instantly assumed it was related to me and started looking for the source. I noticed two things right away.

First, the area—never densely populated, particularly at this time of day—was entirely empty. There was not another person in sight.

Second, the enormous half-troll was less than twenty feet away and approaching quickly. He was armed, this time, carrying an oversized wooden club. The wounds Vigdis had inflicted during our last encounter with the thing weren't visible, not even as scars.

I immediately dropped my phone, cursing. I'd been too casual, assuming I was safe for a few minutes, when the people chasing me were clearly taking less and less time to home in on my location. I wasn't carrying any serious weapons, and I wasn't wearing anything more protective than simple clothing. Hell, I hadn't even grabbed my cloak, which—with the tricks and toys it contained—would at least have given me some options.

I thought about trying to talk to him, then dismissed the idea. He'd made it quite clear that he wasn't interested in talking. My next impulse was to run for the door, which was smarter but, sadly, impossible. I'd wandered more than fifteen feet, and I'd have to turn my back on him to go for it. He might not be fast enough to catch me—I'd outrun him once before, after all—but I'd need a good ten seconds of concentration to disarm the wards and go in. The chances that he couldn't catch me in that time—or, hell, just toss that club hard enough to splatter my brains all over the wall—were not worth considering.

I stepped out into the middle of the road instead, giving myself room to maneuver, and called Tyrfig. The half-troll grinned, rolled its shoulders, and picked up the pace slightly. When it was around seven feet away, it stepped into a simple overhead strike with the club.

I dodged out of the way, with surprising ease. The half-troll wasn't as quick as I was, which made him pretty damn slow in the greater scheme of things. The head of the club hit the street instead,

sending chips flying, and left a dent half an inch thick. Cracks spread through the asphalt for almost a foot in all directions.

Note to self: the half-troll is also not interested in taking you alive. That hit would have turned my brains to jelly, and even werewolves die from that.

I backed away, thinking furiously. The thing was strong—much stronger than me—and extremely tough. He had shrugged off being stabbed, bitten, and clawed without wincing, which was more than I could say. On top of that, with that club he had a significant advantage in reach. All of that taken together meant that, if I wanted to win this fight, I had to get inside of his reach without being hit, avoid letting him touch me, and inflict an instantly lethal wound on something which was remarkably resistant to lethal wounds.

That did not seem particularly likely.

The only solution, then, was to change the rules of the game.

He lunged, bringing that club around in a horizontal strike that might have literally knocked my head off my shoulders like a baseball. As I didn't want to find out, I ducked under it—and immediately found myself about a foot away from his free hand. The half-troll wasn't stupid, and he'd been ready to grab me if I dodged the swing.

Off-balance as I was, the only way I could avoid the grab was by diving aside. I did so, simultaneously throwing a gust of wind at his back. I had my foci, fortunately; I'm really not good enough to use magic in a fight without them.

That gust was strong enough to toss a grown man from his feet, especially if he wasn't expecting it. The half-troll, having much more mass than a grown man, wasn't knocked down. He did stagger forward, though, giving me time to get back to my feet.

This wasn't working. I was outclassed and under-equipped for a physical confrontation with a half-troll, clearly, and trying to beat it with magic alone was out of the question. I'm just not that good at combat magic; that's why I use things like stored spells and foci in the first place—

Oh. *That* might work.

I stared past the half-troll as he started to turn, calculating distances and angles in my head. As a result, I had an excellent view when Alexis opened the front door and stuck her head out. "Hey, Winter," she called, looking around. "Breakfast's—" She broke off, staring at the half-troll. "What's going on?"

"Bad guy," I shouted, advancing. "Blast him."

My cousin nodded and stepped out onto the sidewalk. She held up her hands and I caught the smell of human magic, barely touched with the scent of ice and snow. She was channeling the power through her own focus, a copper ring set with amber. The magic built, twisted, surged.

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And then she sent a bolt of lightning into the half-troll's back.

In my experience, most people tend to underestimate how potent lightning is as a weapon. An average lightning strike delivers several hundred thousand volts—more than five times as much as a typical industrial accident, and way more than enough to be lethal. The great thing about lightning as a weapon, though, is that it has more than one thing going for it. In addition to the electricity itself, the *heat* of a lightning bolt is incredible—like, five times as hot as *the surface of the sun*. That's...pretty unbelievably hot, really.

Even if you dodge the lightning itself, it can still hurt you in all kinds of ways. Ground current can be plenty strong enough to kill a person, and it can travel a long way. The concussion of the thunder can throw shrapnel right through you, if it doesn't just inflict enough blunt force to cause internal bleeding and fractures.

That's a pretty long list of dangers, and it's very hard to counter all of them at once. It can be done, at least by some people, but pretty much only by dropping everything, getting out of the direct path of the electricity, and putting everything you've got into defense—and it's pretty hard to hurt someone while you're doing that.

As weapons go, lightning is top-notch. *Much* more deadly than the blasts of wind that were my main magical arsenal.

Alexis couldn't match a real lightning bolt, not without a lot more time to work on it than she'd had. She wasn't really generating the electricity—she wasn't anywhere near strong enough for that, at least not yet—more altering the positions of charges already present in the air. It was a spark of static electricity, basically, and while it wasn't anywhere near genuine lightning, it still packed a solid punch.

The half-troll convulsed, muscles jerking uncontrollably. He fell to one knee and stayed there for a second or two. I couldn't blame him; two or three hits like that would take the fight out of most anyone.

Unfortunately, Alexis didn't look like she was up to a repeat performance. She staggered to the side and had to lean against the wall to stay standing. She'd just moved a whole lot of magic fast—it was probably the single biggest punch I'd ever seen her throw, in fact—and that really takes it out of you. It would probably be several seconds before she could produce so much as a spark, and she wasn't carrying a weapon.

If that half-troll got within reach of her, Alexis would die. She couldn't go back into the building, either; the wards didn't keep things from leaving, but they wouldn't let her back in. She'd learned enough to lower them, but it would take her even longer than me.

He stood up, growling incoherently, and turned towards her. Clearly, that lightning bolt had revised his opinion of who the most urgent threat was here. It had rattled his cage, if nothing else, which was more than anything I'd thrown at him had managed.

Fortunately, while he shook it off, I'd had time to get into position. When he turned around he found me standing between him and Alexis. That meant I was also standing between him and the house.

He bellowed, truly angry for the first time, and charged me. I backpedaled, fast. The half-troll wasn't moving terribly quickly—a human could have run faster—but he had so much *mass* that there was still an enormous amount of momentum involved, and I would definitely fare worse in a collision.

Of course, the nice thing about momentum is that it's impartial. Once you introduce that energy, that motion, it doesn't care who uses it.

As I backpedaled I brought up another breeze, this time blowing straight into the half-troll's face to slow him down. It didn't, of course. He just leaned into it a little and kept coming. That was fine.

The other part was a little trickier, because I couldn't see what I was doing. I didn't need to be precise, though, which made it doable.

I started spreading ice on the pavement behind myself.

It was actually easier than most of the times I'd done it. It was cold out, meaning I didn't have to fight nature to get it to freeze. There was a bit of snow left in the shade, too, giving me water to work with. After a second or so Alexis, who was also part-jotun, started pitching in too. This wasn't magic—not quite, not *exactly*. It didn't draw on the same sources of power, and she could do it regardless of whether she was temporarily exhausted or not.

I managed to keep my footing as I backed across the ice, but I had to be careful, and that slowed me down. By the time I was at the edge of the sidewalk, the half-troll had reached the edge of the ice and was just about in range of me.

Perfect.

He wasn't stupid, but he was extremely focused on turning me into a red splatter on the pavement. He didn't see the ice until it was too late.

As I'd noted, he had a whole lot of momentum behind him. He was preternaturally strong, granted, but he was also dependent upon that strength. Once you get half a ton of muscle moving at a charge, you *need* incredible strength just to keep it under control.

I'd dealt with unnaturally strong things before. One of the things I'd learned in the process is that muscle doesn't do you much good without something to push against.

When he hit the ice, the friction he'd been relying upon to control his own momentum was gone, suddenly and unexpectedly. When, at the exact same moment, I dropped the resistance of the headwind and instead threw a gale-force blast at his back, his controlled and deadly charge turned into something a bit like a runaway truck. It was still incredibly dangerous if you happened to be in front of it—but now the driver had no more control than the guy standing in the way, and was in almost as much danger.

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The half-troll had already started another swing, which went far wide when he started slip-sliding around, and only threw him further off balance. I seized his arm as it flew past me, and then I fell down.

I wasn't as strong as he was. But falling down changed things. Suddenly, it wasn't about strength anymore. It was about him trying to hold a hundred and fifty pounds on one arm, when it was suddenly dropping and pulling in the direction he was already barreling. He was phenomenally powerful, but he wasn't *that* strong—especially not when he couldn't even get his feet under him.

Bottom line, the end result was this. His own momentum, combined with the aids I'd so helpfully provided, was too much for the half-troll to handle. He went airborne, passing just over my face while I narrowly escaped being trampled. I let go at the peak of the arc, and his speed was such that he flew over the sidewalk completely and impacted the side of the building.

More specifically, *my* building.

My *warded* building.

My wards are fairly passive, as such things go. They're designed so that, when something applies a force to them, they turn that force back on the object with a little bit extra—meaning, essentially, that the more force you apply, the more trouble you're in. Try to egg my house, and the yolk's on you. Throw a brick at my window, and your problems are going to be significantly worse. It was a common, very simple warding technique, and while I'm not good enough with kinetic energy to do it well, it hadn't been hard to find someone who could.

However, any design of kinetic barrier can be overwhelmed if you throw enough force at it. Between that and the fact that I wanted a little more discouragement than that if someone ever attacked me for real, I'd taken another common precaution by building additional spells into the structure. The idea was that, if enough force was applied to deform the barrier, it would also change the shape of the trap spell in such a way that it would trigger.

The half-troll was a thousand pounds of nasty moving at high speed. It was pretty much inevitable that he would impact hard enough to trigger them.

There was a bright flash of white-yellow light when he hit the wall, followed by a loud *woomph*. A moment later the half-troll flew over me *again*, and landed out in the street. I pushed myself to my feet, wincing slightly—falling on the curb hadn't injured me, but I'd have bruises for a while—and turned to inspect the damage.

The half-troll was lying on the asphalt, smoldering. That, along with the smell of burnt meat and the distance he'd flown, told me that he'd triggered one of the fire spells. I'd hired a Dutch wizard to design those, because I'm pretty useless with fire. The result was closer to high explosives than simple flame, and had similar effects on anyone unfortunate enough to trigger it. He was also twitching spastically, suggesting he'd had the poor fortune to also set off one of the traps Alexis had designed. Those were basically just magical batteries designed to release a great deal of electricity quickly. Based

on the distance he'd flown, I thought he might have tripped one of the kinetic spells, too. Even a half-troll would go flying when one of those things went off; they hit harder than a speeding truck.

My wards are lethal. It's probably civically irresponsible of me, but let's get real. When you've pissed off as many people as I have, you take home defense seriously.

Lethality can be tricky when you're dealing with preternatural attackers, though. So I waited a minute or so, watching to see if the half-troll was going to get up and keep trying to kill me, but it didn't even twitch, and I was pretty sure it wasn't breathing. It smelled like it had been pretty well cooked by the wards, reminding me that I hadn't eaten yet, and its bones had been damaged enough that its chest and face looked misshapen.

Even with all of that, I approached only cautiously, and kept Tyrfing at the ready. When even that didn't get a reaction, I figured it was probably dead.

I cut its head off anyway. I haven't kept myself alive this long by taking chances *that* dumb.

"Well, that was exciting," I said to Alexis, sheathing Tyrfing and setting it aside. "Thanks for the help."

"What was that?" she asked, staring at the corpse with an expression of revulsion.

"Half-troll. It tried to kill us in Germany the other day. Apparently someone's a little upset that I'm looking into this mess. Or something. I'm not sure why else it would be chasing us."

"Wait," she said. "You killed it, and you don't even know why it was upset at you?"

"It was trying to kill us," I repeated patiently. "The conditions weren't exactly conducive to a nice chat." I looked at the body. "We'd better get this off the street before somebody sees it. Could you get the wards, and maybe grab the head? I'm going to have my hands pretty full with the body, and I'd rather not take the time to chop it up."

"Don't you guys have some way of dealing with things like this?" she asked. She sounded a little queasy.

"I don't know," I said doubtfully. "I mean, I'm pretty hungry, but this guy's huge. Maybe if we got the werewolves to pitch in." I shook my head. "Look, we'll figure out what to do with it later. For now, I want to get this out of sight." I slid my arms under the body and heaved experimentally. It was exactly as heavy as it looked; I was going to have to drag it, and even that would be an effort. The ice would make it considerably easier, at least.

Alexis looked at me, opened her mouth to say something, then closed it and turned to start on the wards. I shrugged, bundled the half-troll's head up in its cloak, and started dragging it towards the door.

Chapter Nine

"Took you long enough," Aiko said through a mouthful of sausage. "Getting cold."

"Our half-troll friend found me," I said, grabbing a plate and loading it with some of everything. Alexis's cooking is almost always worth eating, unless it involves curry. I can't stand curry.

Aiko tensed and looked up from her food. "Is he...?" she said, starting to stand.

"He rests in pieces. We dumped the body in the garden, and covered the blood with snow. It should hold up until I can get somebody out to clean it." I sat down with my food and started eating. "Zhang wants another meeting. I scheduled it for noon today."

"That does not seem to be a logical request," Ash said quietly. "You have barely had adequate time to begin your investigation, let alone determine the proper judgment."

"I get the impression that's what Zhang's after," I said dryly. "The less time I spend investigating, the sooner everyone forgets about this and the less of a hit his reputation takes."

She frowned, one of the more intense expressions I'd seen from her. "That is an inappropriate attitude," she said severely. "Excessive preoccupation with personal interests reduces the efficiency of the system, ultimately making things worse for everyone."

I blinked. "I don't think the smooth operation of the justice system is high on Zhang's priority list," I said after a moment. "Just guessing here, but I'm pretty confident about that one."

"She does have a point, though," Aiko said. "If Zhang keeps putting pressure on you like this, it's going to be pretty hard for you to do your job."

I grunted. "Yeah. He won't put up with much more in the way of delays." I shrugged. "We'll see how it goes today. Honestly, at this point it's pretty much Ryan's word against every single piece of evidence we've seen, so I'm not sure it will matter. If he doesn't come up with some kind of proof, I pretty much have to just agree he's guilty and try for a light sentence."

"Kyra might be a little upset by that."

"Too bad. I told her at the outset, I can't just let him off without a reason. I'm inclined to believe him, if only because I think he's smart enough not to get involved in this mess. But that isn't really good enough."

"In retrospect," Aiko said after a moment, "I'm sorry I told you to take this job. That was stupid advice."

"Thanks a bunch. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go get dressed for real before I go call Edward."

And wasn't *that* depressing? I mean, I literally had to get armor and a shotgun to ensure my safety when I stepped outside to make a phone call. That's sort of a sign that you've seriously screwed up somewhere.

"I can't come."

"Look," I said. "I know two hours is a little short notice. But I can pick you up there in forty minutes and get back to Colorado in plenty of time, trust me."

"You aren't hearing me," Edward said. "I can't come. As in can not."

"Why?"

"Your meeting's in Colorado."

"Yeah. So?"

"So I can't come. I stay out of his state, he stays out of mine. That was the deal."

That was news to me—although, in retrospect, it explained a lot. "Who?"

"Doesn't matter," he said dismissively. "Look, it ain't a problem. Kyra's there, she can represent me if it needs doing." He did not, I noticed, mention Ryan, at all. That might be a coincidence, or it might not.

There was a longish pause before he spoke again. "How's it looking?" he said, something in his voice suggesting that he thought he knew the answer and it wasn't good.

"Not good. Ryan can't really prove anything, and I can't do much without that." I paused. "I'm afraid he might take the fall for this," I admitted. "Whether he's guilty or not."

Edward grunted. "I was afraid of that. I told the boy not to get in with the fae. Dammit. Well, do what you can for him."

"I will. Goodbye, Edward."

As it turned out, Kyra and Ryan were eating a late breakfast at Pryce's, so we went to meet them there. I saw them standing in the parking lot as we walked up. I also saw something rather more unexpected.

Who's that? Snowflake asked, clearly referring to the third person standing with them. She was shorter than Kyra, putting her a bit below the norm, and not pretty. Her hair was grey, a few shades lighter (and therefore more noticeable) than mine, and her skin was also greyish, although her face was that of a woman in her early twenties. Her features were a little too blunt, too squashed-looking, and

her eyes were spaced too narrowly to be attractive. Her clothing looked anachronistic, but not for any reason I could put my finger on.

The selkie girlfriend, presumably. I didn't bother pointing her out to the others; they'd seen her, and they could probably draw the same conclusions I had. Besides, I had no idea how good a selkie's hearing was.

"Good morning," I called once we were within conversational range.

"Good morning," Ryan said. "This is Unna, my fiancée."

That one stopped me in my tracks—and everyone else, too. "Your fiancée," I repeated. "That would be the agreement you made with her family, then."

Ryan had the grace to look ashamed, at least. "Yeah."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Okay, you know what? None of my business. I'm pleased to meet you, Unna. Call me Winter."

She made no effort at small talk, just stared at me with cool black eyes. "You are helping my Ryan," she said abruptly.

"I'm certainly trying to," I said, neatly sidestepping the question. "Trying" wasn't the same thing as "doing."

She considered me for a moment, then nodded, once. "Good. Is there assistance which I may provide?"

Right to the point, anyway. That was something. "I'm guessing you didn't come to the meeting yesterday for a reason," I said.

"Yes, my presence would have been problematic. As I am a biased source, my contributions would be given little weight in any case."

I nodded. "I figured so. I don't think you can contribute anything at the moment, then. We have another meeting with Zhang and maybe the fae in an hour and change."

"That's ridiculous," Kyra said. "*One day?* That's all the time he gives you?"

"Zhang doesn't care whether we catch the right guy," I said. "And he can't afford too much scrutiny. He's running a smuggling ring out of that nightclub."

I watched their faces closely as I dropped that bombshell. Kyra looked a little disappointed, as though she'd expected something less mundane. Ryan nodded, as though he'd expected something of the sort. Unna didn't react to the news at all; I'd seen more animated statues.

"Is that it, then?" Kyra asked. "It's over?"

I shrugged. "Hopefully not. I'm hoping I can talk the fae into backing me when I ask for more time. I want to talk to the Watcher, too." I was guessing that would be a *very* interesting chat. It seemed clear that he'd been aware of what Zhang was up to, and I had a hard time imagining the Watchers being okay with that sort of thing. Moray might not—scratch that, definitely didn't—give a damn for Ryan, but he probably wanted to see Zhang taken down a notch. That didn't make him an ally, necessarily, but it meant that we had certain interests in common.

"Do you think that'll do any good?"

"Maybe so. Come on," I said, walking towards my Jeep. I left it parked outside Pryce's, because it was free, nearby, and had almost no risk of theft. "We should get going. I don't want anybody showing up before us."

"You have got to be shitting me," Kyra said, staring. "You run your evil empire out of our old house?"

"Yeah, the universe has a weird sense of humor," I said, walking up to the front door. This building wasn't warded, because it would have been too inconvenient to be constantly raising and lowering them.

Besides. Anybody dumb enough to break *into* a house full of psychotic, bloodthirsty jötnar deserves what they get.

Sveinn met us about two steps inside the door. "Jarl," he said, giving me a nod almost deep enough to qualify as a bow.

"Hey, Sveinn. Did you call everyone I told you to?"

"*Já, minn herra.* Gwyn ap Nudd sent word that he cannot attend but will send a representative. All of the other parties should be present."

"Good. Get some chairs set up in the main room, in three sections." I walked past him into said room.

I'd seen this building in a lot of configurations. It was built to be the pack house back when Roland—crazy old Roland, whom I'd never met and never wanted to—had still been the Alpha. I saw it once then, when we went in to wipe him out, and was not impressed. The main room had been designed around a literal throne, while everyone else sat on wooden benches or stood. There'd been plenty of room in the middle for fights. It was that kind of pack.

Later, when Christopher took over, he'd brought a more pleasant feel to it. With comfortable seating, posters, and televisions, it had seemed more like a well-equipped lounge than anything. After he died Kyra hadn't changed things much.

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And then, when the pack pulled up stakes entirely and scattered in search of greener pastures, a group of rakshasas had bought the place. I think it was a statement of dominance—if they took over the center of the werewolves' former territory, then they could take the rest too, or something like that. They'd turned it into a fortress, with boarded-over windows, bricked-up doors, and serious magical protections. It had been a pretty tough nut to crack.

Now, well, it was mine. Not legally—I don't have *legal* ownership of any property, anymore. But Skrímir had assured me that it was mine, and I didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to argue the point.

During the day, all the windows let in plenty of light, and you can almost convince yourself that it's a cheerful place. Once night falls, though, it seems pretty creepy. The walls were covered in depictions of wolves, ravens, and snowflakes, the wrought iron throne dominated the room, and the firelight cast plenty of flickering shadows.

"What's that?" Kyra asked, gesturing at the wall behind the throne. It was mostly window from the ground to a height of ten feet or so, looking out on the trees behind the building. Sitting in the throne, I was framed on all sides by forest. It's another aspect of the place that seems pretty cool during the day, and freaking scary once the sun goes down.

I was guessing that wasn't what she was talking about, though. "That's my coat of arms," I said. Then I chuckled. "Damn, that always feels so weird to say. People like me aren't supposed to have coats of arms."

"What does your motto mean?" Ash asked. She did not seem surprised that a person like me would have a coat of arms.

"Grim and coldhearted. I didn't pick it," I said, forestalling what I'm sure would have been a pithy comment from Kyra. I glanced at the time, and saw that it was less than an hour until the meeting was scheduled to start—or, in other words, people could start showing up any time. "Unna, Ash, I would appreciate it if you would head upstairs. It shouldn't last too long, but there's food, and a TV if you get bored." Not that I really expected either of them to use it; Unna didn't seem human enough, and Ash just wasn't the type.

Unna went without a word. Ash did not. "Why do you not want me to be present for the proceedings?" she asked me. I couldn't tell whether she felt left out or not.

"I'm worried that Zhang will make a fuss about you being here," I told her. "And given that I'm trying to talk him into giving me a few more days, it seems logical to avoid offending him if possible."

"That is logical," she said approvingly. I got the impression that that was high praise, coming from her. "I will remain upstairs until such time as it is no longer necessary. Good luck, Winter."

"Thanks." I walked up to the throne and sat down. "Damn, I hate this chair," I grumbled. "Bad enough that I have a throne, but did they have to make it out of *iron*? This thing's about as comfortable as sitting on a rock."

"You think you have it bad?" Aiko said incredulously. "I don't *even* want to hear it, Fuzzball."

I couldn't argue with that, particularly not when Kjaran walked in a moment later carrying *her* chair. It was basically a smaller version of my throne, a huge iron monstrosity that was both simple and strangely elegant in design. The thing weighed a ton, but Kjaran carried it with only slight difficulty. Jötnar are quite a bit stronger than werewolves, making them off the charts relative to humanity, and Kjaran makes even most jötnar look like they need to hit the gym.

I always feel awkward when I see Aiko's mini-throne. I mean, I get that it's supposed to suggest some degree of equality, which is awesome and everything. And I get that, since Aiko usually avoids court sessions like the plague (she'd only come to watch me chat with the vampire a few days ago because it promised to be mildly entertaining), it wouldn't work to install it permanently. It would look pretty odd to constantly have an empty throne sitting next to mine. But still. It just seems so...tacky.

Kyra stared. "That," she said, "is so tacky."

"*Finally* someone agrees with me!" Aiko said vehemently. "These goddamn things don't even have any padding, you know? Your ass goes numb in, like, ninety seconds." Around us Sveinn and Tindr started carrying in more conventional chairs for everyone else. That is not, mind, to say that they were ordinary. They were all straight-backed chairs made of mahogany and upholstered with velvet, and the wood was covered in subtle geometric carvings. Going by the workmanship, I strongly suspected that Val had made them, although I'd never actually asked him about it.

It struck me as deeply unfair that, out of everyone in the room, Aiko and I—theoretically the most important and privileged people, in a local sense, who were present—had the least comfortable seating.

Kyra and Ryan both sat in the group of seats to my right, which consisted of exactly two chairs. Alexis would stand once things got started, much like last time, but for now she took another chair, turned it so she could see everyone, and sat as well. Snowflake, obviously, just laid down across my feet and got ready for a high-intensity power nap. Pointless and irritating politics always encourage you to seek oblivion, if only so you don't have to listen to the people involved talk anymore.

"So," I said. "How have you been getting along with Edward?"

Kyra looked at me in disbelief. "Is this really the best time to talk about it?" she asked.

"You got anything better to do while we wait?"

"Good point." She shrugged. "Things have been going well. I've been working on the ranch, but I'm thinking about going back to school. You know, finally finish up my degree."

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

"Everyone treating you all right?"

She snorted. "I'm your best friend, and you're the next best thing to Edward's son. Half of town bends over backwards to keep me happy, and the other half's old enough to have known you and can't get enough of telling me embarrassing stories."

I grinned. "Have you heard the one about the beavers yet?"

She thought for a moment. "I don't think so."

"Oh, you'd remember that one." Aiko, who'd heard that story, sounded amused. "What about you, Ryan, what are you doing? Aside from a selkie, I mean."

"You just aren't going to let that rest, are you?"

She grinned wickedly. "Oh, you haven't heard anything yet. I haven't even gotten started on silkie jokes."

Ryan made what was clearly a conscious decision not to ask what she meant. "I'm all right," he said. "Been doing construction work with Shoemaker's company."

"Larry's still doing that, huh?" Larry Shoemaker was one of Edward's werewolves, a crotchety bastard who had to be pushing a century old by now. For as long as anyone could remember he'd run a fairly large construction company. They didn't take any really huge jobs—too much publicity—but he did brisk business building everything from houses to hospitals throughout most of the western part of the country. Most of the adolescents in town worked for him at one point or another, and there was a longstanding tradition that new werewolves spent some time there while they figured out where to go next.

I worked for him for all of four hours when I was a teenager. Then he made a crack about my mother, a topic on which I was somewhat sensitive. Almost without meaning to, I decked him. The whole jobsite went dead silent. He stood up, slowly, and stared at me for a solid thirty seconds before he told me I was fired. Then he grinned, complimented me on my left hook, and invited me over to his house for a beer after he was done working.

I liked Larry.

"Yeah, he's got us out renovating an office building in Arizona. A couple weeks ago some moron broke in thinking we were the bank across the street. He was *pissed*."

I laughed. I could just imagine how Larry would react to that one. Then, before I could lose my nerve, I said, "How's Anna doing?"

Kyra didn't seem surprised at the non sequitur. "She's doing well. Really well, actually. She's handling the Change a lot better than I did."

She'd pretty much have to, considering that Kyra had been Changed against her will and then practically enslaved by a psychotic Alpha and a pack that was far, far out of control. I didn't mention that, though, because I knew that wasn't what Kyra meant.

"Have you talked to her at all?" she asked me.

I looked away. "I thought I'd wait for her to finish adjusting." That was actually a perfectly valid line of reasoning. Becoming a werewolf tends to have some fairly serious psychological consequences, and a lot of new werewolves are uncomfortable with their less human instincts and urges. Being around people who'd known them when they were human sometimes made them feel ashamed of what they had become. Although, given that Anna had apparently had something of an urge in that direction all along, whether that was a valid concern in her case was debatable to say the least.

I was just playing it safe, though. It certainly didn't have anything to do with my feeling guilty because I'd gotten her into some fairly serious trouble. I also wasn't avoiding her because I wasn't sure how to deal with the fact that she'd only struck up a friendship with me in the first place because she'd guessed I was a werewolf, and she was obsessed with all things lycanthropic. I don't know why you would even think such a thing.

Also, I have a bridge to sell you, Santa Claus actually does exist, and someone's sneaking up behind you right now.

Fortunately, Sveinn walked in before the conversation could devolve any further. "Jarl," he said. "The first fae party just arrived."

I sat up straighter. "About time. Sveinn, you're the greeter. Everyone else, get ready."

Sveinn nodded sharply and then went to get the door. Alexis stood up, yawned, and then went to stand against the back wall, where she was quickly joined by Vigdis. A couple seconds later Kjaran walked in, arranged the last few chairs, and stood next to them. Haki stood at the opposite end of the line, where the two massive jötnar would act as bookends.

Tindr wasn't attending. I respected the guy, but an anemic kitten wouldn't be impressed by how visually threatening he was, and his actual combat skills didn't do much to change that.

To my surprise, the first person to show up was not Samuel Black, or Anja Morgenstern, or even Carraig. It was the same person who had been shadowing Gwyn ap Nudd yesterday, the one who had looked like his human disguise wasn't quite up to par. It still wasn't, and I still couldn't pinpoint what was wrong with it, and that was still *really* annoying.

This time, though, there was no one else around to confuse things, giving me a chance to get a good sniff of his magic. It was fairly strong, although not anything like his master's, and clearly fae in nature. There was a strong hint of wolf, though, and more than a touch of forest, blood, and night.

I stared. "I know you."

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

He smiled, showing teeth very slightly too sharp to be human. A casual observer wouldn't notice, but once you did it was surprisingly distracting. The smell of magic shifted slightly, and his glamour melted away.

The body thus revealed would have drawn stares from any gathering of normal people in the world—although, depending on the setting, not necessarily in a bad way. He was around six feet tall and resembled some sort of hybrid of wolf and human. His knees were oddly jointed, but clearly capable of bipedal locomotion, and his hands resembled paws, complete with clawed fingers. His whole body was covered in a thick coat of grey-brown fur, his eyes were a vivid yellow-green, and his teeth had gone from mildly inhuman to blatantly carnivorous.

In other words, if you saw him you would think that he was either a monster or wearing the best costume ever made.

About three seconds later—long enough that no one could have missed it, not long enough to form a coherent response—there was a gentle surge of power and the human mask was back in place. I didn't have to wonder why it was less than perfect anymore. Such a profoundly inhuman body would logically have to move in ways that weren't quite the same as human movement, and my subconscious had picked up on that. No paint job in the world is going to make a Ferrari handle like a Volkswagen.

"You do, Winter jarl," he said, making no explanation for his behavior. He didn't need to; everyone who needed to know (which in this case meant him, me, and Aiko) did.

I wasn't quite sure how to feel about this revelation. On the one hand, I'd gotten along with this...creature, I suppose, although that seems too derogatory...pretty well. After he was the only member of the Wild Hunt to actively show support for me, I'd run into him again at Skrymir's party. We'd spent a while talking without anything catastrophic or disturbing happening, which is pretty good for a Sidhe party. So there was at least one person who, if not a friend, at least wasn't an enemy.

On the other hand, with the exception of Morgenstern and the mages, there wasn't a single person present I hadn't encountered previously. That I would keep encountering the same few people over and over again was odd, and probably evidence for some bizarre conspiracy or something.

"Gwyn ap Nudd is the king of the Tylwyth Teg," I noted. "A group which does not include you." I hadn't encountered any of the Tylwyth Teg before, excepting Gwyn ap Nudd himself, but the stories usually depict them as vaguely humanoid in appearance, much like the Sidhe. I wasn't sure what, precisely, the wolfish fae (whose name, incidentally, I'd never heard) was, but humanoid definitely wasn't on the list.

He smiled. "Gwyn ap Nudd will take almost anyone, if they can hunt. I can."

"And Stefan Morgenstern? A Sidhe, and a young one at that. It seems hard to believe that he was a hunter on that level."

"Perhaps not."

"Your lord has a reputation for honor," I said. "A reputation which seems at odds with Morgenstern's more...illicit activities."

His smile sharpened slightly. "A spy for one can often be a spy for another," he said. "And being honorable does not mean that one must be a fool."

I nodded slowly. Gwyn ap Nudd had been playing the same game as Scáthach, using Morgenstern as a way to get at his cohorts—or possibly as bait. I couldn't say I was surprised; fair and honorable or not, you don't take and hold power among the fae by being straightforward and naive. "And what of those things which are more offensive than simply spying? The smuggling, the violence...did your lord know about these things as well?"

"There is not knowing," he answered, "and there is not caring. It is important not to confuse the two. I find, when dealing with such folk as he, that it is safer to assume the latter."

Which was not, I noticed, actually an answer to my question. "Surely one so reputable as Gwyn ap Nudd would not allow his subjects to profit by dishonorable means."

"And tell me, then, what profit has Stefan Morgenstern's reaped? He is quite dead, jarl." He shook his head. "No, you know as well as I do—and Gwyn ap Nudd knows better than either of us, to be sure—that the course which brings pleasure today often exacts a heavy price tomorrow. My lord has no need to punish wrongdoers when their own actions will bring misfortune down upon them."

Which, reading between the lines, strongly implied that Gwyn ap Nudd had known quite a bit about what was going on. He'd known what Morgenstern was getting up to, he'd known that his actions had pissed someone off enough to incite them to murder—and he hadn't told him.

I got the sinking feeling that I had seriously underestimated how much trouble I'd gotten myself into agreeing to this. Doing a friend of a friend a favor was one thing. Tug-of-rope between a mage clan, the Watchers, a Faerie Queen, the king of the Tylwyth Teg, and some unknown smuggling ring was another thing entirely. Any one of those was enough to obliterate me, and if I kept sticking my nose where it didn't belong it was entirely too likely that one of them would do so.

Of course, at this point I couldn't really let go of the wolf's ears either. It was too late to back out of it. That left me with no real options but to keep going and hope that I could resolve things in a way that wouldn't get us all killed.

"You've been very helpful," I said, skirting the edges of outright gratitude. When you were dealing with the fae, it paid to watch what you said; thanking someone could be taken as an admission of debt, and you don't want to be in debt to a fae. They take that sort of thing seriously.

"It is my pleasure," he said, showing teeth in what was only in the most technical sense a smile. It was the sort of expression that reminded you there was a wolf's face hiding behind that illusion, and most of the time if a wolf shows you his teeth it's because those teeth are about to be in you. "I have no fondness for Morgenstern, or those like him."

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Nothing more was said for several minutes. Sveinn escorted in Anja Morgenstern and Samuel Black, and then a few minutes later Moray. The Watcher was dressed even more formally this time, in a three-piece suit all in black. It looked both expensive and uncomfortable as hell, but he seemed used to it. Zhang came separately, several minutes later, and sat down with a sour expression. He hadn't brought his minion with him this time, but he was still wearing the robe.

Carraig was the last to arrive. Of course, since he still showed up fifteen minutes before the meeting was actually scheduled to begin, it was hard to blame him too much. "Can we get this show on the road?" he asked, dropping into one chair and putting his feet up on another. "I've got an appointment in Cairo in an hour. Some idiot welshed on a deal, and he's worth more as an example than a client."

"I have no objection," I said, "since everyone is here already. Master Zhang, since you requested this meeting, would you like to begin?" That was a subtle dig at him, reminding everyone that he was the reason they had to take time to come talk about this again. Since I expected him to be my main opposition, I didn't figure I could go wrong turning everyone else against him.

I hate having to think like that.

"Certainly," he said precisely. "I wish to know whether you have yet found that Mr. Peterson is guilty and should be punished."

"Mr. Peterson, are you still claiming innocence?"

"Yes." Ryan sounded a little nervous, which I really couldn't blame him for.

"I see. Well, the evidence does suggest that Mr. Peterson is the most likely culprit. However—"

"This is obvious," Zhang interrupted. "I told you that additional investigation was unnecessary with such clear facts."

"Excuse me, Master Zhang," I said coldly, "but I was not finished. As I was saying, I was not able to find a reasonable motive for him to kill Stefan Morgenstern, nor has any been proposed here."

The mage shook his head emphatically. "Mr. Peterson is a werewolf, and they are well known for their aggression. And he has admitted that Morgenstern made advances on his fiancée. Surely this could drive any man to violence."

"Be that as it may, there are other factors to consider. Aspects of the timing make it highly likely that this act was premeditated. Your suggestion, which is dependent upon it being a crime of passion, does not match this evidence."

"And?" he demanded. "Mr. Peterson is, as you said, still the most likely culprit."

"Ah," I said. "But this implies that he was hired or ordered to do so by another person, one who did have a clear motive ahead of time. Surely justice is not served until both the hired hand and his employer are found and treated suitably."

"In fact," the lupine fae said before Zhang could respond, "under our law only the one who gives the order is responsible. A killer in the service of another is no more at fault than the knife is responsible for the acts in which it is wielded."

"That is preposterous," Zhang snapped.

"No," Anja said, "it is the law. Jarl Wolf is correct in this, Master Zhang. If another party was responsible for my brother's death, then that party is the one at fault."

"You wanted this dealt with by fae law," Kyra said unsympathetically. "You don't get to change your mind just because that isn't convenient anymore."

Zhang, clearly seeing that support was not forthcoming, relented. "Fine," he spat.

I smiled serenely at him. "I'm glad that we all agree," I said. "I will be glad to investigate this further and let you know what I find."

Zhang's left eyelid twitched once, giving me a pleasant feeling of satisfaction. It's always nice when you can piss off a self-centered, obstructive jerk. Then he stood up and walked out of the building without another word.

"I believe that is all that needs to be said," I told the rest of them. "I appreciate your taking time to meet with me. Oh, and Moray?" I said, as people started standing up. "Would you mind staying for a few minutes? There are a couple things I'd like to discuss with you."

"It would be my pleasure," he said, his voice unreadable.

"Thank you."

A few minutes later, the room had emptied out considerably. I stood up, sighing with relief. "Freaking hate that chair," I muttered, grabbing one of the recently vacated wooden ones instead. Aiko and Alexis joined me about two seconds later, while the jötnar went back to whatever they'd been doing. "Sveinn, would you please go tell Ash and Unna they can come down now?"

He nodded and left. I leaned back in my chair and scratched Snowflake's ears absently. "So," I said. "I got your message."

He smiled, the expression surprisingly carefree. "Why, I don't know what you mean, jarl Wolf-Born."

I snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure. So I take it the Watchers are not happy with our friend Zhang."

The smile faded. "No, we aren't."

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"Mind if I ask why? I mean," I said hastily, "I know that he's involved in smuggling, I know Morgenstern was one of his business associates, I know that's why he was killed, I know that Zhang is aware of that fact. I just don't see where you get involved."

He raised one eyebrow. "Isn't that enough of a reason for us to pay attention?"

"Well, sure. I mean, you *are* the Watchers, it's your job to police mages and this definitely falls under that." I smiled without much humor. "But you're also chronically underfunded and short on manpower. Considering the number of people you're supposed to be keeping in line, and the amount of power they wield, I know you have to pick and choose what to deal with."

He considered me for a moment, then sighed. "There's a bit of a story to that."

"I have a bit of time."

He nodded as though he'd expected me to say that. Then he launched into his story.

Chapter Ten

I first encountered Zhang five years ago in Portland. I live in Seattle but, like you said, we're stretched thin. My territory runs from British Columbia down to northern California, and east into Idaho, Nevada, even parts of Montana. It's a lot of ground to cover, and there are always things that are going to fall through the cracks. I try, but you can't be everywhere, you know?

That's how Zhang could get away with it for so long. We don't know how long he's been active, but he's been around for a long time. He's good at operating under the radar, doesn't make waves, doesn't draw attention to himself. He knows how the system works. He's come across as an asshole in these meetings, but that's only because he thinks it's the best approach to take. He can be subtle when he wants.

I don't even really know how they figured out what he was up to. I sure didn't have a clue. All I got was a message from my superior saying to go check out some abandoned warehouse, they thought there was something sketchy going on. That's one of the worst things about being a Watcher. Everything's always confidential, need-to-know only. They don't even admit they've redacted it, they just don't tell you anything.

They shouldn't have sent me. I knew it, and they knew it too. I'm a combat specialist, and this was intelligence work all the way. That's another thing you get used to working for the Watchers. There's never enough people available, and the bureaucracy is so thick it can take months to get a specialist sent out. So you have spies trying to fight off vampires, and people like me trying to infiltrate secret societies.

I went in alone—there's almost never someone available for backup. It was a disaster from the start. Security was heavy, much heavier than I expected. He had wards to five blocks out, golems and armed guards in the building itself. I can do a veil, but like I said, I'm a combat specialist. Hiding from one person is one thing, but something like that? Not a chance. I made it almost two blocks in before one of the wards caught me, and that was it for being sneaky.

They were prepared for a lot of things, but a combat trained mage wasn't one of them. I killed seven or eight of the guards trying to get in, before the rest started running. I don't like killing people, especially people who are only in the way because that's their job. But sometimes you don't get a chance. Maybe under other circumstances you'd get along great, but he's on that side and you're on this side and that's just how it is. It's them or you, and if you pick them you aren't going to last very long in this business.

Anyway, the last five or ten guards ran. I shouldn't have let them—they'd seen too much—but I don't have much taste for killing, and they weren't a threat to me. The golems didn't run, but they aren't alive and I don't have a problem destroying them. They weren't designed with stopping mages in mind.

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I remember thinking, at the time, that that was strange. If they weren't scared of the Watchers, and it didn't seem like they were, then who else would they be worried about? What had them so spooked that they kept a small army on hand, if it wasn't us?

I couldn't actually get into the warehouse. Breaking wards isn't something I'm particularly good at, and these were top-notch. Well, backup might be impossible to get, but the Watchers are pretty understanding about unofficial channels. I called in a friend who's a B and E expert. She took down the wards and we went inside.

It was like walking into a movie set. He had bales of cash sitting around, stacks of gold ingots—I've never seen so much money. There were crates of drugs waiting to be shipped, pallets of furs and ivory, art. Monica—that's the friend I'd called—she majored in art, and she told me that some of the pieces in that place were worth a few million, and there were a lot of them.

Add it all up and there must have been something like a billion dollars in that warehouse. I don't know what I was expecting when they sent me out there, but it sure wasn't what I got.

Maybe ten minutes after we got in the door, Zhang showed up. He was just as much of an asshole then as he is now. Told us we were on his property and demanded we leave immediately. Well, I told him I was a Watcher, and he had me call my superior. When he heard what had happened he told me to drop it and leave, immediately. I didn't like it, but what else was I supposed to do?

Since then I've run into Zhang's operation a dozen times. At first it was unintentional; I just had really weird luck. I caught one of his couriers in Vancouver, almost by accident, and stumbled on a warehouse in San Francisco. When I was sent to Tokyo as backup on a raid, the necromancer we were after turned out to be buying his materials from Zhang. Once that had happened a few times, someone higher up decided we might as well go with it and started picking me for anything that looked like his work.

Saying that he's involved in smuggling is an understatement. Zhang is like the Al Capone of the supernatural. He moves drugs, money, contraband, weapons, fugitives—if there's profit in it, he's there. I never found another haul like the first one, not anywhere close, but my God, the money involved is unbelievable. Most of it isn't his, of course; he's just transporting it. But he's still worth billions.

Do you see now why the Watchers care about this? It isn't just that he's a smuggler. It's that some of the bans he breaks are *ours*. One of the shipments I intercepted included everything you need to perform a ritual, one that's banned for a *very* good reason. Another had the materials for *seriously* prohibited research.

I've busted him a dozen times, but none of them ever come to anything. Not even a slap on the wrist. Zhang's untouchable, see? He's high in his clan, and the Zhang clan is huge—over a thousand Conclave-certified mages, at least five times that number of minor talents and such. We can't afford to piss them off. Half of the senior mages have used his services at one point or another. He's got friends in

the Twilight Court—he does a lot of shipping to the Otherside—and if the Watchers even look at him funny they raise hell.

We can't get him.

Moray finished his story, and the room was silent for a long moment. Ash and Unna had come in partway through, and were currently standing at the edge of the room. Assuming what he was saying was true—not at all a safe assumption—well, that was...terrifying, really. It was huge.

"If you can't do anything to him," I said at last, "why do you keep chasing him?"

"We can't do anything to him *overtly*," he corrected. "But we can annoy him, interrupt shipments, confiscate the worst things. At some point, when it's not worth the price of doing business, economics will shut him down."

"Riiight," Aiko drawled. "You believe that?"

"Hell no," Moray said promptly. "You kidding me? We don't catch one shipment in a hundred. We make less of a dent in his bottom line than spoilage due to vermin. *Nobody* thinks that's going to work." He shrugged. "Nobody's got a better idea, either."

"So you need him shut down," I said slowly. "But you can't do it yourself. I think I see where this conversation is going, and it scares the shit out of me."

He grinned. "You're a smart man, jarl."

I snorted. "My name is Winter. If you can't call me that, at least come up with something entertaining."

"My boss thinks that nightclub is a major processing center for his operation," Moray continued. "He wants it taken out. Not just disrupted—he wants everything there to disappear. You do that for us, and he's offering you Conclave recognition. We're talking about a full membership."

"Not interested," I said immediately.

Moray didn't look surprised. "Do you know how hard some people work to be recognized by the Conclave?" he asked. It sounded like a salesman on the last stop of the day, who couldn't work up the enthusiasm to pretend that even he thought what he was selling was a good deal.

"Do you know how many people are breathing down my neck already?" I countered. "I don't need any more, thank you."

"I don't blame you," he said. "Funny thing, though. He told me this twenty minutes after you were suggested as an arbiter for this. Can you guess who came and talked to me five minutes after that?"

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

"The head of the Watchers?" I guessed. I'd met her once. The experience had been...memorable.

"Good guess. She walks in—and I've only spoken with Watcher three times in my life, so she must have thought it was important—and tells me you won't take that deal. Then she tells me that, when you say no, I'm supposed to tell you that she has a better offer."

"And what's that?"

"Access to our information system."

I paused and shared a glance with Aiko. The Watchers were, first and foremost, the intelligence force of the Conclave. Information was their business. An offer like that was enormous, and almost worth considering.

It also meant that Watcher didn't just think this was important, she thought it was freaking earthshaking. That probably was not a good thing.

"Why on earth," I said slowly, "would she think it was a good idea to offer something like that to someone like me?"

"Her exact phrasing," he said dryly, "was that you're doing more of our work than half of her people anyway, so she might as well give you some help."

I snorted. Yep, that sounded like her. "Wonderful. And what *exactly* does she want me to do?"

"Go to the nightclub. Get the contraband. Make sure he doesn't get it back."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You know," I said after a moment, "it occurs to me that, in order for them to specifically recommend you for jobs involving Zhang, your superiors must *know* which jobs involve Zhang. It also occurs to me that most of the Watchers I've encountered have been undercover in other groups. It occurs to me that having such a person in Zhang's organization would be the easiest way to have the information which they must have. In which case, presumably, Watcher also knows what is *in* this shipment. Given how highly she's paying, it more than likely contains something risky enough to justify the expense."

"Sounds reasonable," he admitted. "Look, ja—Winter, I already told you this. I'm a combat specialist, and they aren't big on telling me things. I'm not making the offer, I'm just telling you what it is."

I am not sure where the conversation would have gone from there, if Sveinn hadn't walked in at precisely that moment. "Jarl?" he said diffidently. "Someone to see you."

Behind him came the leader of the half-breeds and changelings who had been following me around. "He knows me," she rasped.

"I was wondering when I'd see you again," I said. "Are you ready to talk yet?"

She spat to the side, provoking a wince from Sveinn. (I wasn't sure if that was because he was offended at her lack of manners, or because he was probably going to be cleaning it up.) "Nothing to say," she said, her eyes cold and flat.

"You're still here," I pointed out. "Might as well talk to me anyway." She scowled and didn't say anything. I sighed. "Look, could everyone please leave for a minute?"

Ash, who knew who this was, did not look convinced. "Are you certain that is wise?" she said quietly, but with a sort of muted ferocity. "This person has attempted to do you harm on several occasions, and has freely admitted that she is still not interested in peaceful discourse. Is it not possible, or even probable, that she has come here in the interest of finding you vulnerable?"

Before I could respond, the half-breed rounded on Ash. "You," she said. "You're one of us. What you doing with him?"

Ash's voice turned very, very cold, although it was still quiet and polite. "I am, like you, of half-mortal descent," she said evenly. "However, I do not in any measure share your attitudes towards Winter. He has shown me nothing but kindness. Should you continue behaving antagonistically towards him, we will have little in common." She stroked the back of that stuffed cat as she spoke, her motions calm and smooth.

The other girl hesitated. "He done you right," she rasped. "That truth?"

"It is," Ash confirmed.

She grunted. "Fine. I'll talk, Wolf. What you want?"

I looked around the room. "Everyone? This should just take a few minutes."

People started, with varying degrees of reluctance, to get up and leave. Aiko leaned closer to me. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" she hissed.

"Of course not," I replied at a similar volume. "But she's mixed up in this somehow."

She grunted skeptically. "Don't get killed." And then, doubtfully, she joined the rest of them in leaving.

Snowflake, of course, stayed right where she was. I'm not a *complete* idiot.

"Okay," I said. "What should I call you?"

"Jackal." An interesting choice. Nobody thinks nice things about jackals.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

"Okay. So what are you guys so pissed off about? I get that you think I killed someone, but I honestly have no clue who you're talking about."

"It ain't easy being a half-breed," she said. "Or a changeling. My crew, we watch out for each other. We been through tough patches, and all come through." Jackal's face contorted into almost insane rage, and her already-raspy voice came out in a growl. "Then last week Morgenstern fucking took Wishbone. Just walked in, grabbed him, and walked back out before we could do anything."

"Wishbone is another of your group, I take it?"

"Yeah."

"And you're *certain* it was Morgenstern that took him?"

"Yeah, I'm fucking sure. We ain't stupid, Wolf."

Pieces started slotting together in my head, and I saw what was going on. Not entirely; there were still pieces missing, important pieces. But I knew enough to sketch an outline, and more than enough to make me see red.

I'm generally fairly easygoing, but there are some things that make me angry. If I was right about this one, then someone was going to bleed.

"I see," I said, nodding. "And then when I got involved, you decided that I must have something against you?"

"Pretty much," she admitted. "Bit stupid, but we had to do *something*, you know? And then the last time we found you, it seemed kind of funny. Something odd there. Would have kept talking, but Anvil decided we were taking too long."

I got a sinking feeling. "Anvil. Was that the half-troll?"

"That's the one," she rasped. "Why?"

"He attacked me again this morning," I said. "I ended up throwing him into my wards."

She went utterly still, and I got the impression that she was seriously considering trying to claw my eyes out. "You killed him." It wasn't a question.

"In my defense, he *was* trying to kill me at the time. I honestly thought he was someone Zhang hired to get me out of the way."

Jackal nodded. "Yeah, I get it. Don't matter. There'll be a reckoning. Ain't either of us got a choice about that. You know how it is."

I knew. "Come on," I said, standing up and walking towards the door. "I can't bring Anvil back to life, but I think I might be able to make some kind of reparation."

"Why?"

"I don't think Wishbone's dead, and I'm pretty sure I know where he went. We're going to go find him." I kept the growl out of my own voice, but not without some difficulty. "Moray," I said, walking outside. "You still up for that offer?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"You're on, with two conditions. One, you don't cause any more trouble for Ryan. You let this drop, and convince the others to also if you can. Two, you come with me."

"A chance to do some real damage to the guy who's been pissing me off for the past five years, *and* an excuse to annoy him some more?" He grinned sharply. "You drive a hard bargain, Winter. Deal."

"Wonderful. Ryan, could I talk you and Unna into staying here? I think this will be easier, politically, if you aren't present for this part."

He shrugged and glanced at the selkie before answering. "I think we can do that," he said, and she did not contradict him.

"I'm coming," Kyra said. I knew better than to argue with her when she used that tone.

"That's fine," I said, looking at Alexis.

She sighed. "I know, I know. Stay here and mind the store." She gave me a hard look. "Don't make me regret not coming with you, Winter. I don't want to have to find another teacher."

I always feel guilty about how glad I am that Alexis got her first lesson in prices and consequences before I became responsible for her. On the one hand, it was horrific for her, and involved quite a few other people dying too. But it also gave her a lasting awareness of how dangerous and cruel the world can be. Other people, under her circumstances, would have thought that they were magic-wielding badasses and resented being excluded. Alexis was aware enough of her own limitations to know that coming with us would be a very bad idea.

"Where are we going?" Jackal asked, hurrying to keep up with me.

"Munich," I said. I glanced at her. "You don't have to come. It might be dangerous."

She spat and fondled the hilt of her knife. "Fuck that. Wishbone's one of mine. If he's there, I'm going."

I could understand that. "All right. Aiko—"

"Don't *even* try to leave me here," she interrupted.

"I was going to say, I have your carbine, is there anything else you need?"

"Oh. No, I've already got my armor, so that should be it."

"Okay." I glanced at Moray. "I'm guessing you're armed?"

His smile was about as friendly as that exhibited by a triangular fin rapidly approaching a wounded seal. "Heavily."

"I'm going to change before we go in this time," Kyra said, pretty much removing any concern regarding her equipment. I suppose you could devise weaponry for a werewolf in fur, but it really isn't necessary. Claws and teeth are more than adequate for most tasks.

"All right. I guess we're going through Leipzig again—"

Moray cleared his throat. "Actually, I can take us directly to Zhang's club."

"Anticipated this?"

"You aren't the only one who can predict the obvious," he said, walking to the edge of the road. I felt him gathering his magic, human-scented with a touch of saltwater, as he began constructing the portal.

I chuckled. "Fair enough." I looked around, making sure everyone was ready to go, and paused when I realized that Ash was still there.

She noticed me noticing. "I am coming with you," she said, calm as usual but still very much a statement rather than a question. "The possibility that my presence will have a significant contribution to the completion of your task is non-negligible."

"I am *not* telling Bryan you got killed because I dragged you into a firefight."

She smiled faintly, clearly amused by my concern. "As I have said, I do not consider the danger serious enough to warrant an extreme response. I wish to be of use in this matter, Winter."

"Bloody hell, you talk weird," Jackal muttered.

"I have had relatively little opportunity to interact with ordinary humans," Ash said, seeming quite unperturbed. "And my education has been...perhaps unusual would be the best descriptor."

Jackal stared at her for a second or two, then rolled her eyes and looked away. "Academy brats," she muttered, just under the threshold of hearing of a normal human.

Moray was faster and smoother at gating than I was, but not as smooth as Aiko, and I'd seen people way faster. He took us from Colorado to a part of Daylight Faerie I'd never seen before, on the shore of an enormous lake. Between the saltwater scent of his magic, his—likely assumed—name, and the fact that every one of the locations he'd mentioned working in was on the coast, he definitely seemed to have an aquatic theme going.

That impression was not noticeably reduced by his next choice of layover. It was a spot on the shore of an enormous underground river in the middle of a small city, in a domain I'd never visited before and didn't recognize. Kyra changed while we waited for him to get the second portal running.

After that, we were in Munich, just forty minutes and a little unpleasantness after we'd left. I still found it hard to believe, sometimes, that it was possible to do things like that.

More specifically, we were in the alley down the street from Zhang's club. It was almost midnight, local time, and primetime for a nightclub. It no longer looked bland and anonymous. Near-ultraviolet light pulsed and flared on the building's exterior, and my ears were sensitive enough to hear the bass from across the street. There was a line stretching around the corner waiting to get in, and a bouncer standing outside collecting cover charges. He was a big, ugly guy, with a nose that looked like it had been broken more than once and plenty of scars and tattoos. The cheap suit emphasized, rather than hiding, the fact that he was clearly a man accustomed to and employed for violence.

It seemed incredibly tawdry, and I was snarling with distaste just looking at the place. Never mind the smuggling, even Zhang's cover operations were distasteful. How many people passed through those doors, how much money was spent, in pursuit of a happiness that would never be found inside?

Humans disgust me, sometimes.

"Okay," I said, turning my back on the sight. "Is everyone ready?"

Snowflake growled under her breath and Kyra whined an affirmative. I could feel both of them in my mind, a complex blend of eagerness, fear, bloodlust, and excitement. Jackal grunted, staring at the people lined up outside with an expression of disgust that likely mirrored my own. Ash simply nodded, face unreadable, while Aiko fondled her tanto and grinned. Moray took a pair of sunglasses out of his suit pocket and slipped them on.

I stared at the Watcher, in his pitch black suit and black sunglasses, and wasn't sure whether to be amused or disgusted. "Are you going for the Men in Black look on purpose?" I demanded.

"Oh, absolutely. Of course, the shades are also a focus to improve my magical senses." He smiled thinly. "You aren't the only one who can be creative, Winter."

Apparently not. It was a useful reminder; no matter how amusing a Watcher might seem, it was always best to assume they were a cunning genius with five aces up their sleeve.

"All right," I said. "Let's go."

People got out of our way. Perhaps they saw my expression, which was probably not very pleasant. More likely it was that I had Snowflake on one side and Kyra on the other. Kyra's only average-size for a werewolf, but that still comes to almost two hundred pounds of angry canine staring you down, and Snowflake is a very scary husky.

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Whatever the reason, by the time we'd made it to the doors the street was practically deserted. The bouncer watched us approach nervously. We didn't have any visible weapons, excepting maybe a couple of knives, but Snowflake and Kyra more than made up for it. Besides, you see that many unfriendly people approaching you as a group, you get uncomfortable.

"Get Schulz," I said to him. "Now."

I don't know if the bouncer knew English, or he just recognized Schulz's name, but he went without arguing.

We waited for several tense minutes in silence. Finally Schulz appeared, sans bouncer. He opened the door, his expression promising a horrible fate for whoever had interrupted his work. Then he saw who was there, and immediately swung the door shut again.

I put my foot in the way, keeping him from closing it, and grabbed him by the collar. "Schulz," I said quietly, "my patience has been severely tried by the past few days. I'm telling you this as a fair warning, so that you don't do anything stupid. I'm not in the mood. Clear?"

He nodded and stammered an acknowledgment. I let him go. "Good. I want this club emptied. No customers, no employees. I want this to happen within fifteen minutes."

"I can't do that...the cost...I don't have the authority," he stammered, semi-coherently.

"Schulz," I said, calm and quiet and very cold, "perhaps I didn't make myself clear. Either you clear the building, or I will do so in a way that prevents you from ever reopening it. Your choice." How, exactly, I would do that I wasn't sure. I mean, I could probably scare the customers away—walking in with guns blazing would send them running for the hills, I was fairly sure—but I could hardly afford police attention right now.

Fortunately, Schulz didn't know that. He looked uncertain for a second or two, then his features firmed and he nodded tightly. "How should I do that?"

"How should I know? Just get them out, *without* bringing anyone else in. I don't care how you do it." He nodded again, and started back into the club. "No," I said. "You don't leave my sight."

Schulz hesitated, looked at my expression and those of the people with me, and then shouted something. The bouncer we'd scared off came trotting up the stairs a moment later, and they had a brief conversation in German. I glanced at Aiko, who nodded; Schulz was giving the appropriate orders. A moment later the bouncer went back into the club, shouting something.

"Great," I said. "Come on, Schulz, you're waiting with us." I almost dragged him across the street to the alley, where we could watch the door. I didn't want to unnerve the patrons more than was necessary, and seeing us would definitely have unnerved them.

It took surprisingly little time for them to leave. I didn't know what excuse Schulz had come up with, but people started flooding out of the nightclub within a minute. Most of them were dressed in

more-or-less typical nightclub fare, lots of leather and not a whole lot else. A few had much the same scheme, but in a standardized format that made me think they were probably the waitresses Schulz had mentioned, or possibly the strippers. The bartenders got more formal uniforms, and the bouncers came last in their cheap suits, herding the rest in front of them.

"Is that everyone?" I asked quietly. Schulz nodded. "Good. Come on."

Inside, the club somehow looked even more depressing than it had before. The music was still playing, dance music heavy on the bass and light on melody, harmony, and indeed any musical skills other than keeping a beat. The lights were all in the blue-violet spectrum, and strobed unpleasantly. The smells were thicker, inside, sweat and smoke and booze mingling into something truly nasty.

This place reeks, Snowflake said disgustedly. *Why would people pay to be here?* I didn't have an answer for her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wolf," Schulz said once we were inside. "I want you to know I have nothing against you, personally. But my orders were very specific." Then he barked out three or four syllables in German.

Schulz had no magic to speak of. I could smell him, and his smell was the weak, pale disinfectant of a human with no more power than average.

Zhang, on the other hand, was an experienced mage, and it seemed reasonable to assume that he was pretty good at it. He was, for example, good enough to design spells to react to a certain person saying certain words.

Thus, when Schulz said whatever the code phrase was, there was a surge of power that was strong enough to be slightly disorienting. And then things started coming alive.

I had thought that the floor was made out of concrete, until the concrete started to move and I realized the truth. Parts might have been simple concrete, but at least half of it had been golems—beings carved from stone, then animated by a wizard, probably Zhang himself. They weren't alive, or conscious, but they could be programmed to follow simple orders, and magic-reinforced stone is damn near indestructible.

I'd fought a golem once before. A witch had used the thing as a guard. It had been just it against me, Snowflake, and half a dozen werewolves, and it had kicked our asses. I only beat it by hitting it with half a dozen high-powered grenades at once.

Granted, that golem had been ten feet tall, and these things were little bigger than the average human. Hell, if I landed a solid hit with Tyrting I might be able to decapitate them. I wasn't sure whether that would be lethal, but it seemed like a decent guess.

Of course, there were also something like thirty of them, granite monsters with blank stone masks where their faces should be. Some of them came up between us and the stairs, cutting off any

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escape, while others were between us and the bar, the office, throughout the room. One golem sprouted directly under Kyra and she jumped to the ground with a startled yip. More stepped out of the walls, leaving hollow spaces behind them.

Holy shit. I did not have that many grenades.

"I'm sorry that things had to take this route," Schulz said again, making his way through the crowd. The golems let him pass without reaction. "Goodbye, Mr. Wolf." He walked into the office and closed the door behind himself.

I summoned Tyrfing and unsheathed it. I looked from it to the golems. The comparison was not a comforting one.

The golems charged, silent but for the sound of stony feet on concrete. I laughed and went to meet them.

Chapter Eleven

The first priority was the golem that had come up in our midst. It turned and swung one arm in an overhand strike at Kyra. The things weren't armed, but I knew from experience that they didn't have to be. A stone fist propelled by superhuman strength hit with enough force to shatter concrete, never mind little things like bones and organs.

Maybe Zhang hadn't reinforced the stone as much as the last golem I'd encountered, or maybe I'd just gotten stronger. Whatever the reason, Tyrfing managed to cut entirely through the golem's forearm, throwing off the swing.

It rounded on me, already attacking again without slowing down. One of the benefits of a soldier without self-awareness was that they didn't react much to damage.

One of the downsides is that they tend not to be much good at tactics. By turning its attention to me, the golem had given Kyra time to get her mental feet under herself and act. She lunged and bit down on the golem's leg. She couldn't penetrate—werewolf teeth are sharp, but there are limits—but she could grip it, and she did, tugging it off balance. That gave *me* time to duck inside its reach and get a shoulder under it, tossing it backwards to land in a clump of its fellows. Three golems fell to the ground, and we had a chance to breathe.

That also gave me a chance to see what was happening. And holy shit, was it terrifying.

In many ways, Aiko, Kyra, and Snowflake were the worst off. They were all deadly, of course, but their weapons weren't much use in this fight. Teeth and claws would skid off of the golems' concrete skin, and Aiko's carbine was relatively small-caliber. The bullets weren't armor-piercing, and would ricochet off the golems, doing more harm to her allies than the enemy. Her wakizashi was made from ordinary steel, and couldn't cut stone.

Bottom line, they could aggravate, annoy, and distract the golems, but not inflict real harm upon them.

The same could not be said for the rest of us.

Moray had a short length of some dark wood in his right hand, a focus of some kind, that blazed to my senses with the power he was forcing through it. One of the golems threw a punch at him, but it never got close. A kinetic barrier warped the air around the Watcher, and for all their strength they couldn't touch him through his magic. He bobbed and wove through the crowd, making his way towards the bar. I didn't know what he was planning, but I was guessing it would be good; a combat-specialist mage is a force to be reckoned with.

Jackal was crouching with her knife drawn, a feral and vicious snarl on her face. One of the golems approached her and she threw herself on it, slashing at it repeatedly. No individual attack did

any real damage, but she was moving *fast*, too fast to see clearly. Within a couple seconds the golem's head and neck were scored with dozens of fine cuts. She threw herself off of it, literally, and it staggered sideways and fell. Its head shattered when it hit the ground, and it did not get back up.

As for Ash...well, I got one look at Ash and suddenly understood why she and Bryan had dismissed my fears for her safety. Oh yeah, I understood.

I'd always wondered what that stuffed cat really was. It seemed like a simple affectation, a meaningless idiosyncrasy, but I didn't believe that. It smelled of magic, in tones quite different from Ash herself, and some of the things she'd said implied that it was a sapient being in its own right.

Well, now I got my answer—or, at least, I couldn't think of another explanation for the thing standing next to her.

I couldn't see quite what it was. It looked something like a large wolf, and something like a scrawny mountain lion, and not really much like either. Its fur was pure white and stood on end, making it hard to guess just how big it was, and its eyes blazed azure. Its body was wreathed in lightning, casting flickering shadows across the floor.

As I watched one of the golems get too close to Ash, provoking the beast to attack. It pounced on the golem, moving almost too quickly to see. The fight was over before it started. Claws and teeth cut stone like cheese, lightning crackled on the air, and the golem landed on the ground in pieces before it could so much as take a swing at its opponent. The lightning-beast stood, threw back its head and howled, a sound like the crack of thunder.

Ash, for her part, stood and watched. The bone dagger was in her right hand and soft, subtle power gleamed at her left, but she made no move to attack, just stood and watched with a sad, resolute expression.

Damn.

That was all that I could see before the golems pressed in, and I had to focus on preserving my own skin. Snowflake and Kyra, recognizing that speed and mobility were their greatest defenses, sprinted off into the crowd of golems, jostling them and knocking them over. They did no damage, but they disrupted the charge, preventing the whole lot of them from arriving at once. And, while dogs and werewolves weren't especially suited for destroying golems, the golems proved ineffective at harming the canids as well. They had been designed for fighting things shaped roughly like humans, and weren't prepared for dealing with quadrupeds.

The first golem reached me, and I met its swing with Tyrfin. It was stronger than me, but I was used to fighting things stronger than me. I parried at an angle, deflecting the force of the blow aside rather than meeting it directly, and then counterattacked. Jackal's success suggested that the head was the key component of these golems, so I thrust straight through this one's face, throwing my weight behind it. Tyrfin sank in to a depth of six inches or so, and the golem collapsed, its own weight pulling it off of the blade.

Aiko stepped up beside me, wakizashi in one hand and tanto in the other. Her face was pale, but set in a fierce smile. She flicked attacks at the enemies' faces and arms, distracting them. They retaliated, without success. She was too quick to hit, too agile to catch. Her attacks were, ultimately, no threat, but the golems weren't smart enough to recognize that.

Aiko and I have fought together a lot. We didn't need to talk to sort out the best strategy to use. She was the distraction, the annoyance, keeping them off-balance and setting me up to actually destroy them. I did, launching short, brutal attacks whenever they left an opening. I removed or shattered heads when I could, struck off limbs when I couldn't. They didn't stop when they lost a limb, but the removed portion stopped functioning when it was separated from the main body and they weren't terribly dangerous once they were two or three limbs down.

I maimed or destroyed half a dozen of the golems in the first ten seconds, but they kept coming, pressing in around us. They were on all sides now, swarms of them. Aiko and I were standing back-to-back, our motions frantic. I wasn't even trying to remove them from the fight at this point. It was all I could do to remain standing and keep enough space clear to move in. I tripped them with tangling shadows, sent them stumbling back with blasts of wind, picked them up and bodily threw them away. It was a losing effort, though, and I knew it. I could keep them from overwhelming us, but they weren't being injured by my attacks, and I was tiring rapidly.

I got only flashbulb glimpses of the larger fight. Kyra and Snowflake were nowhere to be seen, lost in the crowd. Jackal had vanished, which was probably a good sign; she wasn't the type to go down without a fight. Ash and her protector stood in the center of an empty space littered with bits of stone; it was clearly capable of dealing with them, but it was also clearly more concerned with keeping Ash safe than bailing the rest of us out.

Overall, things didn't look especially good for us. Ash might get out; that lightning-thing seemed more than up to the task of protecting her, and the golems didn't seem inclined to mess with it. Jackal might *already* have escaped, for all I could tell, and I thought Kyra and Snowflake might manage to weave through the crowd out onto the street. Once they were outside, they were fast enough that the golems would never manage to catch them.

But I was pretty sure Aiko and I wouldn't be able to get out of that room. We'd be dragged down by the weight of numbers before we ever reached the door.

Fortunately, I'd forgotten about Moray.

I'd known that I wasn't particularly combat-capable, as mages go. I'd known that my tricks had about as much in common with true battle-magic as a canoe had with a battleship. But there was an *enormous* gulf between knowing that conceptually and seeing it in action.

There was a sudden, sharp detonation, as loud as a gunshot, and the golem in front of me collapsed to the ground. Its head was gone, just *gone*, exploded into shards no larger than my smallest finger by pure kinetic force. I looked up to see the Watcher standing on the bar.

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He didn't look funny or ridiculous in his three-piece suit and sunglasses anymore. He just looked scary. Magic was gathered around him in a cloak so thick I could smell it from across the room, and that wand was literally glowing, a piercing blue-green light brighter than a floodlight.

They'd had a sink behind the bar, a large one, and taps for drinks. Alcohol, soda, tonic water, whatever; all of them had burst at his touch. The spraying liquid didn't pool on the ground, the way it should have. It flowed *up*, through the air, coiling translucent snakes that merged and spun and danced. Moray stood in the center of it all, water flowing around him without ever dampening his suit. There had to be a dozen or two gallons already, and more was flowing out rapidly.

As I watched, he made a slight gesture with the wand, his mouth moving, and a jet of water no thicker than a pencil shot across the room and struck a golem in the head. It must have been at an incredible pressure, because it immediately began drilling into the golem, abrading the stone away. He swept the jet from side to side across the crowd of golems. The wounds thus inflicted weren't severe—he didn't hold it on any one golem long enough to do much—but they were numerous, affecting lots and lots of the golems, and they drew attention.

As a mass, the golems began to turn and move in his direction. It was a much-needed reprieve—werewolf or not, I can't sustain that level of physical effort indefinitely, to say nothing of the magic—also a concern. There were at least twenty golems still standing, and I didn't know whether his barrier could hold up under that much force.

As it turned out, I didn't need to worry. A moment later the pipes feeding the sprinkler system above the golems burst, and Moray had all the water he could have wanted to work with.

Water poured across the ground, flowing towards the bar at the center of the room. Moray snatched globes the size of my fist out of the air and threw them at the golems, slowing them down, bunching them up, while water swirled and eddied around their feet. It was only ankle deep, but that's deep enough to throw off your balance when it's moving forcefully and unpredictably around.

I stared, perplexed. I'd clearly been right that Moray was good with water, but he was still doing a hell of a lot of heavy lifting there, for no clear gain. He was capable of destroying golems—the blast of kinetic force that had decapitated the one in front of me was proof of that—but these games weren't harming them. He'd managed to get most of the golems focused on himself, and there was plenty of water moving around, but—

I suddenly saw what Moray was planning, and gaped. "Snowflake!" I screamed, both out loud and mentally. "Kyra! *Get out of the water!*"

I don't know whether they heard me over the music, or they just saw the same thing I had, but two furry forms sprinted out of the crowd a moment later, moving at top speed.

A moment later, Ash's companion threw itself into the fray.

The thunder-beast was clearly intelligent, because it waited for almost all of the golems to be standing in the water before it threw itself in, and it led with a ranged salvo. Bolts of lightning peeled off the aura enveloping it and darted at golems. They didn't leave craters in the stone, but they made the golems stagger and fall.

I'm not sure why electricity would harm a golem. I mean, I don't know a lot about the topic, but it doesn't seem like rocks should be particularly bothered by it. Maybe it was the magic animating them that was being affected, or maybe there was something special about the lightning wreathing Ash's...pet? Friend? Whatever, it sure as hell wasn't natural electricity.

Anyway, when that thing hit the water, golems started stumbling and staggering around. And then it went on the offensive, and golems started dropping to the ground.

It moved fast, literally fast as lightning, and it was visible only as a blur. Deep claw marks just *appeared* on the golems' heads, chests, limbs, as they struggled to rise and the lightning continued pumping into them through the water. Moray watched it dispassionately from on high, occasionally tossing blasts of force into the crowd to finish off any golem that seemed particularly reluctant to die, or looked like it might get out of the killing ground. The thunder-beast seemed to fly, everywhere at once, attacking the golems from every side.

I cut down the last few that were still attacking us almost without paying attention, staring at the show. The lightning, the strobe lights, and Moray's wand combined to create a mad, almost hallucinatory picture, one that was disturbingly and undeniably beautiful. The last of the golems fell to the ground in pieces, and the thunder-beast stopped moving. Its sides were heaving, head thrown back, as the lightning slowly faded.

With the perfect timing so seldom exhibited by the real world, the song came to an end.

The thunder-beast padded back to Ash's side, changing between steps into the stuffed cat. It kept walking, on two legs now, and she picked it up. It made no effort to seem inanimate now, staring around itself with button eyes and casually licking its front paws clean with a long black tongue.

Moray stopped the water pouring out of the pipes with a casual gesture and hopped down off of the bar. The puddle on the floor rolled away from him, not even touching his shoes, and then flowed up into the mass that was still following him around. "I see Zhang hasn't improved his security measures," he called dryly, walking back towards us.

I stared. "His security's been that serious everywhere?" I sheathed Tyrfing, very carefully; it hadn't been out long enough to make my luck really, truly, dangerously bad, but it always paid to be careful around Tyrfing.

The Watcher shrugged. "Heavier most places. I guess he didn't want to use anything too dramatic in the middle of downtown."

"And you dealt with it *solo*?"

He smiled thinly. "I'm good at my job, Winter. And my job is killing things."

Aiko paid no attention to any of that. She stalked over to Ash instead. "That's a raiju," she said, her voice somewhere between astonished and accusatory. "Why in hell does a half-breed fae have a raiju with her?"

"Please," the stuffed cat said between licks. "You're a kitsune who's screwing a god-born werewolf, and you're asking that question?" The raiju's voice was male, fairly deep, and the inside of its—his?—mouth was pure black.

"Hell yes I am. You people don't even talk to *us*."

"Excuse me," Ash said calmly, "but is it not the case that we should complete our task here before having this discussion?"

At least one person here can keep her priorities straight, Snowflake said, clearly amused. Schulz is still in his office, by the way. I can smell him.

"Good point," I said. "Jackal? Are you still around here somewhere?"

"I ain't leaving yet," she said, jogging down the stairs. She'd clearly bolted to the street outside as soon as the fighting started, and my respect for her went up another notch. Anyone with arms can swing a knife around. You need a brain to figure out when a fight's too much for you, and run away if that's what the situation demands.

"Good," I said, turning towards the office.

Schulz had locked the door, which slowed us down not at all. It was a cheap interior door, and the lock was more to keep drunk patrons from wandering in thinking it was the bathroom than to stop an assault. I kicked it down and walked in without slowing. Schulz was sitting at his desk, on the phone—with Zhang, presumably. He started when I kicked the door in and then stared at us, his face set in an expression of absolute shock.

I grabbed him by the lapels, picked him up, and slammed him into the wall, his feet six inches off the ground. It was a bit of a workout—he was on the heavy side—but I am a werewolf, and I was currently absolutely *pissed*. Aiko darted past me and yanked the phone line, and the rest of the gang piled in after her.

"If you run," I told Schulz quietly, "I will cut off your legs. Do you understand me?" He flinched at my tone of voice, which was probably even more coldly threatening than I had intended, and then nodded frantically. "Good," I said, and tossed him to the ground. "Could you watch him, Kyra?" I asked.

She barked an affirmative and then walked over to straddle him and stare into his face from about six inches away, her half-open jaws dripping saliva onto his face. He flinched away, provoking a growl, and then settled in to wait. I could clearly smell that he'd pissed himself in terror.

I was smiling as I walked over to examine the locked door. I have to admit, Kyra makes a pretty effective thug. I'd have been terrified too.

My smile faded as I examined the door. There was something different about it. "Warded?" I asked Moray, who was already there. The gallons and gallons of water were still following him around.

He nodded, staring at the door. "Pretty heavily. Looks like a mix of fire and electricity."

"Can you get through it?"

He shook his head. "Like I said, it isn't my specialty. I could call Monica. She's pretty good at dealing with Zhang's wards by now."

"No time. He'll be here by then." I looked at it, weighing options in my head. "I might be able to get through. But not without triggering it."

Jackal snorted. "Amateurs," she muttered contemptuously, brushing past to examine it. She looked at it, sniffed a couple of times, then leaned forward and licked it, grimacing at the taste. "Two minutes," she said, with perfect confidence. "Now back off. I need space."

I shrugged and did. If she thought she could get through, I wasn't going to gainsay her.

I'm not sure quite what Jackal did to break the ward, even though I stood and watched the whole thing. She started by nicking her finger with her knife and drawing on it in blood, odd designs placed seemingly at random. She murmured cajolingly in a language I didn't recognize (a quick glance at Aiko confirmed that she didn't either). She trailed her fingers over the locks, leaving smears of blood. The whole time I smelled her magic, not particularly strong but subtle and confident.

Finally, almost exactly two minutes later, the last energies of the ward faded and died. "How did you do that?" Moray asked, his voice almost awestruck.

Jackal snorted. "I been around. Now did you want in here or not? I can't do the locks."

"That won't be a problem," I said confidently. "Will it, Mr. Schulz?"

"N-no," he stammered, as Kyra stepped aside. She followed him to the door, her nose about six inches from the back of his knee, panting slightly. Kyra knows how to make a statement. Schulz punched in a ten-digit code on the keypad and opened the combination lock. "I, I can't open the padlock," he said, sounding so scared I thought he might throw up. "Mr. Zhang took my key. This morning."

"Not a problem," I said confidently, leaning forward to look at it. I'd been practicing, and it took me less than ten seconds to open it with magic. Moving tumblers into position with air magic is tricky, but I've gotten pretty good at it. I twisted it open and pulled it off, dropping it on the ground.

"You're fast," Jackal said, looking at me with something like respect.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

I grunted and shoved the door open. On the other side was a narrow concrete staircase, completely unlit. I could see all of six feet by the dim light of the office. Moray stepped forward, his floating mass of water wrapping around him like a cloak, and slipped his wand out of its pocket. It started to glow, casting a vivid, eerie blue-green light. It was bright, almost painfully so.

The staircase led into a perfectly normal storage room. There were racks of bottles, kegs standing along the walls—everything, in other words, that you might expect to find in the cellar of a nightclub. It was a little larger than I would have guessed, a little more spacious, but otherwise unremarkable.

I frowned as a familiar, unpleasant scent hit my nostrils, and glanced at Kyra. Her expression told me that she smelled the same thing, and had drawn the same conclusions. Kyra's many things, but innocent and naive haven't been among them for a long time now.

I followed the smell to another door, this one simple wood and unmarked. It wasn't even locked; Zhang had been confident that no one would make it down here. I opened it, with a sick feeling of nausea, and was both disgusted and unsurprised at what I saw.

Moray had said that Zhang would ship any contraband that was worth his while. Well, he hadn't overstated the case, and I shouldn't have been surprised at what we found in his storeroom. After all, one of the biggest black market commodities has always been other people.

There were around twenty people in there. They'd been hogtied and gagged with duct tape and dumped down here to stew in their own filth. That was what Kyra and I had smelled. They flinched away from the light, to the extent that they were able, and I wondered how long they'd been in the dark. There were no light fixtures down here; Schulz must bring his own light when they needed fed or cleaned, and he hadn't come since this morning at the latest. I believed that Zhang had taken his key, and he couldn't have gotten in without it.

There was one other detail that made it offensive, that took it from the merely disgusting and reprehensible to the truly, absolutely evil. Namely, the average age of the prisoners seemed to be about ten or twelve. There were a few that might have been in their mid-teens, a few that couldn't have been older than eight.

I felt a sudden surge of disgust, hatred, and contempt. Some idle part of my mind wondered how much of it was mine, and how much came from Kyra or Snowflake. Certainly they both reacted with a similar blend of emotions. Ash's face was set in a cold, flat expression, and she had stopped stroking the raiju.

"Did you know about this?" I asked Moray, feeling a very calm, very cold anger building. I am not a saint, but there are things I will not tolerate.

He looked like he was only with difficulty restraining from violence. "Officially? No. But I'm sure someone did."

Aiko had been staring through the door for the past several seconds, her face dangerously blank. Now, suddenly, she grabbed Schulz and slammed him into the casks lining the wall, hard enough to rattle his skull. "You sick son of a bitch," she growled at him, her face about two inches from his.

"Start cutting them loose," I said quietly to the others. They moved without complaint—even Moray, who I'd half-expected to insist on helping interrogate Schulz. I walked over to stand beside Aiko, feeling oddly disconnected. That was a bad sign. It usually meant I was truly angry, and that meant that there were going to be bodies on the ground soon.

"How long has this been going on?" Aiko demanded, shaking him.

"I, I can't. Zhang, he...I can't tell you."

Aiko punched him in the face. "You sick fucking bastard," she whispered. "Tell me what I want to know, or I swear to God that if they ever find enough of the body to bury they'll develop a drinking problem over what happened to the rest of it." Wow. I didn't think I'd ever seen Aiko quite this angry.

Schulz looked at me imploringly. "Please," he whimpered.

"I seldom act from anger, Mr. Schulz," I said, my voice even and remote. "This is not because I am a gentle, peaceful person. It is because I know that if I do act in anger, I will not stop until I have overreacted seriously." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It didn't make me feel any calmer. "I am telling you this," I continued, "so that you will understand that I am not joking or exaggerating when I tell you that you have made me really, truly angry. I have treated you with respect, with courtesy, and I am *sick* of it." I smiled, and he flinched. "You will answer our questions, Mr. Schulz. One way or another."

He gulped. "Seven years," he whispered. "I've worked here seven years. Zhang's been doing it at least that long."

"How many?" Aiko snarled.

"I, I don't know. I don't keep count."

"Guess."

"A few hundred. Less than a thousand."

"Who is he selling them to?"

"I don't know," he whimpered. She shook him again. "I don't!" he cried, "I really don't. Zhang handled all the transport."

I believed him. Schulz was obviously a bit player in this operation, and Zhang was too smart to tell him more than was necessary to do his job.

Aiko believed him too. She glanced at me, her expression questioning.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

I've spent a lot of time with Aiko. I knew what she was asking. I nodded before I could reconsider.

"You deserve worse than this," Aiko whispered. Then she kned him in the crotch, hard, and threw him face down on the floor. He lay there whimpering.

I rammed Tyrfing through his back. The sword passed cleanly through him and sunk into the concrete two or three inches. "I kill you in Scáthach's name," I said quietly. "Rot in hell." I wrenched the sword back out and then cut off his head. He would have died anyway, but there was no need to make it slow. Vile, greedy little man or not, tormenting Schulz before he died would accomplish nothing.

I turned around and found a whole bunch of people staring at me. Ash looked calm as ever, while Jackal and Kyra clearly approved. Most of the kids just looked scared, and numb.

Numb. That was about how I felt too. "Come on," I said, sheathing Tyrfing. "We need to get out of here before Zhang shows."

Moray nodded, still clearly furious, and started making the portal.

Chapter Twelve

Back in Colorado, we turned the kids over to Sveinn to be cleaned up and cared for. They would need food, water, probably medical treatment. Moray went to tell his boss what had happened.

I went to talk to Jackal.

I found her outside, near the edge of the trees. She was sitting with one of the people we'd rescued, a scrawny guy who looked like he was sixteen and smelled like he hadn't been clean for years. "Is this Wishbone?" I asked. Jackal nodded.

He looked at me. His eyes were haunted, and I didn't think it was because of being kidnapped. He gave the impression of being someone who had seen more than his share of misfortune. "You Wolf?" he asked, his voice distant.

"Yeah. Do you think you could do me a favor?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. What?"

"Were you given a message of some kind? Something maybe a little cryptic?"

He stared into the distance. "Favors aren't free," he said finally.

I blinked. "Are you really—" I began.

He shook his head. "No," he interrupted. "That was the message. Some Sidhe told me the day before Morgenstern grabbed me. Don't know what it means."

"Huh," I said. "Thanks."

Jackal looked at me. "You taking Zhang down?"

"I'm going to try."

She considered that, then nodded. "We ain't up to that," she admitted, no trace of shame in her voice. "You ain't bad, Wolf. See you around."

I nodded and left them there.

I couldn't figure what the message was supposed to mean. Scáthach had said that Morgenstern was smuggling a cipher, something that could be used to decode another message. Well, if this was a cipher, I couldn't figure out how.

I also didn't have time to think about it right now. I had things to do.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

I found Moray outside the building. He was staring at nothing, his face grim.

"They're letting him go," I said quietly, walking up beside him. "Aren't they?"

He nodded tightly. "Same story I've heard a thousand times. 'The greatest good is served by preserving stability and maintaining the ability of the Watchers to protect humanity.'"

"They're going to let him get away with selling kids as slaves?"

Moray's voice was bleak. "They can't prove anything. Not without admitting they know what we just did."

"I don't like that answer very much."

"Neither do I."

"What if there's another one?"

He looked at me guardedly. "What are you suggesting?"

"The Watchers are already denying one operation. They can deny another."

"What you're talking about goes a bit further than just disrupting a shipment."

"That's kind of the point," I said dryly. "Look, I'm sure your bosses know where to find him. All those times you wished for backup? Well, this time you've got it."

"It won't make a difference," he said reluctantly. "You know that. I hate to admit it, but they're right about that. Zhang just moves the goods. So long as someone wants to buy and someone wants to sell, there'll be people like him."

I knew that what he was saying was true. Killing Zhang wouldn't change anything, not really.

"Do you really believe this is the greater good?" I asked quietly.

He sighed. "I don't know. It's hard to see, sometimes."

"Yeah," I agreed. That was a sentiment I could get behind. "You know what isn't hard to see? Zhang takes peoples' freedom. Smuggling is one thing, I could tolerate smuggling for the greater good, but Zhang is not a smuggler. He takes away freedom, takes away choice. Not for the greater good, not in service to some ideal. He does it because he can, and because it profits him. And if he gets away, he's going to keep doing it."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Yeah. I know."

"Look," I pressed. "Call your boss—the big boss, I mean, not the one who thought he could bribe me with Conclave recognition. Ask her where Zhang's hiding—because I'm sure he's hiding right now, after what we just did. I bet you she'll answer. I bet you she meant for us to be having pretty much

exactly this conversation." I'd never quite gotten sure just how many layers of plans Watcher had the last time around, but I knew she was one of the smoothest operators I'd ever dealt with. That kind of long-term planning and manipulation was well within her purview.

Moray hesitated, then nodded. "That's her style," he admitted. "Look, I'll make the call. If she says yes, you're on."

"Good," I said, and went to get some food.

I found Snowflake, Kyra, and Aiko in the office on the third floor. Kyra looked bemused, insomuch as a wolf's face can manage the expression, to find herself in the room where she'd spent so much time as Alpha. Things hadn't changed much. I don't really spend much time in the office.

I walked in carrying several pounds of beef, most of it raw, and a few loaves of bread. It wasn't particularly tasty, but it would work. I'd gotten by for months at a time on a diet of raw meat and little else before Alexis ever showed up; I could handle a day. "Good news," I said, dropping the food on the desk. I unwrapped the raw meat and set it on the floor.

"Yeah?" Aiko asked. She was staring out the window at the trees.

"Yup. Moray's finding out where Zhang's fortress is, and then we're going to go take him down."

"You do realize what a stupid plan this is, right?" she said dryly. "We almost got taken out by the defenses around a minor hideout."

I hate to admit it, Snowflake said reluctantly, but she's got a point.

"I know." For several seconds the only sounds came from Kyra and Snowflake eating. Not for nothing do they call it wolfing food. "Do you think we should back down?" I asked reluctantly.

Kyra growled in a menacing, aggressive way, making her opinion clear. *Hell, Snowflake said, amused. I've got no problem with it. I've never wanted to die in my sleep anyway. Just making sure we were all on the same page.*

Aiko was slower to answer. "I don't know. I mean, it's just...things are nice, you know? Things are finally going *right*." She sighed. "I guess you always have to pay it back. I thought I'd gotten off easy, but I guess it just took longer coming around than I thought." She grabbed a sandwich. "Fuck it," she said through a mouthful of roast beef. "Let's go kill the bastard."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," she said, her eyes hard and cold. "He deserves it. Besides, it's been ages since we had a proper battle."

I grinned faintly. "Yeah, it has. What do you say we make a real party out of it?"

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

She looked at me and started to smile.

Fifteen minutes later Moray came in and told us that Zhang was at his main base of operations, a heavily-fortified manor in the Himalayas. He also, more quietly, said that Watcher had given unofficial approval to our plan. We were permitted to remove Zhang, permanently, by any means necessary.

Most people don't take phrases like that seriously. They don't really mean it when they say things like "by any means necessary" or "at all costs." I was pretty sure Watcher did. No expense too high, collateral damage not a concern.

I don't like being handed a blank check like that. I'm always afraid of what I might do with it.

"So do we have a plan?" Moray asked.

"You won't like it."

"Try me."

I told him. He didn't like it. I inquired whether he had a better idea. He was quiet for several minutes, and then told me no, he didn't have any suggestions.

Moray left to get more armaments, presumably from his home in Seattle. Unless he had a stash nearby, which he probably did; that seemed like his style. I thought that was a great idea, and went back to the mansion to do the same.

I always carry a decent supply of equipment. But, werewolf or not, you can only carry so much at one time, and it's important to pick your gear carefully. On the last trip out, I hadn't really been expecting trouble—I'd just been going to a meeting, after all—and I'd chosen my kit appropriately. I'd been carrying a lot of items suitable for hiding and running away, with an emphasis on not being overtly threatening or conspicuous.

Well, right now I had different priorities. We were going to break and kill whatever and whomever got in our way. I could put a pleasant spin on it, and it might be the only way to resolve the situation, but that didn't change the fact that what we were planning was to go and murder people, at least some of whom probably didn't deserve it.

So what I'm getting at is that being inconspicuous and nonthreatening weren't on the table anymore, and I didn't even try. I put on my armor, including the helmet and gauntlets, and grabbed my shotgun. I was still carrying a few stored spells designed for producing cover or concealment, but mostly I'd switched to more aggressive ones, a mix of explosives and a couple more exotic weapons. A few grenades, a couple of knives, and my favorite pistol rounded out the mix.

I also helped both Snowflake and Kyra into their armor. Kyra's was a standard werewolf design, heavy plates of steel over the back, chest, and flanks, leaving the legs and most of the head uncovered.

She'd brought it with her, assuming that things would turn violent at some point—which, let's be honest, she was around me. It was a fair assumption.

Snowflake's armor was a little more exotic. I'd purchased it custom from the same kitsune who made both my armor and Aiko's, at a moderately exorbitant price. It had thick plates of steel inlaid with silver covering her chest and sides, and a mix of scale armor and chainmail along the legs, throat, and head—although, unlike Kyra's, her armor was covered in spikes and sharpened ridges, making any attempt at grappling with her a risky proposition. Her paws were covered by tailored metal sheaths, complete with oversized steel claws. It was colored white with swirls of pale blue, making her look almost ghostly. The whole thing was lined with extra-thick Kevlar, and between that and the metal she was probably safe from anything short of anti-tank rounds.

It was fairly heavy armor. A normal husky couldn't have stood up in it, let alone sprinted. Fortunately, Snowflake was not normal, or anything like it. She was stronger than she should be, and the spells woven into her collar made her significantly stronger than that. I'd actually designed those enchantments myself; there aren't very many witches specializing in affecting nonhumans. I'm not really sure how to compare her to other dogs—you can't just say how much she bench presses, for example—but she's at least as strong as most werewolves in fur, and faster.

Snowflake's kind of scary.

Aiko walked into the room, wearing her full suit of armor and carrying her carbine on a strap around her shoulder. She had her wakizashi on one hip and her tanto on the other. I looked at the demonic mask of her helmet, she looked at the lupine mask of mine, and then we both broke down laughing until we were leaning on each other to stay standing. She swayed sideways and I fell on my ass, which just made me laugh harder.

I don't get it. What's the joke?

Nothing, I said, still laughing. *It was just the image of the four of us, sitting here in our tin cans with all the guns and swords and explosives. And then Moray in his suit.*

Snowflake considered that for a minute. *Nope,* she said eventually. *Amusing contrast, but not that funny.*

"Okay," I said, getting myself back under control. "Ready to go pick up our guests?"

I couldn't see Aiko's face behind the helmet, but I could tell that she wasn't smiling anymore. "Yeah," she said. "Let's go."

The first stop was back at the pack house to pick up Vigdis and Haki. Vigdis was coming because I knew that she wouldn't balk at any task, however unpleasant. Most people react poorly when ordered to do things like finish off wounded enemies or shoot through human shields. They might obey, because

most people are disgustingly obedient, or they might not, because everyone has their limits—but either way, they hesitate. Vigdis doesn't. If dirty work needed doing, I could count on her to do it.

Haki was coming for the somewhat more straightforward reason that he was a badass. Now, don't get me wrong. All of the housecarls were soldiers, even Tindr. They could all fight. But Haki lived for it. He spent every free moment training, practicing, exercising. He could take any two of the other housecarls on any given day. Sveinn and Kjaran were skilled enough that it might take him a couple of minutes to beat them; for the rest it was a matter of seconds. The guy's absolutely lethal in a fight.

I might be able to take Haki, in a fair fight. But only because of Tyrfing and my magic. He's bigger, stronger, faster, and more skilled than I am, and all else being equal he would kick my ass.

He also redefines the term "lone wolf." Haki Who-Fights-Alone, they call him, a name with a lot of implications. He earned every one of them.

The six of us stood there in silence for a few minutes, holding our various weapons and growing increasingly impatient. I was just starting to wonder whether maybe this whole thing was a setup when the Watcher walked up.

Brick Anderson was a tall guy, and beanpole thin. He looked to be in his early twenties, and had for at least three or four years. He was currently wearing a long, hooded grey robe. He was carrying a wooden staff and a granite rod, and no other obvious weapons. It looked a little ridiculous, but I knew better. That robe was bulletproof, and the staff and rod were foci of some sort. I'd seen him go toe-to-toe with a skinwalker, and while he'd been badly outclassed he'd still held the thing off for almost a minute. I couldn't have done half as well.

"Brick," I said, nodding to him. "I'm glad you decided to come."

He smiled. "It isn't often I get to work with really skilled fighters," he said, casually dissing the rest of the Inquisition. Having seen the lot of them in action, I couldn't argue. They're scary—but they're minor talents, not even as versatile as me. Brick was in an entirely different class. "I'm looking forward to this."

"Bring any of the gang with you?" I hadn't invited the rest of the Inquisition—I didn't want to drag them into something like this—but I hadn't exactly *uninvited* them either. They might not be on Brick's level, but they'd had a lot of time to practice what they did and there were a lot of them. Not as many as they started out with, maybe, but quite a few all the same.

He snorted. "No. Katie has everyone who will listen to her chasing a vampire in Pueblo."

"And who does that include?" I asked, curious in spite of myself.

"Almost nobody. Kris and Doug have dropped out, and Matthew doesn't have the patience for investigating things." He smiled thinly. "At this rate, they'll be weeded out entirely before long, and I can move on to a real job."

Moray arrived in a rented sedan less than five minutes later. He was still wearing his three-piece suit, which presumably had the same kind of protection as Brick's robe. That wand hung from a nylon web belt, along with a knife and a heavy semiautomatic pistol. He'd added a black silk balaclava and gloves, leaving no exposed skin.

The two Watchers eyed one another distrustfully. It looked amusingly similar to a pair of dogs who weren't yet sure whether they were going to fight or not. I was guessing they hadn't worked together before. Neither of them were wearing their official emblems—not surprising, considering that this little outing was as unofficial as they come.

"We ready?" I asked before they could start showing teeth.

"You aren't bringing any of your other henchmen?" Brick asked, not looking away from Moray.

I shrugged. "I can. Do you really think we'll run into any problems we can solve by applying more manpower than we already have?"

"Probably not," Moray answered before Brick could say anything. "That isn't Zhang's style. He goes for versatility, not numbers. Adding more of the same thing won't help us deal with curveballs." He paused. "Would be nice to have the raiju along, though. That thing could chew right through his defenses."

I shook my head. "I don't think it would leave Ash. And I'm not bringing her along on this trip."

"No argument," Moray said. He rolled his shoulders, pulled his sunglasses out of a jacket pocket, and put them on. "I'm ready when you are." Brick, never one to talk much, just nodded.

"All right. Let's do this."

The first step was getting to Zhang's hideout, a process that was significantly easier than I'd anticipated. Moray just so happened to have a connection point about ten minutes hike from the compound, shown to him when he was given the unofficial position of dealing with Zhang's crap. The Watchers had always known where to find him, of course. Like most mobsters, Zhang had been hidden more by politics than secrecy.

We did not, of course, approach directly. That would have been foolish to a degree that approached suicide. We stopped two hills away and looked at it through binoculars. I *wasn't* the only person who'd remembered to bring a pair this time.

Zhang, as you might expect, had money to flaunt, and he'd flaunted it. The manor was sprawling, a rough square maybe a hundred and fifty feet to a side, nestled into a large valley. The building itself was two stories, but considering the nature of its owner I was confident there was at least one basement level we couldn't see. There were no roads leading to the manor, not even a gravel path.

Zhang was a mage with an international smuggling network; he could presumably get everything he needed shipped in by other means, and he didn't want visitors.

Unfortunately for us, that also meant that his defenses didn't need to be as low-key as they had in the middle of Munich. There was a ten-foot-tall concrete wall around the perimeter, topped with coils of razor wire, and guard towers spaced along the perimeter. There were no visible gates in the wall, or any other obvious structural weaknesses. I could see all that clearly, because there were also a bunch of spotlights. The area for twenty feet around the wall was cleared of all vegetation and lit up like a sports stadium, the light reflecting off the snow.

That wasn't good. I'd been counting on the darkness to let us sneak up on the place. As things were, approaching it was going to be problematic. Zhang was the type to have large numbers of armed men on duty at any time of day or night, and that would pose some difficulties. Armor is a fine thing, but there are limits. Large amounts of military-grade munitions were probably on the wrong side of them.

"Vigdis," I said quietly, returning the binoculars to my pocket. "Eyes in the sky?"

The giant nodded and set her axes down on the ground. It was cold and snowy—we were in the Himalayas, after all—but she paid no notice as she kicked off her sandals, removed her sundress, and folded it neatly before setting it down. Brick, I noticed, didn't look away from examining Zhang's defenses, while Moray was clearly not as accustomed to a shapechanger's casual nudity.

He was probably somewhat surprised when Vigdis changed. Her shapechanging is closer to that of a shapeshifter or kitsune than a werewolf; there's no prolonged warping of flesh and bone, just a sudden surge of magic and a different body. Where Vigdis had been, now there was an eagle. It was a huge bird, large even by the standards of eagles, with dust-brown plumage. It took off immediately, soaring into the night.

Most raptors, including eagles, don't fly at night. Fortunately, Vigdis wasn't really an eagle. Her vision would be very poor, like that of an actual bird, but she had access to a few other senses that neither birds nor humans do, and she was smart. It made her surprisingly good at recon, especially when people weren't expecting it.

It would take her a few minutes to go and come back, though. I walked a short distance along the hill to where Moray was standing, staring at the manor. "Does this look right?" I asked.

He nodded, not looking away. "I haven't seen any of his places this heavily fortified, but some of them came close. It's his style, too."

"Can you tell if it's warded?" I asked. I couldn't, not at this range, but that wasn't exactly my specialty. My magical senses are unusually good, but I've spent a lot of time honing them for highly detailed work, not on expanding their range. Plus I don't have a nifty pair of enchanted sunglasses.

He nodded. "Definitely some energy on the building itself. I can't tell what they're doing at this range, but if it's his usual mix he'll have kinetic barriers, mantraps, and a lockdown."

"Lockdown?" I asked.

"A ward designed to limit access," he explained. "Try to open a way to the Otherside and it shuts you down. Nobody gets in, nobody gets out."

I frowned. "Doesn't that limit his options for escape?"

Moray shrugged. "Yeah. It also means he doesn't have to worry about unhappy customers bypassing his security. Or prisoners escaping, for that matter."

"I guess that makes sense," I said. "So if we keep him inside the building, he can't just slip away." I frowned again. "Might make getting out tricky, though."

"You're confident," he said dryly.

I snorted. "Maybe you're cool with a suicide run. *I'm* planning on surviving this."

"Likewise," Aiko said, strolling up next to us. "Those lights are going to be a problem."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Can you...?"

Moray shook his head. "I might be able to take them out, but we'd have to get too close. I don't know if I can blast through that wall, either."

"Brick can," I said confidently. He had a talent for working with rock and earth, and concrete was close enough. "I don't know of any way to deal with the lights, though."

"Distraction?" Aiko suggested. "We don't really need the lights gone, we just need them to be looking the other way."

"Might work. We'd have to move fast, though. What kind of distraction are you thinking of?"

"Dunno. I don't think I can manage an illusion that would do it at this distance."

I was about to answer when Snowflake told me that she heard Vigdis approaching. I turned around just in time to see her land and melt back into her human shape. "Jarl," she said, not bothering with clothing. Moray gulped audibly.

"Vigdis," I said. "What do you see?"

"Snipers on the hills," she said briskly. "Three teams. Every approach is covered by at least one."

That was a problem. Having seen an anti-materiel rifle in action, I knew better than to think my armor would even slow it down, particularly if they were using armor-piercing rounds, which I was confident they were. "Can you take them out?" I asked.

She considered that for a moment, then nodded. "*Já*. It will take me a few minutes."

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

"Good," I said. I reached into a pocket of my cloak and, very carefully, pulled out a hollow glass sphere a little bigger than a marble. It was warm to the touch, and a tiny spark of blue light hovered in the center. I bit my finger, drawing blood, and smeared a little of it over the surface of the glass. The magic of the stored spell shifted slightly at the touch of blood—the signal it had been designed to react to. Like most stored spells meant for sale, it had a very specific set of triggers that anyone could provide.

Before, it had been relatively safe. It looked like simple glass, but Alexander was smart enough to reinforce it with magic, and it would have taken a few hits with a sledgehammer to break it. Contact with any kind of blood removed that protection.

In other words, it was now about as safe to carry as nitroglycerin on a carnival ride.

I set it on the ground, very gently. "Deal with the snipers," I told Vigdis. "Then come back and grab this. Do *not* break the glass. Fly it over and drop it at the base of one of the towers on the opposite side of the compound. We'll meet you inside the wall. Do you understand?"

"What will it do?" she asked, staring at the sphere with some trepidation.

"Blow up," I said. "Make sure to drop it from high enough that the glass will break. It should take out the tower. They'll assume we're running for that gap, and we should be able to get by on the other side while they're distracted." I spoke loudly enough that everyone would hear.

Vigdis nodded, and melted back into the eagle without another word. I watched her fly off into the night and worried. Vigdis was tough, and the snipers were presumably focused on their jobs, but this was still a chancy prospect. Whether she could take out three teams of snipers unarmed without raising an outcry was far from certain.

One of the hardest parts of having minions—and teamwork in general, but it's worse with minions—is trusting the other guy to do his job. Especially for someone like me, who's naturally more suited to lone wolfing it, it can be more stressful than just doing things yourself.

Unfortunately, Vigdis was the only one of us who was mobile enough to get to all three locations and deal with them in a timely manner. And we also had a job to do; we had to be in position to move, immediately, when she dropped Alexander's spell on them. So I did my best to pretend I wasn't concerned, and started moving.

We set off across the hill, moving fairly quickly. Vigdis wouldn't take long, and we didn't want to be running late. The humans had the hardest time of things; the almost-full moon didn't provide enough light for them to be comfortable, and the terrain was rougher than they were used to. Brick, at least, was accustomed to the altitude, although we were probably a fair bit higher than Colorado Springs here. Moray was coming from the coast, and he was visibly suffering for it.

Haki changed while we walked. It was nothing as dramatic as Vigdis's shapeshifting; I didn't even notice when it happened. But at some point I glanced over and saw that he'd dropped the human mask, and let his true face show through. Haki in his natural form stood almost ten feet tall and was leanly

built, reminiscent of a half-starved wolf. His chain shirt, which had looked more like a dress, fit him now, and the axe which had seemed enormous previously fit comfortably in one hand. He was also carrying a half-dozen knives, which looked like toys next to his bulk, and a short sword that most humans would need both hands to lift.

"Can you make us a hole in the wall?" I asked Brick as we hiked. He nodded, not sparing the breath for speech, without any hesitation. That was good. Another stored spell or two could crack the nut, but I was really hoping to save those for use as weapons. They were pretty much the only big guns I had.

A few minutes later, we were lying on the ground just outside the pool of light surrounding the wall. We were well within sight of the guards on the wall—I could see them now, and my guess that there would be a lot of them was confirmed—but I didn't think they would see us. Their own spotlights blinded them to anything lurking in the dark.

The snipers were a different story—they would be using some form of night vision or thermal imaging device, and darkness was no adequate defense against that. But Vigdis had presumably removed them by now, and if she hadn't we probably had bigger things to worry about anyway.

We lay there for about five minutes, waiting. I didn't get cold, because I pretty much don't, but I felt sorry for the others.

I never saw Vigdis fly overhead, nor was I in position to see the glass sphere fall. My first hint that it was time to move was when I saw a flash of blue light reflected in the snow on the other side of the building, hardly visible against the brightness of the floodlights. A moment later there was a loud sound, resembling thunder, and I saw one of the towers tilt sideways. The blast had taken out only a small chunk of it, relatively, but most towers aren't so good at remaining standing without a foundation.

I was up and running before the screaming started, a blend of shouted orders and panicked yells. Those of the guards I could see rushed about like distressed ants, paying no attention to me.

Snowflake and Kyra were right behind me, and outstripped me in seconds, with no particular effort. Haki came next, followed by Aiko, while the mages came last of all. A pair of guards in one of the towers had kept their heads about them and not abandoned their post, and they shot at us while we approached. They missed, and their shouts of warning were lost in the din.

Before they could get another volley off, the concrete of the tower seemed to simply melt and flow like wax. The tower slid free and collapsed at an angle, tossing the guards to the ground and forming a ramp to the top of the wall, crushing the razor wire. Snowflake and Kyra, running far ahead of the rest of us, reached the guards before they could stand up. Jaws closed on necks, blood stained the snow, and that was that.

I glanced back and saw Brick, smiling calmly, return the rod to its sleeve within his robe. He hadn't even paused.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

I rolled my eyes. "Show-off," I muttered, reaching the base of the tower. I jogged up it, taking care with the slick surface—the last thing I needed was to slip off and get tangled in the razor wire. I reached the top, looked out over a clear expanse of ground, and saw something terrifying.

There was a space maybe twenty feet across between the wall and the building. When we'd looked down on it from a distance, it had been a simple, barren courtyard of concrete, with no decorations to provide cover.

Currently, it was crawling with golems. I don't mean that metaphorically. I could have walked from the wall to the manor without once setting foot on the ground. Most of them were the vaguely humanoid forms we'd seen in Munich, but there were a couple dozen shaped like enormous hounds, and a few bipedal monsters as big as Haki. All of them were sculpted of smooth, cold concrete, some of them with snow still clinging to the surface.

We didn't have time to deal with this. It would only take moments for the guards to discover that they were under attack from the opposite side. If we were caught in the open when that happened, things would go poorly for us; the defenses inside would probably be at least as deadly, but out here we were sitting ducks exposed to numerous lines of fire.

Fortunately, this time I'd come prepared for golems. As I reached the lip of the ramp I pulled a grenade out of my cloak, pulled the pin, and tossed it down into the crowd.

In my experience, most members of the preternatural subculture don't have sufficient respect for the damage purely mundane weapons can inflict. Stored spells are wonderful things, and for many tasks they're irreplaceable. But for just blowing shit up, you can't go wrong with plain old explosives.

The grenade went off with a hollow *boom* that made the din of shouting voices pale in comparison. It cleared an area maybe ten feet in diameter in the middle of the mass, shattering the golems into so much shrapnel.

Unfortunately, that wasn't enough to really make a dent in the sheer numbers of golems present. It also attracted lots of attention. The chitter of automatic weapons fire started almost immediately.

I snarled. They weren't hitting yet, but they would soon, and I hadn't cleared nearly enough of the golems for us to make it to the door. I could—if nothing else, I had enough grenades and stored spells to carpet bomb a significant chunk of the courtyard—but nothing I was carrying could do the job quickly enough, and I couldn't afford to waste the munitions.

Before I could think of a plan, Brick brushed past me, muttering something about amateur work. He was holding both staff and rod again. He stood there, ignoring the bullets whizzing past, and swept the rod from left to right, muttering something under his breath.

And, just like that, two hundred golems collapsed to the ground, their legs melted just as the tower had been. It took maybe two seconds, start to finish, and the area between us and the manor was clear.

I stared. I'd brought Brick specifically because I'd known to expect stone golems, and he was an expert with stone—but damn. He didn't even look like he was *trying*.

"We need to deal with the wards," he said, shouting to make himself heard over the ongoing gunfire.

I shook myself out of it. He'd cleared the way, but we still had to get there. "On it," I said, digging in my cloak. I came up with a silver sphere the size of a pea, packed with so much magic that the silver burned my fingers, even through the gauntlets. "Trial by fire," I shouted, and threw the sphere in the direction of the manor.

It hit the ground five feet from the wall, rolled a little, and then burst into yellow-gold light that made the spotlights look like they needed to work out. It burned through golems, wards, and walls with equal ease, sending shrapnel flying in all directions. When the light faded, there was a nine-foot sphere that had been emptied of everything but bits of rubble. The edges of the wall smoldered a little, and the concrete was burned black.

"Go!" I shouted, jumping down and sprinting for the hole I'd just made. Snowflake and Kyra were right beside me, and then in front of me—a werewolf in fur is always faster than one without, and Snowflake is faster than either, even with the armor. The handful of golems that managed to get in our way, they dealt with before I ever got close. Drawing on their experience from the last fight, they didn't even try to fight the things. They just knocked them off balance, bowled them over, or physically tossed them aside.

As I ran, an eagle swooped down beside me. Vigdis changed ten feet above the ground, did a flip on the way down (because she could, presumably) and hit the ground at a sprint. Haki, who'd been carrying her gear, tossed her an axe on the run, which she promptly used to decapitate one of the golems the canines had knocked down.

Snowflake and Kyra reached the door first and took up positions on either side. I was the first one through. The wards, fortunately, had been taken out by the stored spell; I'd used a similar spell for the same purpose once before, but I hadn't been completely sure that Zhang's wards would also be susceptible to it. There are a *lot* of ways to make a ward, and not all of them are vulnerable to a brute force attack like that one.

Inside, I found myself in what appeared to be a large kitchen. There was no one around, and no defenses that I could see. Once I'd crossed the threshold without dying in some horrible way, Snowflake and Kyra followed, with Aiko on their heels. Haki and Vigdis were next, leaving just the Watchers outside, predictably. Don't get me wrong, they were fit—but they were also human, and most of the time a human will lose to a nonhuman in a contest of speed.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

Brick came first, holding his staff under one arm to keep it out of his way. Moray was fifteen feet behind him, panting, and had slowed from a sprint to a fast jog. The guards had their weapons sighted in now, and the bullets were coming in short, on-target bursts. Moray was deflecting them with a kinetic barrier, but he couldn't maintain his barrier at a high enough strength to stop bullets indefinitely, and dividing his attention was slowing him down.

I glanced at Haki and gestured slightly. He nodded—it wasn't hard to figure out what I wanted, after all—and bolted out the door. He reached Moray in a couple seconds, threw the Watcher over his shoulder, and returned. His speed was not noticeably lessened by the weight. He tossed Moray through the hole—literally tossed him, I mean—and stooped to get through himself.

Brick stepped up to the entrance as soon as Haki was through. "Figure out which way to go," he said calmly. "I'm going to seal this." I felt him gathering power, scented with a dry, earthy tone. Bits of concrete started moving toward the hole. Most of them were golems, and some of them were still moving. Brick didn't seem to care.

I left him to it and went looking around. There were three doors out of the kitchen, all of them identical in appearance. The first went to a larder; Snowflake went down the stairs for a quick look around, turning up nothing interesting. The second opened onto what appeared to be servants' quarters, currently empty. Zhang had evacuated, apparently, in preparation for our attack. Whether that was a surprising touch of humanity from him or just concern for his property was hard to say.

The third door led into a large, elaborately decorated dining room. Snowflake, Kyra, and I, being most easily able to keep in touch with each other, went through the dining room and explored the rest of the house. There was a living room, an office, a painter's studio, a guard barracks—all empty. The only door to the exterior we found was locked and warded, and from the structure of the wards I didn't think the guards would be able to pass through them. Zhang or one of his subordinate mages must have lowered the wards every time they needed to change shifts. The inconvenience was offset by how much more secure it made them. Any time your security system will let some people through, there's a possibility that an unauthorized person will take advantage of the same hole.

Of course, now that we were inside the building, it would have the opposite effect, keeping the security forces from chasing us in. That gave us a little breathing room, a little time to work.

We found no defenses on the ground floor, and no sign of Zhang's presence. The three of us gathered at the base of the stairs, just down the hallway from the dining room. There was one staircase leading up, and one leading down. I had no idea which way Zhang was; being on the top floor had connotations of superiority which would appeal to his arrogance, but underground was probably more secure, and he might be smart enough to go with safety over style.

We'll have to split up, Snowflake said reluctantly.

I nodded just as reluctantly. If we picked wrong, Zhang would slip out behind us, and we wouldn't catch him unprepared (relatively speaking) again. We couldn't wait and flush him out, either;

the guards would catch us from behind, and we wouldn't have much of a chance at success then. That really didn't leave many options *other* than splitting up. It was always bad tactics to divide your forces, but sometimes that's all you get. Hopefully we'd brought enough force to get the job done anyway.

"Let's go report," I said, walking away from the stairs.

Back in the kitchen, no one had mysteriously vanished, which was excellent news. The hole in the wall was stopped with a massive heap of concrete fragments, many of which seemed to be fused together. How thick it was I couldn't say, but it seemed like a fairly formidable obstacle. The guards would dig through it eventually, of course, but it would take some time.

I explained what we'd found, briefly. Brick immediately came to the same conclusion we had, and said as much. Nobody liked the idea much—everyone's seen the movies—but no one had a better idea, either.

We all proceeded as a group to the stairs. Moray examined them for maybe a second and a half before he said, "Trapped."

"Trapped how?" I asked.

He shrugged. "The usual. Looks like fire, force, lightning—" He paused. "That step's actually a golem. How did he manage *that*?"

"Can you disarm them?" I asked.

"Maybe. Most of them don't look too bad anyway. I should be able to shield against them."

"All right. You and Brick check the upstairs. Take Vigdis and Haki with you. If you clear it come down and help us."

"It would be better if one mage went with each group," Brick said, looking down into the basement. "No offense, Winter."

I shook my head. "No, it wouldn't, and we don't have time to argue about it."

"You'd better know what you're doing, Wolf," he said quietly.

"Trust me, I don't plan on dying here."

He looked at me, then sighed. "All right, but only because crazy works for you. Come on, meat shields," he said, turning to his staircase. Magic flickered to life at his fingertips, sparks of green-brown light running along the length of his granite rod. "Let's bring the house down."

Chapter Thirteen

I was pretty sure the traps on the stairs were rigged to a pressure trigger—that was the simplest way to do it—which made the solution pretty simple, too.

Of course, there was a big difference between "pretty sure" and "sure." If I'd guessed wrong, this was going to be an exceptionally embarrassing way to bite it. But if safety was what we wanted we'd have just stayed home, so I figured screw it.

Besides, there wasn't time to spend second-guessing myself.

Kyra was the only one I wasn't sure could make it, so I picked her up. She was heavy—with the armor, it probably came to around three hundred pounds, and even for me that was a load—but I could hold her for a while. It helped that she didn't squirm or struggle, although she did twitch fairly enthusiastically when I grabbed her—more out of surprise than anything, I think.

I took off down the stairs at a dead sprint. Or, more accurately, I took off *above* the stairs at a dead sprint, shoving power through the focus of my boots to hold us several inches off the ground on a cushion of air. We dropped at a steep angle—I wasn't used to supporting this much weight with magic—but, given that we were descending a staircase, that was less of a bug than a feature.

We reached the bottom of the stairs a few seconds later, seemingly without triggering any of the traps. I dropped Kyra, who looked like she knew something weird had just happened but couldn't quite put her finger on *what*, and looked back up the staircase. It didn't look like anything bad had happened, so I sent Snowflake the all-clear. She hit me in the chest about two seconds later, knocking me to the ground.

Aiko made the jump look graceful, which was pretty impressive. She took two long steps and dove forward, turning and coiling in the air to avoid coming into contact with any of the surfaces, and landed in a crouch. She *also* landed on me, because the universe has a weird sense of humor.

It took me a second to catch my breath—seriously, you have someone jump down a flight of stairs onto your stomach and see how *you* feel—during which time we heard a couple of explosions and a lot of cursing from above. I remembered Moray's mention of deliberately setting off the traps, and optimistically wrote it off as "according to plan."

There were no lights down here, the same as in the storeroom in Munich. Zhang could make his own light, and I didn't get the impression that he cared overly much about other people's convenience—particularly not here, in his private sanctum, where even his guards and servants were clearly not allowed.

Fortunately, Aiko can also make a light. She's never quite been able to explain how it works to me—she was raised to approach magic from a very different standpoint than I was, and techniques

don't tend to translate well from one school to the other. There was a gentle twist of magic, scented with fox and spice, and a reddish gold light filled the staircase. It illuminated a circle about ten or fifteen feet in diameter, roughly centered on her.

We turned the corner and found another flight of stairs leading downward. I wasn't sure if this one was trapped as well—I could smell magic, but that might have just been Zhang's wards—but it was a pretty safe assumption. We got around it the same way as before, although this time I went last. The narrow hallway we found ourselves in was little more than a concrete-lined box; aesthetics were evidently not high on Zhang's priority list. It led off into the darkness with no distinguishing features or doors in sight.

We started down it. It was an unnerving experience, walking down a lightless hall in the stronghold of a ruthless criminal wizard without knowing for certain what we would encounter. The fact that it was too narrow for the four of us to walk side-by-side and short enough to feel claustrophobic just added a little spice to an already unpleasant mix.

We found no more traps as we walked, which just made me more nervous. Things were going too smoothly.

Finally, perhaps fifty feet along, the hallway split into three. All three branches were unlit and unoccupied, and there was no way to say for sure which one led where.

"Which way?" Aiko asked after a moment.

I nodded toward the right. "That one's warded," I said. It made sense that Zhang would be hiding behind wards right now.

She nodded. "Right it is, then. Hang on a second." She pulled out a piece of chalk and drew a large, obvious arrow pointing back toward the stairs. "All right. Can you get through the ward?"

I grinned and drew Tyrfing. "Let's find out." As always, excitement and bloodlust rolled through me from the sword, more obvious than usual. Most of the time if I'm holding Tyrfing I'm in a fight, and that generally means I have anger to spare already. I took a deep breath, set the emotion aside, and turned to face the ward.

It was a fairly simple design, nothing more than a kinetic barrier. It was *strong*, though; I could have rammed a truck into that barrier and bounced off. Explosives wouldn't do the job, not without bringing the ceiling down on our heads, which I felt was a definite step in the wrong direction.

Fortunately, Tyrfing is much more than just a sword, and it cuts more than just flesh and stone. I swung it at the barrier, two-handed, and I put all the strength I had behind the blow. It bounced off seemingly empty air—but I felt the magic quiver at the touch. Two strikes, three, four, and then the sword's magic bit into the barrier's and the blade stuck. I wrenched it back out, sheathed it with some difficulty, and then gathered my power.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

I'm not good at purely energetic work, magic unconnected to the physical world. It's one of my weakest suits, actually. But I've gotten a little better over the years, and this was pretty much the simplest application of the skill there was. Designing a ward this solid took a genius, but breaking it didn't require much in the way of technical knowledge. Just power and an understanding of what I was looking at.

It's almost always harder to make a thing than break it.

I started at the crack Tyrfing had made. That made things much easier. Wards are a lot like any other kind of defenses. Once there's one breach, it's hard to keep the enemy from expanding it. I took advantage of that fact, sinking claws of power into the opening and tearing at the structure of the ward. It had been constructed as a single unit, each strand of magic dependent upon each other strand, and once it started disintegrating it was relatively simple to keep unraveling it.

Suddenly, though, things changed. The structure I'd been picking at collapsed, imploded, and folded into another shape. I had about a second to recognize the new alignment of energies before it activated.

A second doesn't sound like much time. That's because it *isn't* much time. But it was long enough to let me react. I immediately stopped messing around with the ward, threw one arm over my eyes, and turned my attention to dropping the temperature. I've gotten a *lot* faster at that, and it took me less than a second to take it from chilly (we *were* in a basement in the Himalayas at night, after all) to something well below zero.

An instant later, all of the energy that had been bound up in the barrier degraded into heat, rapidly. A *lot* of heat. That kinetic barrier had been strong enough to hold up under a battering ram, and that translated into enough heat to render us all extra crispy.

If I hadn't had that second's warning, we wouldn't have stood a chance. As it was, the hallway was cold enough to begin with that it took a few seconds to really crank the heat up, time during which I could continue trying to chill it back down.

Don't get me wrong, it still sucked. There was a rush of hot air like standing in front of an oven, except that it went on and on, building and building, until it must have been at almost two hundred degrees in that hallway. Agonizing seconds ticked past, one after another. Finally, almost ten seconds after the ward triggered, the heat started fading. It only took me a few more seconds to dial it back to something comfortable.

I opened my eyes hesitantly, wincing. "You all right?" I asked.

"Yeah," Aiko said from about twenty feet away, while both Snowflake and Kyra barked. "What happened?"

"Zhang happened," I said, glowering. "He had the ward rigged to turn into a fireball if it stopped working."

"Clever."

"Yeah," I admitted. "I guess this means we can expect some traps ahead."

We progressed very slowly, very cautiously down the hallway. Aiko's light was a godsend (not literally, of course; in my experience most actual godsendings are rather unpleasant and dangerous); I would never have been willing to walk down that hallway if I were relying on a flashlight to see my way. Strangely, there actually *weren't* any traps. I supposed that made sense, in a way; Zhang could pass through his own wards with ease, but mechanical traps are inconvenient for everyone.

We *did* find two more wards, though, spaced ten feet apart. We'd gotten smart about it. I approached each one, alone, in a bubble of air as cold as I could make it, and just beat the shit out of it with Tyrfing until the damage triggered its fallback mode. I got some burns—it felt like a whole body sunburn—and my cloak, never designed for such conditions, was going to need serious repairs, to the extent that it might be easier to just replace it. But there was no serious harm done, and I got through.

Finally, thirty feet along, we reached a door. Saying it was the kind of door you would expect to find on a vault would be accurate, but misleading. Most vaults couldn't dream of a door like that. I suppose there are a few that still have massive steel blast doors secured by bolts as thick as my arm, but I don't think they're very common. It had a pair of large combination locks set into it. Somehow I didn't think my usual tactics were going to be very effective at picking them.

"Do we blow it?" Aiko asked.

"Of course we blow it," I said, digging more glass spheres out of my pocket. They were the same design as the one I'd given to Vigdis, although not nearly as high-powered. I'd made these myself, reverse-engineering the design from Alexander's model, and my talents with this kind of magic were nowhere near his. They looked pretty much the same, except that the spark of light inside was emerald green rather than blue.

I tugged my gauntlet off and bit down on my fingertip again, drawing blood. I smeared a little blood on the surface of each sphere and then, very carefully, taped each of them against one of the bolts. (It goes without saying that I was carrying a roll of duct tape. That stuff is indispensable.)

We retreated most of the way back down the hall. I couldn't see the vault door by the time we'd reached a safe distance. I had a good idea of where it was, though—and, seriously, it was a straight hallway. It wasn't that hard to aim my shotgun in more or less the right direction and pull the trigger.

Before the noise of the shotgun blast could begin to fade, one of the pellets hit one of the spheres. The glass, which was now exactly as fragile as glass should be, shattered. I almost fancied that I could see a tiny spark of viridian light begin to unfold like a flower.

Then the expanding pressure wave released by that first sphere hit the other two. Glass shattered instantly under the force. Suddenly there was no doubting that the shot had been on target; the light was visible now, bright as a lantern, then brighter, brighter, until it was nearly blinding.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

Snowflake whimpered instinctively in surprise and distress. The noise started moments later, a crashing, crunching sound like car being compacted.

There was very little heat, the spheres having been designed to produce kinetic energy rather than thermal. They were designed as demolitions charges, not weapons. The force hit us a few seconds later, though, sending me stumbling backward. The noise died away. I blinked a few times, clearing my vision—not that there was much to see, until Aiko brought her light back.

The hallway had held up well under the stress, as I'd anticipated. There were cracks in the floor and walls, and the floor was covered in chunks of concrete that had fallen from the ceiling, but the structural integrity didn't seem to have been damaged.

The door, being at the epicenter, hadn't fared so well. The bolts were sheared through and the door lolled drunkenly to the side. I pulled it the rest of the way open, grunting at the weight. I'm sure it set off all kinds of alarms, which really wasn't important considering that we'd already set off every alarm he had.

I wasn't disappointed by what we saw on the other side. Well, actually, that isn't quite true. I'd been hoping to find Zhang, and we didn't. But what was there was enough to make up for it.

The room was fairly small, perhaps fifteen feet to a side. It was *packed*, though, barely enough room to walk between the crates, shelves, and pallets. The contents were pretty much the same as what Moray had described, although it was a hell of a lot more impressive in person.

"Do you think you could carry this out?" Aiko asked, eyeing a large gold ingot speculatively.

"We should keep moving," I said.

She stared at me. "Come on, Winter. You don't even want to grab a handful of diamonds or something? You've become jaded."

Some diamonds would look nice on my collar, Snowflake said. Even Kyra looked at me askance.

"No, actually," I said. "I was thinking that, if we go kill Zhang first, we can come back and loot it at our leisure. I want to take more than one load."

"Ah, pragmatic greed. There's the Winter we all know and love."

"Damn straight. Now come on. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can roll around in heaps of money."

We tried the hallway directly across from the vault next, and were disappointed—for real, this time. It led into a mage's workshop. It was a nice setup, actually a suite of rooms. Zhang had a large laboratory, a carpentry shop, a darkroom—he even had a literal, old-school forge. There were no wards

or other defenses, presumably because there was nothing there valuable enough to require more protection than remoteness, armed guards, the wards on the house, and booby-trapped stairs.

Okay, so that was pretty reasonable.

That left one more branch to clear. I was guessing that was where we would find Zhang; it was clear that the basement was where he kept the highest-security rooms, and from the workshop it seemed likely that he spent a lot of his time down here.

Besides. It just felt right.

Fifteen feet down the hallway—just outside Aiko's bubble of light, from the intersection—we found a set of double doors. It wasn't anything like the vault door, though. Where that was designed for security, this was meant to impress. Eight feet tall and almost as wide, there were made from rich brown wood and bound with what I really hoped was brass. Gold would have been just too much—which meant that was probably what it was.

They didn't seem to be warded, which was odd. Zhang must have known what we were doing here, and he'd had plenty of time to slap up some defenses while we got this far. I was guessing that meant that he had some other kind of trap ready.

With that in mind, I drew Tyrfing and slashed vertically through the door. As I'd expected, it met resistance about halfway down. They'd barred the door, with a timber or a metal rod or something. Fortunately, since I'd expected it, I was swinging hard enough to cut through it without stopping. I pulled Tyrfing free and, with two more quick slashes, took out the hinges. I kicked the door as hard as I could.

I'm pretty strong, especially when I'm actively feeding the werewolf extra magic. The two-hundred-pound slab of wood flew a couple of feet in and then slammed to the ground with a sound like fifty dictionaries hitting the table at once.

You would probably expect me to charge in at this point, brandishing Tyrfing and screaming something about death and glory. For precisely that reason, I did no such thing. I mean, come on. The bad guys have seen those movies too.

I ducked aside instead, behind the door that was still standing. That turned out to be a wise decision. Immediately after the door hit the ground, some sort of magic flashed by me. It was invisible, but I smelled it, a sort of grey and dusty smell. I was pretty sure it was some kind of witchcraft, meant to target the victim's mind. That wasn't a very good tactic to use against me—werewolves are naturally resistant to most mind-affecting magic, and Tyrfing's wrathful bloodlust was excellent insulation against other effects. A strong enough spell could still put me down for the count, though, and it seemed safe to assume that this was a strong spell.

I dove through the opening as soon as the magic passed, before anyone on the other side could adjust to the fact that they'd missed. I rolled to my feet, seeing Aiko rushing in out of the corner of my eye. Snowflake and Kyra were directly behind her, snarling and growling.

Frost Bitten (Winter's Tale)

Somewhat to my surprise, it wasn't Zhang behind the door. I know I should have seen that coming, but somehow I didn't. It was, instead, the woman who had accompanied him to the first meeting. I could smell her magic, and was surprised at how weak it was. She wasn't as strong as Brick, I didn't think, and possibly not even as strong as I was. An apprentice, perhaps.

"Get out of the way," I said, glancing around the room. It appeared to be a living room, much more opulently furnished than the one upstairs—lots of velvet and silk, mostly red and gold. There were tapestries covering the concrete walls, although I didn't look at them very closely. It was the first room we'd seen since descending the stairs that was lit, a dozen or so oil lamps casting a cheery glow.

"No," she said. I was a little surprised at that; I honestly hadn't expected her to respond in any way that didn't include a weapon.

"Do you know what your boss does?" I demanded.

Something that might have been shame flickered across her features and was gone. "It doesn't matter," she said. "He's my master." She raised her hand and I felt her gathering magic for another attack.

Aiko shot her in the face.

Apparently she hadn't been expecting that. Her head jerked sideways, blood and less pleasant things splattered the wall and floor behind her, and then she dropped to the ground. I don't think she ever felt a thing. Aiko's carbine was a relatively light caliber, but she'd just taken a burst to the head and that was the kind of thing that killed a human more or less instantly.

"What?" Aiko said. I must have been staring at her. "She turned you down. It wasn't like we could leave her behind us."

"I know," I sighed. "It's just...I worry about us, you know?"

"Don't," she said, surprisingly fiercely. "She knew what was going on here, and she stayed. That makes her as bad as Zhang. Worse, maybe. He at least accepts the responsibility."

"I know," I repeated. I couldn't blame her—I would have done the same thing, after all, and we couldn't exactly risk a fight at this point—but I still felt strangely, inexplicably sad.

That did not, of course, stop me from decapitating the mage as I walked past (not that she had much head left, but it's best to be sure). There's sad, and then there's stupid.

The next door we opened led into a bedroom. It continued on the same theme as the living room, and was similarly extravagant. It was dark except for the light coming in from the other room (it wasn't until then that I realized that Aiko had let her light fade). The king-sized bed was rumped and the closet door was hanging open. We'd caught Zhang sleeping, then. That was a stroke of luck. There was only one other door leading out of the bedroom. It was locked, a situation I remedied easily with Tyrfin.

On the other side we found ourselves back in the harsh, utilitarian design Zhang seemed to favor, outside of his personal quarters. There was a short, unlit hallway with concrete walls and ceiling—no trace of opulence here. We found two layers of wards, the same design we'd found earlier, and got past them the same way, earning me a few more burns. Being burned on top of a burn always sucks, but we were so close now that I could smell it, and that took some of the sting out of it. At the end of the hall was another door, this one a heavy steel model. I chopped through the lock with Tyrfin and pulled it open.

The room on the other side was brightly lit by the first electric lights we'd seen since coming down here. The fluorescent lights were harsh, and uncomfortably bright after the relative darkness of the hallway. The room itself was circular, perhaps fifty feet across, with a nine foot ceiling. The blank concrete theme was continued here, giving the place a stark, grim look.

Zhang was sitting in a comfortable armchair in the center of the room. A second circle was delineated around him by a wide ring of silver set into the floor, leaving a strip ten feet wide around the edge. I could feel the magic humming in the ring, probably a kinetic barrier. I didn't think it was a deliberately anti-werewolf measure, but concentrating magic in silver always makes it more unpleasant, and even being in the same room with it set my teeth on edge.

The circle was both good and bad news. On one hand, it would make his barrier much stronger if it was anchored by a circle. However, it also made him relatively incapable of attacking us without dropping that barrier—it's incredibly difficult to project power across an empowered magic circle, especially one designed to prevent that from happening.

"Mr. Wolf," he said, sipping what looked like wine from a fancy crystal glass. "I must admit, I didn't expect you to be so stupid as to try something like this."

I considered him for a moment. "You know what?" I said. "I'm really not interested in talking to you." I took a step forward, rolling Tyrfin casually in my grip.

"As you wish," he said calmly, gesturing slightly. A moment later, the walls cracked open at eight points, evenly spaced around the room. Golems stepped out, their bodies seemingly made from steel. Each of them had four arms, all of which ended in blades. I wasn't sure whether they were solid metal, or just a coating over concrete. Either way, it wasn't good. There weren't very many of the golems, but I was confident that they would be Zhang's best work—and considering how dangerous his worst work had been, that wasn't good.

This was a problem. Tyrfin could probably damage even magically-reinforced steel, but the others weren't so well off. I mean, they hadn't done so well against *concrete* golems.

I immediately turned toward the nearest golem, barely five feet away. It turned to face me, insofar as that phrase can be applied to something without a face, all four arms coming up into a guard position. I stepped cautiously closer, and then immediately had to back away again as one of those arms passed within a few inches of my face. Damn, this thing was faster than it looked. Snowflake and Kyra

raced past the thing while it was focused on me, and in my peripheral vision I saw Aiko starting around the circle the other way.

The next time it swung for me I stepped into the attack, meeting its arm with Tyrfing. The cursed sword bit most of the way through the limb, but the force involved tore it from my hands, and the golem didn't even hesitate as it stabbed at me with another arm. I barely managed to reverse direction, moving with the blow.

It probably saved my life. Instead of punching straight through the armor, the tip of its sword-arm barely clipped me. It still knocked me sprawling, and I was definitely going to have a bruise.

I scrambled to my feet and recalled Tyrfing to my hand. The golem advanced and I gave ground before it, trying to think of something to do. I heard an explosion behind me, probably one of Aiko's grenades, and there was a loud crash of metal against stone where another had fallen, probably tripped by Kyra and Snowflake.

Fighting this thing was an unusual challenge, one I wasn't sure how to approach. I've killed a lot of things using Tyrfing, but generally speaking they've had two arms each. Trying to get through four of them at once without leaving myself open to a counterattack was tricky, and given how strong these things were I didn't think just taking the hit and trusting my armor was a good idea.

It was faster, stronger, and tougher than me. That meant I had to be smarter than it. I also had to do it quickly; the next closest golem was twenty feet away and closing, and I couldn't handle two of these things at once.

I circled around the golem, then attacked as it turned to follow me. I didn't even try to seriously harm it this time, just cut at it and immediately retreated. I barely nicked the arm I'd already damaged, but I dodged the counterattack entirely. Three more repetitions of this had that arm on the ground, where it stopped moving. The golem was, it turned out, solid steel, with no trace of concrete or stone to be found.

That made things easier. I circled to its weakened side, forcing it to reach across itself to attack me. It did, and I ducked under the swing, moving back to its other side. Another slash with Tyrfing, harder this time, cut through its leg at the ankle, and it was a simple matter to knock it over with a gust of wind. It hit the ground with a sound like half a ton of steel smashing into concrete, probably because that's exactly what it was. It immediately started to push itself back to its feet, but before it could I stepped up behind it. It took me three swings, but I managed to cut its head off. Like the golems we'd fought before, it dropped lifelessly to the ground when that happened.

I straightened, breathing heavily, and looked around. Aside from the golem I'd taken out, there was one other lying on the ground, hit by Aiko's grenade. One of its legs and two of its arms were little more than slag, clearly too damaged to use. It was still animate, though, dragging itself toward me with its remaining limbs. The golem coming around the circle from the other direction had nearly reached me, too, and the next wouldn't be long.

My attention was largely captured, though, by another golem, one which was currently fighting both Kyra and Snowflake. And if it wasn't clearly winning, well, it hadn't lost yet, either. The two canids were circling around it, just out of reach, occasionally darting in to nip at it. They weren't doing any damage, but they were distracting it, and the thing wasn't smart enough to figure out that it could just ignore them.

Granted, that would have gotten to be fairly difficult anyway when Snowflake launched herself through the air, landing on the thing's back and ripping at it with her claws. The steel sheaths didn't rip through it like they would have flesh, but they scored the metal noticeably, which was more than either of them had managed to that point.

A moment later, bellowing loud enough to make me wince across the room, it knocked her off with one hand, hard enough to knock her into the wall. It didn't feel like she was bleeding, and I doubted the impact had done serious damage, but it took her out of the fight for a moment. Kyra was left circling the golem, clearly unsure what to do alone, and there were more closing in on her.

That was all the time I had before the next golem was closing in on me. I went on the attack immediately as it got within reach, launching light, quick cuts at its head and legs. None of them would be enough to take it out, but every one was a threat, and it wouldn't take many to damage the golem until a single solid blow would be devastating. It had to parry each strike, and Tyrfinng cut slivers from its arms each time they connected.

The golem had enough limbs to attack at the same time, of course, and it did so. I twisted aside from the strikes, danced in and out of range, deflected its blows by critical inches with gusts and blocks of hardened air. It was a difficult, tiring way to fight, and while it was undeniably effective I wouldn't be able to keep it up indefinitely.

It also meant that I had to be absolutely focused on what I was doing.

I'm not sure what tipped me off. Maybe I felt Zhang's circle, and the barrier it was powering, collapse. Maybe I smelled him gathering magic. Maybe I just got lucky. Whatever the reason, I jumped back without quite knowing why, and the lance of force Zhang threw only clipped me rather than striking me directly.

That was good. It meant that, rather than being turned into so much canned meat, I just got the delightful experience of breaking most of the ribs on the left side of my body, as well as dislocating the shoulder. I hit the ground hard, wheezing painfully. The golem, structural integrity already weakened by my attacks, pretty much went to pieces. The blast of force continued on to hit the wall, shattering maybe ten square feet of concrete into dust, to a depth of around six inches.

Holy shit. I didn't think I'd ever seen even Alexander or Brick throw a punch that hard.

I could hardly breathe and it hurt to move, but I managed to force myself back to my feet. Zhang was standing, and looked coldly, calmly furious. As I watched he drained his wineglass and tossed it aside to shatter on the ground. He gestured calmly, and a blast of white-hot fire rushed in my direction.

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I dove aside, biting back a scream at what the motion did to my ribs. It wouldn't do me much good to avoid the fire and be roasted alive, though, so I also wrapped myself in cold. Frost formed on the concrete, and immediately melted again as the fire rushed through, the heat reflecting off the walls. Even with my countermeasure, the air was oven-hot, and I got some more burns.

The wall where it had been directly struck by the flame fared worse. It literally exploded from the heat and force, sending shrapnel flying. Most of it went away from me, but a few pieces hit me in the back, punching through the armor. The good news was that they were hot enough to cauterize the wounds as they made them, and they didn't penetrate deeply enough to hit organs, so I probably wasn't going to die. The bad news was, it *really freaking hurt*.

I staggered back to my feet, feeling somewhat dizzy. I couldn't just let Zhang keep blasting away at me. I can survive a lot, but attacks on this scale was so far beyond that as to be laughable.

I managed to grab a grenade from my belt and chuck it at him before he could throw another spell at me. It didn't get within ten feet of the mage before he knocked it back at me with another blast of force.

Fortunately, I'd anticipated that. I hit it with a gust of wind before it could move far, sending it in a sweeping curve through the room. For once I got the angle and force exactly right, and the grenade bounced off the wall toward one of the golems. The same one that had already been crippled by the first grenade, to be specific. It was moving slowly, and another golem had caught up to it.

The grenade went off at around head height, and two golems collapsed to the ground.

On the other side of the circle, Aiko had joined in against the golem that Kyra and Snowflake were fighting. She was quick enough and skilled enough to make it look fairly easy, and she'd managed to scratch it about the head and shoulders quite a few times. Between that and the damage that Snowflake had inflicted, the next time Kyra tripped it something broke, and it didn't get back up.

I expected Zhang to make some quip or something, but apparently he took me at my word when I said I didn't want to talk with him. Apparently he'd gotten tired of me dodging, too, because his next attack was a wall of fire that was about fifteen feet wide and filled the room from floor to ceiling. It swept forward like a broom wielded by a pyromaniac giant, not as quickly as his targeted blast of fire had but much too fast for me to get out of the way.

I stared, my eyes undoubtedly taking on the wide, glassy-eyed stare more commonly associated with deer on highways. I don't care how badass you are, the first time you see *that* you're going to be scared witless. Then I snapped out of it and realized that there was only one thing to do. I grabbed all the cold I could find, wrapped it around myself until my armor glittered with frost and my breath could have frozen water. Then I sprinted forward (well, insofar as I could sprint at the moment) and dove through the fire.

You know how I talked about things being unpleasantly hot earlier? Well, that was *nothing*. This, *this* was fire. I don't know how hot that fire was, and I don't want to. It was bad enough having to do it; knowing just how insane it was would only make it worse.

I hit the ground on the other side, screaming. It takes a lot of pain to impress me, but this pulled it off. I rolled along the ground, putting out any lingering fires. I pushed myself back upright, swaying dizzily on my feet. Between the pain and the exertion, I was running on empty. I just didn't have much more left in me.

At least Zhang had to lean on his chair to remain standing. Even he couldn't keep throwing around this level of magic indefinitely.

I must have missed hearing another grenade, because two more golems were lying on the ground in various states of disassembly. Neither of them were actually destroyed, but neither one was really a threat in its current condition. That left just one golem still standing, which was currently fighting Kyra. She couldn't really *damage* it, but she could keep it occupied, and she did.

That left Snowflake with no immediately pressing task, a state she took advantage of. She ran full-tilt at Zhang's back and leapt. I felt her feral, savage rage in the back of my mind.

Zhang heard something at the last second and turned. He fell back a step, clearly surprised, and then gestured slightly with one hand. A rush of force took Snowflake in the face and sent her flying backward, where she landed with all the grace and poise of a ragdoll and didn't get back up. She wasn't dead—I was confident I would have known if she was dead—but I thought she might have been knocked out.

While Zhang had his back turned, I threw my last grenade. It rolled to a stop at his feet. He glanced down and then took a step forward, and I smelled a massive surge of power as he threw up a barrier.

A moment later the grenade went off. He managed—somehow—to withstand the explosion, and while it tossed him to the ground it didn't seem to actually hurt him at all. He had to struggle to stand, though, and I could hear him panting for breath.

Aiko had dropped her blades at some point. Now she lifted her carbine to point at Zhang, where he was still lying on the ground, and opened it up.

Stopping bullets is relatively easy for a kinetic barrier. They've got a lot of velocity, but not much in the way of mass, and a light-caliber bullet is unlikely to penetrate a competent shield.

But Zhang had been burning through *incredible* amounts of magic. The attacks he'd thrown at me were terribly dangerous, true, but they'd also required enormous power. On top of that, he'd also just survived a freaking grenade, while standing virtually on top of it. The energy involved in that had to be astronomical.

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Bottom line, he could still stop bullets. But it took all of his focus to do so—meaning that he couldn't hit back and he couldn't move. It wouldn't last long—Aiko's gun did not have infinite ammunition—but while it did it was a priceless opportunity.

I couldn't get close enough to use Tyrfing. That barrier was ricocheting bullets in all directions, and even if I'd been willing to trust to my armor to keep me alive I couldn't move fast enough. I checked my other weapons, and came up disappointed. Knives were useless, and the shotgun wouldn't penetrate his barrier. I didn't have any more grenades, and I'd used my only silver sphere getting into the house. I was still carrying one of Alexander's demolition spells, but they really weren't meant for combat. It might be fatal if you were touching it when it went off, but short of that it was unlikely to do lethal harm. Besides, using kinetic force to batter down a kinetic barrier was a losing proposition.

Suddenly I saw the answer. I grabbed the glass sphere, biting my tongue hard. My mouth filled with the taste of blood and I spat on the sphere before tossing it. Not at Zhang.

At the ceiling.

A stray bullet hit it before it could quite get into position, and a spark of blue light blossomed a couple feet below the ceiling. The force was invisible—the light was only an identifier—but I almost thought I could see it as a faint ripple in the air.

Alexander's spell was a lot stronger than mine. Twenty feet away, it was still strong enough to knock me on my ass. I landed badly—no surprise, given how tired I was. Honestly, considering how much I'd been using Tyrfing, I'm lucky I didn't shoot myself or something.

But I still landed badly. Really badly; I distinctly heard my right wrist snap, and pain lanced up my arm. That was pretty much the end of me fighting for today, then; with both arms injured and little magic remaining, there wasn't much left for me to do.

I wasn't the only one affected. The two remaining golems staggered sideways, interrupting a slash that likely would have removed Kyra's leg. Aiko fell to the ground, the last few bullets going wild before the magazine ran empty. The wave of force washed over Zhang's barrier and dissipated harmlessly.

And it also washed through the concrete ceiling.

Kinetic force is an interesting thing. There wasn't enough power in that sphere to bring down the roof, not even close. But when part of a solid moves and the rest doesn't, there's an enormous stress on it. Concrete is strong stuff, but it's also relatively brittle, disinclined to bend and sway.

Rubber wouldn't have been affected much by the force. But the concrete broke apart, and once it started gravity finished the job, bringing it down in large chunks. The effect didn't spread too far; the force was too diffuse for that. But for a circle perhaps ten feet across and two feet deep, the ceiling fell to pieces.

Zhang probably could have held it up, if he'd been fresh. Even tired, his barrier could have protected him; he was at the edge of the circle, and only a couple of the chunks of concrete hit him.

But he'd intended it to stop bullets. A kinetic barrier can stop either large masses moving slowly or small ones moving quickly, but it's hard to make one do both at once. I didn't know exactly what adaptations were necessary—in my world barriers are pretty much something other people use—but I knew that, if you wanted to stop an object efficiently, you needed to adapt it to what you were doing.

Zhang hadn't had the chance. His barrier was still incredibly strong, mind you. It held up under the first impact, and the second. But when the third chunk hit it, it wavered and then collapsed. The concrete continued falling unimpeded, and landed on his abdomen.

That alone might have been lethal. I mean, that piece of concrete probably weighed a couple hundred pounds, and having things like that fall ten feet and land on your guts is bad for you. I didn't feel like taking chances, though, so I summoned Tyrfing again. Then I grabbed it with my right hand, biting back a scream at how that felt to my broken wrist, and lobbed the sword toward the center of the room.

Aiko, who had recovered her feet almost instantly, darted toward it. She snatched the sword up and brought it down in a single motion, never pausing in her run. Zhang's head hit the floor, and that was that.

It took Aiko only a couple of minutes to finish off the last of the golems. Between her skill, Tyrfing, and Kyra's assistance, it never stood a chance. She carved it up like a Christmas goose, and it never even got close to her.

She stood there for a second and then sheathed Tyrfing and dropped it. I didn't think she'd been injured, but she looked very tired as she made her way around the room to where I was currently slumped against the wall. Kyra limped along beside her, her left foreleg badly cut. I could smell the blood.

"Are you all right?" she asked, looking at me with concern.

I smiled beatifically. "Don't think so," I mumbled. Then I passed out.

Chapter Fourteen

My injuries were the most numerous out of everyone who went on the attack. I had seven broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a broken wrist, a concussion, and a mix of second- and third-degree burns over about seventy percent of my skin. The shrapnel wounds in my back were fairly nasty too, although the cauterization kept me from bleeding out. I'd also sprained an ankle and broken three fingers somewhere in there without realizing it, and shattered my left fibula into three pieces, although I honestly have no idea where *that* happened.

More seriously, that blast of force that clipped me did some fairly serious internal damage. It ruptured my spleen, which is apparently a fairly bad thing, and also a few blood vessels. That's why I'd passed out; shock is no joke, even for werewolves.

Internal bleeding isn't a joke either, and I could have died from it quite easily. I should have been able to stop the bleeding, what with being a werewolf and all that, but even my body has limits. The accumulated damage of all those injuries had been too much for me to overcome.

Fortunately for me, Moray and Brick had made it down there only a couple minutes after Zhang's death. I don't think the timing was deliberate; they aren't the type to avoid a fight. Neither of them knew jack shit about treating injuries, of course, but Moray called the Watchers and they sent a witch with a specialty in healing. He must have been on standby already, because he got there within five minutes.

Witches can do incredible things, especially when their patients already have accelerated healing. I lived. I don't have a spleen anymore, but apparently that just means I'm more susceptible to infection, which really isn't a problem for a werewolf anyway. My ribs, wrist and leg hadn't healed yet—bones always take longest—and my skin was tender, but I was inclined to call it a success.

Aiko got lucky, and walked out with hardly a scratch. She had some bruises, of course, and some mild burns, but nothing you couldn't get on an ordinary day. Kyra's worst injury was that cut on her front leg, which was messy and painful but didn't involve anything but skin and muscle. She had it healed by the time I woke up, a little less than a day later. Brick and Moray were both exhausted and somewhat scorched—Zhang clearly liked his fire—but basically okay. Vigdis and Haki between them had six broken bones and needed a hundred and twenty stitches—they'd run into one of those steel golems upstairs, apparently, and there wasn't a whole lot Brick or Moray could do about it. They eventually managed to batter it into submission, but it took some battering.

Snowflake was not as fortunate. That blast of force she took to the face knocked her out, like I'd thought, but it also knocked out most of her teeth. She's pissed, but otherwise pretty much unharmed.

Moray also called in a bunch of other Watchers, on top of the healer. They subdued the rest of the guards (most of them had already run, I guess, and I don't blame them) and confirmed that Zhang

was dead. They also carried out most of the loot, of which there was a huge amount, and repossessed the house itself. I gather it's being sold to another, hopefully more pleasant, mage.

We kept a few things—some gold and jewels, a few furs and handmade rugs, that sort of thing. We're taking the rest of our share in cash, though, and there's a shitload of it. I gather that, as it was an unofficial operation, Watcher doesn't have to report the windfall to the Conclave. That made her feel generous. Aiko, Kyra and I got ten percent of the proceeds to split, which came to almost fifty million each.

I spent most of my share making sure that the kids we rescued from Zhang wouldn't starve. Most of them turned out to be orphans abducted from cities around the world. I called in some favors (from Conn, mostly) and arranged for them to be adopted. The rest of the money went into various, elaborately constructed trust funds. There was enough there to put them through pretty much any school they wanted.

I'm not a saint. But come on. Some things are just obvious. Besides, it wasn't like I needed the money.

"Good morning," I said. It was around eleven, so that was technically accurate.

"Morning," Carraig said, sauntering casually in the door. He was dressed more casually today, which in his case meant leather.

It fit with the atmosphere, which was much more relaxed than it had been the last couple of times. I was sitting in an ordinary chair next to my throne, because I'd be damned if I was sitting in that when I was already in as much pain as I currently was. Three days of bed rest and plentiful food had bought a lot of healing, but bones are never fast. Aiko had flat out refused to go near her throne if I wasn't in mine, and had taken another of the wooden chairs. Alexis and Ash (holding the raiju in her lap) were both present, as well, sitting down in the back of the room.

Gwyn ap Nudd's lupine minion entered less than a minute later. He nodded cordially to Carraig and sat a short distance away. "Good morning, Winter jarl," he said.

"And you."

Kyra and Ryan came in a few minutes after that, followed by Moray. Anja Morgenstern was the last to arrive this time, only five minutes before we were scheduled to start at eleven thirty. She didn't bring Samuel Black this time.

"Welcome," I said formally. "If there are no objections, I will begin." Nobody said anything, so I kept talking. "It is my judgment that the werewolf Ryan Peterson was falsely accused of the murder of Stefan Morgenstern. All evidence suggests that he is innocent, and should not be punished."

"Who, then, is guilty?" Moray asked, following his script.

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"It is my belief," I said slowly and carefully, "that the mage Zhang Qiang was responsible for the death." The wording was very important; I had to out-fae the fae, and make every word true while implying something else entirely. Zhang *was* accountable for things that happened on his property, whoever did them.

"What evidence do you have for this claim?" That was Moray, again. As the representative of human mages here, it was his place to challenge me.

"First, that Stefan Morgenstern was in possession of information regarding Zhang's illegal and unethical actions." I'd had to think about that phrasing for some time. "Second, that the murder occurred on premises owned by Zhang. Third, that Zhang repeatedly attempted to limit investigation by accusing Peterson, even after evidence accrued challenging that claim."

"That sounds reasonable," the wolfish fae said, a gleam in his eye suggesting that he knew exactly what I was doing and approved of it. "How, then, shall this blackguard be punished?"

"By death," I said seriously. "When I approached Zhang, he became violent and did not answer." Again, technically true; I never said *why* I was approaching Zhang, and the fact that he didn't answer in no way suggested that I'd actually *asked* him anything. "This behavior convinced me of his guilt"—what, specifically, he was guilty of was unclear, but I was convinced there *was something*—"and I exacted the appropriate penalty."

"Death, eh?" Carraig said, grinning. He knew what I was up to, as well. "That seems unusually strict."

"He accepted my arbitration," I said. "It seems to me that murder, lying before a court such as this one, and falsely accusing another person in order to hide your own guilt are crimes deserving of strict punishment." That was true; those *did* seem like serious crimes. I wasn't certain, not truly *certain*, whether Zhang had *committed* any of them, but then I hadn't said anything about that.

"I agree," Anja said. "It pleases me to see that justice is served." Which, I noted, wasn't the same as saying that it *had* been served in this case. I got the impression that she was no more fooled than anyone else in the room, which made me wonder why we were all sitting here almost-lying to each other when everyone knew the truth we were dancing around. That sort of thing must drive the fae crazy.

"Are there any outstanding issues to be resolved?" I asked. The room was silent. "In that case," I said, expecting at any moment to be interrupted, "I declare this arbitration complete."

"So," I said, sitting down. "Did you learn much?"

"Indeed," Ash said. We were currently in the guest room she'd appropriated, back in the mansion. "Watching you work was most educational."

I nodded. "So what is a raiju, anyway?" I asked idly. It had been bugging me for a while now. I knew the name from somewhere, but I couldn't quite remember.

"A variety of yokai," she said calmly. "A thunder spirit, closely related to the kitsune."

I nodded, unsurprised. "Aiko said that you were half-fae," I said.

"Yes, and she was correct."

"So how *did* a raiju come to be your companion?"

Said raiju, currently sitting on the bed in stuffed-animal form, snorted loudly. "That's business," he said. "As in none of yours."

I decided, in a rare moment of wisdom, to let the topic drop. "Will you be returning to school, then?" I asked her.

"Yes. I expect that Mr. Ferguson will come soon in order to provide me with transportation."

"Funny thing about that," I said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. See, in all the excitement, I almost forgot that Bryan traded me a favor to get me to bring you with me—which I don't regret at all," I said hastily. "You've been a wonderful guest. My concern was only ever for your safety."

"I do not understand."

"I'm getting there," I said. "See, I've been having a hard time figuring out *why* he would do that. Your presence, while appreciated, doesn't seem to have been particularly critical, and I'm sure that he could have arranged an equally educational experience at less cost than he paid for this one."

"That is likely true," she admitted.

"Later," I continued, "Scáthach told me that Morgenstern was smuggling the cipher for an encoded message, one that contained the identity of a traitor in her court. The closest thing I could find to a cipher was the phrase 'Favors aren't free.'"

"That is not particularly informative," she said, her voice very slightly amused.

"No," I agreed. "I couldn't make any kind of sense out of it. Then I realized that I was approaching it from the wrong direction. See, I assumed the message was being sent *to* Scáthach. But what if she was actually the person *sending* it?"

"Then the message would have been for you," Ash said. "Since she provided you, specifically, with the knowledge of what to look for, and where. She would not do so without reason."

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I nodded approvingly. "I had the same thought. That, in turn, provided the context for that message to make sense. Bryan is the only person who has offered me a favor recently, and why is unclear. If, as Scáthach's message suggests, that favor wasn't free, then there must be some exchange involved which I was unaware of, something related to this message. That made sense; Bryan has been involved with Scáthach's affairs in the past."

"I understand what you are asking," Ash said. "And your logic seems sound. However, I cannot help you. I do not know what this message is."

I slumped. I'd been so sure, too. "All right," I began. "Thank—"

The raiju interrupted me with another loud snort. "Humans," he said disgustedly. "You're a bunch of bloody morons, you know that?"

I considered him. "I don't think anyone in this house could be accurately described as human."

"Maybe, but you're still bloody stupid." He snorted again. "It's her mother."

I blinked. "What?"

"That's the message," he said, the "fool" unsaid but not unheard. "It's her mother. Hell if I know what it means."

I considered it for a moment, and then suddenly it clicked into place. I *did* know what it meant, and I couldn't believe I hadn't so much as considered it until now. "Thanks," I repeated. "Hopefully we'll see you again sometime."

Ash smiled shyly. "I would like that. Thank you, Winter."

Epilogue

Ryan and Unna got married around a month later. The wedding was held in Wyoming, in the small chapel in the middle of town. Aiko, Snowflake and I all attended. We dressed up for the occasion, of course, which in our case was something of a statement. The mansion had come with fully stocked closets, and whoever stocked them wasn't on a budget.

The wedding itself was fairly extravagant. Not ridiculously so—which was good, because between Edward's casual wealth and Kyra's newfound riches they could have gone obscenely over the top if they wanted to—but there was a surplus of food, which was saying something when an entire pack of werewolves was in attendance, and they'd hired a live band. I didn't recognize them, but they were pretty good, and I doubted they'd come cheap.

The ceremony itself was more or less standard. Kyra was the best man, which struck me as bizarrely amusing. I didn't recognize the priest (if it was a priest; the fact that the wedding was being held in a church suggested that selkies didn't have problems with holy ground, but that didn't mean they were fond of human religions), but he did an admirable job of talking a whole lot without actually saying anything. No mention was made of any deities, and the vows were so blandly generic that it was easy to miss the fact that nothing was actually sworn.

Ryan wore a tuxedo (I was a little surprised by that; Ryan was the kind of guy you expected to wear a dress uniform) and Unna went with the traditional white dress and veil. She practically radiated happiness, which was some comfort. It still seemed weird as hell, but as far as I could tell they genuinely loved each other. Besides, I couldn't really talk.

This being a rather unusual case, there were actually two wedding receptions. The first one was pretty normal, a casual party held in a large, open building that used to be a barn. It had been empty for a long time, but the scent of animals is distinctive, and it lingers. Aiko and I sat at the edge of the room, went through large amounts of food, and made crass comments about the other guests. Snowflake, being a dog, could get away with waiting outside.

The reception ended earlier than I think is normal, just before sunset. That was kind of necessary. The next part of the event was oriented toward the couple's more *exotic* qualities, and differed from the more traditional event in several important ways. The food is customarily dead *before* the wedding reception starts, for example, and that wasn't the case here. Not for nothing had the wedding been scheduled the day of the full moon.

Aiko left when the human guests did. She doesn't care for hunting. Neither do I, actually, except for full-moon nights. Then, well, it isn't really optional. The hunt is in my blood, and when the moon is out I enjoy it, like it or not.

There was a brief interval between the two events, though, during which time I managed to corner Unna alone. She was sitting at a shadowed table in the corner of the room, eating a plate of

salmon in quick, small bites. I slid into the chair opposite her, checking that no one was in earshot. Nobody was. "Congratulations," I said.

The selkie looked at me, her face oddly blank, and then nodded quickly, the motion reminding me of a bird. "Thank you."

"So," I said, leaning back casually. "I don't mean to spoil your evening, but there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"What is that?" she said, not pausing in her eating.

"Well, it seems to me that in all the excitement, everyone's forgotten one key question." I smiled at her. It was not a friendly smile. "Who, exactly, killed Morgenstern?"

"What do you mean?" she said. Such slippery things, questions are. Asking a question says nothing about whether you know the answer.

"Well," I drawled, "it wasn't Zhang. There was no reason for him to do it. Why would he kill one of his own suppliers? Even if he decided to do it, why in *hell* would he do it in his own establishment, where it would be certain to draw all kinds of attention to things he didn't want anyone looking at? He wasn't an idiot."

The selkie made an impatient sound. "Does it matter? He deserved death, did he not?"

"Sure, sure. But, see, that begs the question: if he didn't do it, who did?" I shrugged. "It wasn't Ryan. I believe that. There was no reason for *him* to do it, either. But it was still an incredible coincidence that he was there that night. What I don't think anyone's considered is that he wasn't there alone." I smiled at her and ticked points off on my fingers. "You were present with him. You were the only one present for the start of the confrontation with Morgenstern. You would have had ample opportunity, in the confusion, to kill him without Ryan noticing. And, strangely, you've avoided saying anything about the topic, which is slightly suspicious."

"Why would I do this?" Her voice was level, but her shoulder were tense, giving the lie to her act.

"Favors aren't free," I said quietly. "Your family's a part of the Midnight Court. You, however, are not. The Sidhe don't give anything away for free, ever. You didn't get out without paying a price. I think that your family is in service to Scáthach. I think that when you wanted to leave her service, the price she asked was a debt, a favor to be paid later. I think that she'd gotten all the use she was going to out of Morgenstern. I think that she asked you to kill him, knowing that Ryan would be blamed, knowing that would eventually lead to my being drawn into this. I think everything that's happened, all of it, was a scheme on her part to get me to take down Zhang's smuggling ring for her."

Unna was looking a little wide around the eyes now. I saw her consider going for a weapon, or running. "Calm down," I said. "I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Why not?" she asked, clearly confused.

I shrugged. "Honestly? It really doesn't matter to me. Morgenstern, by all accounts, deserved to get got. I don't give a damn who did it, not when it was obviously a small part of a big plan. No, I'm pretty much just here to tell you a few things."

"What?" she said suspiciously. I think she expected me to blackmail her.

"Your mother's a traitor," I said instead. "Don't know the details, but I'm pretty confident of it. She sold out Scáthach, and Scáthach knows it. Do with that what you will."

Unna looked shocked. A moment later, though, she nodded, and started to stand up.

I let her get three steps in before I spoke again. "Unna?" I said quietly. She turned to face me, looking like she was ready to bolt. "I don't care that much about Ryan," I said quietly. "I like him, but he's not one of mine. Kyra? Is." I was silent for a moment, letting that sink in. "She likes your husband. She'd be upset if anything bad were to happen to him. So I'm telling you this as a fair warning. You treat him right, or we're going to have words."

She nodded again and left.

I went outside and got changed before the moon rose. Snowflake came with me, her eye bright with excitement. Snowflake *does* enjoy hunting.

That night I hunted beside Edward for the first time ever. It was an interesting experience, in large part because of how *natural* it felt. Snowflake, Kyra and I moved as a single unit, of course, but we also moved in instinctive harmony with the rest of the pack, full of joy and hunger and moonlight.

Ryan and Unna left the pack first, appropriately enough, after less than an hour of hunting. Other wolves continued to drop out over the next several hours, gone to sleep or pursue less social pleasures. Finally, by coincidence or design, the only ones still hunting were me, Snowflake, Kyra, and Anna. Anna took down a buck, the first we'd seen that night. She tore his throat and feasted on the blood, while the rest of us crowded in beside her and ripped at the meat. I didn't think I'd ever seen her so happy.