

## **Unclean Hands**

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## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

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Emrys Vaughn

Dedicating this book to Shuiko, because seriously, people. It's about time that someone mentioned that I was *three full books* behind posting files for the completed books.

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### Chapter One

I heard the door creak as it swung open at the base of the stairs

Small, beady eyes glinted in the darkness, following the motion of the woman through the door. She was slender, almost petite, and looked young. She was not, at least not by the standards of humanity.

The door crashed shut again, closing her off from sight. It was a heavy door, a hundred pounds or more, and the sound was commensurately impressive. At such close proximity it was slightly painful. A few moments later there came another crashing sound as the second door closed, followed by a third.

I looked up at the sky, and felt the sun on my face. The breeze swirled around my head, bringing with it the scents of the forest. The air was crisp, bearing the promise of an early snow. We had already had our first frost of the year, though it was just now September. A consequence of living in the mountains.

The woman's footsteps made almost no sound on the stairs. I heard them anyway.

A sparrow flew past the tower, ignorant or uncaring of the danger it was courting. I watched it pass, tracked its movement as it flew off into the trees. It passed across the sun, but I had little difficulty following its course.

The woman kept climbing.

When she was thirty feet from the top, I turned to face the trapdoor. That put six hundred feet of empty air at my back, inches away, but I felt no fear at the thought. Heights held no terror for me. Not anymore.

The woman threw the trapdoor open with surprising ease, considering her slim build. She was dressed casually, in grey silk marked with the crest of a diving falcon on the back of the shirt. I could see the blade tucked through her belt at the small of her back, however, and I could smell the magic woven through the orb of crystal in her sleeve. Her hair was cut just above her ears, and dyed a vibrant cherry red. She was holding a large envelope, the wax seal on which was broken.

"Winter?" she said hesitantly. "You're kind of creeping me out, here."

"Sorry," I said, hopping down from the parapet. "You know I'm safe, though."

"Not what I meant," she said dryly. She gestured slightly at the hawk perched on the parapet.

"Oh," I said. "Right."

I pulled my consciousness back into myself, almost staggering as I lost the rush of sensation from my magic. A moment later I pulled off my blindfold and removed the earplugs. It took a few seconds, one-handed.

I blinked back tears as the sunlight hit my eyes. "Is this better?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, looking around the rooftop. "Bloody hell, Winter. Were you running all four of them?"

I looked around. In addition to the hawk, there were two ravens, and a squirrel that was currently stuffing its mouth with seeds from an open bag on the floor. "I don't *run* them," I said. "And I was doing five. There's a mouse at the base of the stairs."

"*Five*," she said. "Damn. That's a new record."

"I know," I said. "I just wish I thought it was me improving. I'm pretty sure most of the difference is whatever Loki did to me. It takes some of the fun out of it."

"You can get full detail from two animals at once," she said. "You can experience what it's like to have sex as any animal you want, from both directions at once. I am *so* not feeling your pain."

I snorted. "You know, Aiko," I said, "I occasionally wonder why people treat us like we're the most disturbing couple they've ever heard of. Then you say things like *that*."

"It's an art," she agreed happily. "You've got mail, by the way. In case you didn't notice."

I grunted and dismissed the various animals. The birds took off, carrying their various foodstuffs with them. The squirrel scampered down the side of the tower, clinging to cracks so tiny I doubted most people would even see them. The mouse went back to ransacking our pantries, where its life expectancy was about as long as it took for Snowflake to get bored.

"What's it say?" I asked, wandering over to the bench. Unlike most of our furniture, it wasn't a work of art made from exotic hardwood; this particular piece was exposed to the elements, and it would have been ruined if it were made from the wood and fabric so prevalent in this castle.

So, naturally, it was a work of art in granite and obsidian instead.

"It says you're screwed," Aiko said, following me. She handed me the envelope.

I dumped the contents out into my lap. One sheet of paper, of a very fine quality, and a sprig of honeysuckle. Both objects reeked of magic, the odor thick and sweet, almost soporific, with a hint of nightshade underneath.

I got a sinking feeling when I smelled that. I *knew* that smell, and it boded nothing good.

I unfolded the sheet of paper and read what was written on it. Then I read it again. Then I looked at the sprig of honeysuckle.

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"I am *so* screwed," I said. "How did they deliver this?"

"Some Sidhe walked up and handed it to me while I was playing video games," she said. "Told me it was for you."

I sighed. I really hated how *easily* the Sidhe had always been able to get past my defenses. They'd at least done so openly this time, I supposed. Not that that made me feel any better.

"You read it?" I asked, more form's sake than anything. I knew she had. She wouldn't have been so sure that it was bad news, otherwise. Not that it was hard to guess.

"Yup. Scáthach wants to chat with you, and she's being *nice* about it?" Aiko shook her head. "Screwed. You are, like, *epically* screwed."

"It might not be that bad," I said hopefully. "Scáthach isn't that bad, as Faerie Queens go. And I'm still on her good side, as far as I know. Depending on how you interpret what she said, she might even owe me a favor."

Aiko snorted. "Yeah, right. And I've got a bridge to sell you. You know as well as I do that having someone like her owe you a favor is at least as bad as the other way around."

I thought about Loki, and nodded. "Yeah. I know. But I guess I'm probably in too deep to back out now, you know?" I gestured vaguely at my face, and my eyes in particular.

She nodded. "Yeah. I know. That's how it goes, isn't it?"

I nodded. For several seconds, there was no sound but the gentle rustle of the wind through the trees, a long way below us.

"How'd you get out?" I asked abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"You used to run with the Courts," I said. "You got away. They haven't bothered you about it at all, that I can tell."

Aiko was silent for a long moment. "I didn't get away clean," she said at last. "The Sidhe have a way of making you pay for every step you take. And I was never as deep into the Courts as you are. You're dealing with one of the *Queens*. They aren't the type to let anyone go, once they get their hooks in you."

I grunted. "Yeah. So. I guess I need to go have a chat with her."

She nodded. "I think we can both imagine what happens if you turn her down."

I could. Oh, I couldn't guess what the details might be, but the broad strokes? Yeah, I knew what that would look like. When a Faerie Queen sends you a personal invitation to come and chat, you don't say no. That's the kind of thing that Greek tragedies are made of.

"The invite is for me, specifically," I said, after a long pause. "Probably best if I don't bring you guys along."

Aiko nodded again. "Yep. I'll see you when you get back, hopefully. Try not to get screwed over too badly." She turned and descended back into the castle without another word, taking the stairs at a speed that would be dangerously reckless for a human. For Aiko, it was business as usual.

I stood on the roof for a minute or so longer, watching the sunset. It wasn't that spectacular, but I've always loved watching sunsets. If this was my last chance to do so, a distinct possibility when I was going to meet with Scáthach, I wanted to enjoy it.

Then I sighed, and went back inside. I didn't bother turning the lights on in the staircase. I didn't need them.

I would have gladly worn armor to this meeting. I'd gotten used to it, over the years, until I hardly even felt the weight anymore. My armor was made out of an iron alloy, though, and that meant wearing it to an event like this a particularly ugly form of suicide. Invited or not, you don't bring iron into the personal demesne of a Faerie Queen.

I've always had a tendency to plan ahead, though, and I've gotten a lot better about setting up contingencies. Thus, it should probably not be a great surprise that I'd prepared something to wear in case I couldn't use the armor, for whatever reason. My social life had been rather sharply curtailed, recently, but there were a handful of places I was still welcome, and wearing a suit of armor on a social visit wasn't the kind of thing that made you many friends.

This particular excursion was more formal than most, and I dressed to match. When I left the castle, I was wearing a silk outfit not unlike the one Aiko had been wearing. My shirt was white, and rather than the diving falcon, it was marked with my own coat of arms, a white wolf's head on a black shield. The shirt contrasted sharply against black silk pants and a black leather belt studded with bronze. I draped a cloak of shadows over my shoulders and put on some understated jewelry, a mix of gold and bronze, with a few pieces of more exotic materials thrown in.

Between the jewelry and the contents of my pockets, I was carrying enough in the way of magical armaments to kill a small army. I had to limit my selections somewhat to avoid any iron derivatives, but it hardly mattered. I'd had years to build my collection. There was plenty to choose from.

Before I left, I found Snowflake in the library. She was reading a copy of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. I knew for a fact that she'd read it cover to cover, a few times, but there was something

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to be said for repetition. Particularly when a lot of the monsters in that book weren't nearly as fictional as I might have preferred.

*Hey, I said to her. I've got a meeting to go to.*

The husky didn't bother turning to look at me, instead flipping the page with a delicate motion of one claw. *I know, she said in the back of my head. Aiko told me. Are we still on for the concert tonight?*

*We'd better be, I muttered grimly. We've been planning this for three months. If Scáthach gets in the way, I'm going to be peeved.*

*Good. Now get going. You've only got a few hours before we're supposed to leave.*

I laughed and scratched her ears, then stood and walked out. I thought about stopping to let Alexis know where I was going, but decided against it. My cousin was working on a focus at the moment, and the last thing she needed was a distraction. She didn't have anything like the practice I'd had making things with magic, and an interruption at the wrong time could easily set her back months in her work.

I couldn't think of any other way to put it off, so I made my way to the ground floor of the castle and crossed the absurdly large entrance hall to the front door. It was made of ash bound with bronze and steel, and large enough to have a smaller door inset into it.

It also reeked of magic, a dozen or so flavors of power blending together to form a strong, somewhat harsh medley. The whole building was warded, of course, but the door got special attention. You'd probably have better luck taking a battering ram to the walls than trying to get through that door.

I lowered the wards, an exercise of magic so familiar that I hardly even had to think about it anymore, and then raised them again once I'd left. There wasn't enough room on top of the mountain to fit a courtyard, so the door of the castle opened directly on the staircase that led up the slope.

I jogged down the stairs, barely paying attention to where I placed my feet. I knew this path by heart, and I didn't even have to think about it to know which steps to skip, and which stones I should take care to avoid. The traps out here weren't nearly as nasty as the ones on and inside the building proper, but I still wouldn't like to trigger any of them.

Down at the bottom of the stairs, I turned around and looked up at the castle. It looked just as ominous as the first time I'd seen it, just over a year prior. The huge, bleak granite edifice loomed over the valley, seeming absurdly large. It looked like a fairytale castle, but not in a good way. It was the kind of castle that you normally picture as seen on a dark and stormy night, with ominous music in the background. It was the kind of castle where dark lords sat and schemed and plotted.

I wondered, sometimes, what it said about me, that I kind of liked that aesthetic. That it fit me.

I sighed and shook my head, bringing my thoughts back into the present. They seemed more inclined to wander, since whatever Loki had done to me a year ago. Although I supposed that might

have just been an effect of my circumstances. I hadn't been involved in a real catastrophe for nine months. Maybe my mind was getting rusty after so long without a disaster.

Whatever the reason, this was definitely not the time for it, not when it looked like the next crisis might be just around the corner. Scáthach asking to talk to me was pretty serious, as omens went.

With that in mind, I took a few moments to clear my head, then pulled out the envelope again. I dumped the sprig of honeysuckle in my hand, then crumbled it.

As promised, a moment later a portal opened in the air in front of me. It looked like a hole in the world, a circle of almost incomprehensible darkness. It wasn't black; it was more like there was nothing there to look *at*. My eyes slid from one side of the hole to the other, refusing to focus on the interior.

Scáthach showing off, no doubt. For anyone else, designing an Otherside portal as a stored spell was a whole lot of work for a moderately dangerous result, meaning that you really only used them as last-ditch escape routes. For someone like her, it was a casual display of power.

I wasn't getting any happier about this idea, but there didn't seem to be any way around it, so I sighed and stepped through the portal.

For most people, a portal to the Otherside is *not* a pleasant experience. The instant of transfer feels drawn out, as though time stretches out and becomes meaningless. It feels nauseating, horrible and distressing in a way that you pretty much can't describe in English. Once you're done, you pass out for a couple of minutes, and wake up feeling like you've got the worst hangover imaginable.

It used to affect me in much the same way. Then Coyote had dragged me into the Void, the primordial chaos that reality had been sculpted from. It turns out that the way I had reacted to portals was just the natural reaction to being exposed, however momentarily, to a glimpse of that Void. It turned out further that, once you've seen the real thing, the watered-down version you get when you step between worlds doesn't really affect you all that strongly anymore.

These days, I got an entirely different experience. When I crossed the threshold of the portal, there was a momentary feeling of weightlessness, not unlike the feeling you get when you hit terminal velocity skydiving. My vision went black, the same sort of blackness that I had seen inside the portal, although now the darkness was crossed by streaks of vivid color, in every shade on earth and a few that weren't.

Then I stepped out the other side, blinking. I felt energized, refreshed, as though I'd had a pleasant nap. My left hand itched, which was a step up from its usual dull ache.

Before I could really register my new surroundings, someone stepped up and grabbed my left arm. I immediately stepped to the side, calling power and drawing a knife from within my cloak. It was a short, stiletto-style blade made from crystal, oddly beautiful and fragile-looking.

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A tall, slender figure backed away from me. "Just trying to steady you," it said. Its voice was high, feminine, and so perfect in tone that it hardly sounded real. It was hard to tell under the wooden armor, but presumably this was a female Sidhe. I didn't see any weapons, not that that meant much.

"Ah," I said, relaxing slightly. I returned the stiletto to its place. "The sentiment is appreciated, but not necessary."

"So I see," she said. "May I ask why not?"

"You may ask. I highly doubt that you can afford the answer."

She nodded. "Reasonable. The Lady is currently occupied."

"That's fine," I said. I looked around for somewhere to sit, but there wasn't anything appropriate that I could tell. I was standing in a thick forest, rich with the same aromas I had noticed on the letter, with no landmarks in sight. The sky was perfectly clear, a blue as deep and pure as the finest lapis lazuli, filled with ten thousand stars blazing with cold silver light, diamonds scattered across the sky.

It was night, of course. It was always night here.

"Is there somewhere I might wait for her to be free?" I asked. I didn't like to admit ignorance that way—admissions of weakness are a *terrible* idea around the Sidhe—but it was better than blundering around on my own.

"Yes," she said, sounding relieved that I wasn't going to cause a fuss about it. "Follow me."

The receptionist led me down a narrow path that I would have sworn wasn't there a moment earlier. The grass twined about my ankles, an unnervingly sinuous movement that did nothing for my peace of mind, but didn't try to trip me.

Maybe thirty feet along the path we reached a clearing. Fallen trees had been arranged around the edges of the space, forming improvised benches. I sat on one and found, as I expected, that it was far more comfortable than its appearance would suggest.

To my surprise, the Sidhe sat on another bench, directly across from me. "May I ask what you are called?" she asked.

"You may," I said again. "I am called Winter."

She nodded slightly. "Well met. I am known as Quercus."

"A pleasure," I said.

"May I ask what your purpose is here?"

"I think," I said slowly, "that that is a question which you would have to ask the Lady." That was true, in that I had no idea what the answer was, but hopefully it would be taken to mean that I knew but

didn't want to share. That kind of word game is important, when you're dealing with the fae. Telling a direct lie to one of the Sidhe is a bad idea at the best of times, and something told me that doing so now would be considerably worse than that.

"Reasonable," she said again. "It should, I think, only be a short time until she is available to converse with you."

Slippery language, that. What she thought was a short time might be radically different from a human's interpretation of the phrase. I didn't think Scáthach was going to screw me like that, though.

Quercus said nothing after that, and I didn't feel any need to fill the silence. I spent the time working magical models in my head instead. I'd been thinking about designing a mirror that could display the visual information I got from an animal, letting other people have some idea what I was looking at. There were a few kinks in the design, and I was still working out how to balance the energy flows properly.

About fifteen minutes later, I thought I might have figured out how to rearrange the structures of my mechanism, preventing a potentially disastrous buildup of energy. I'd produced a pencil and a small notebook from my cloak, and I was writing out formulae describing the proposed alterations so that I could figure out whether there was something obviously wrong with it before I got Legion's interpretation of the changes. The demon was insufferable when I made an amateurish mistake.

At that point, Quercus suddenly stood. "She is ready now," the Sidhe said.

I nodded, returned the writing implements to my pockets, and stood. I would rather have had another two minutes to finish what I was doing, but I didn't bother asking. When the Queen was ready, you didn't argue.

She led me further down the path, and within a minute we reached the base of a large, fairly steep hill. Quercus gestured for me to continue, and I climbed the hill alone.

It was taller than it looked. It took me probably ten minutes to climb that hill, and I was breathing hard by the time I reached the top. Hopefully Scáthach wouldn't be upset by the delay.

At the top, the hill leveled out for a few hundred feet. In the center of that expanse was a massive throne carved from a single piece of amethyst. The back flared out like a cobra's hood, covered in spidery, vaguely runelike designs that glowed with the same pale light as the stars overhead.

Scáthach should have looked ridiculous in that throne, dwarfed by the scale of the thing, but she didn't. On the contrary, she looked quite at home, lounging in the seat. Her posture was strange, subtly *off* in a way that I couldn't quite define, making her look more feline than human.

She was, of course, beautiful, the kind of intense, overwhelming beauty that drew the eye irresistibly. Her long black hair seemed to move in a gentle breeze that wasn't there, and her brilliantly green eyes gleamed in the darkness.

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"Jarl," she murmured as I approached. "Be welcome in my lands."

I bowed deeply. "Queen," I said. "I shall endeavor to behave as a guest ought."

She nodded, and smiled. It was...a surprisingly friendly smile, all things considering. "The years have treated you well, it seems."

"I would say the same of you," I said. "But I can't envision a world in which it wouldn't be true."

Scáthach laughed, a high, piercing sound, not unlike wind chimes. "I see your charm has not faded." The goddess stood abruptly, a motion more akin to a mantis rising to its feet than anything human. "Come, walk with me."

I hesitated, but what was I supposed to do? Say no? Yeah, that would go over *real* well.

So I moved closer and walked around to the other side of the throne with her. I was careful to stay out of reach. It wouldn't do me any good if she got upset with me, but I thought she might appreciate the gesture.

The view was incredible. The hill dropped off sharply just behind the throne, falling a thousand feet before it began to level off. The blanket of trees stretched maybe a mile past that before running into the sea. Starlight glittered off the water, highlighting the peaks of the waves. Other lights gleamed off near the horizon, the only hint that there might be land beyond the edges of this island.

"Tell me, jarl," she said, staring out across the trees. "What did you think of Quercus?"

"She doesn't make much of an impression," I said. "What's her position in your personal guard?"

"She is the head of it," Scáthach said, smiling. "How did you know?"

"Because you thought she was sufficient as a greeting party," I said. "Because she wouldn't get this close to you if she were as naive as she wants to seem. Because she wasn't carrying a weapon, and the only reason a person guarding the path to their Queen wouldn't be armed is if they don't think that they need to be." I shrugged. "A lot of little details."

"Clever," she murmured. "I've always appreciated that about you." Scáthach started to pace, the motions uncannily graceful in an odd, almost stilted way. She stared out across the water, her manner almost meditative.

"You intrigue me, Wolf," she said at last. "So clever, so foolish. You consider the consequences of your actions with care, yet the results are never what you anticipated or desired."

I was starting to get a nasty feeling about this. Nastier, I mean. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember the night we met?" she asked, ignoring me. "Do you remember the Hunt, and the duel, and the blood?"

I shuddered. "Yeah," I said. I remembered. I wasn't lucky enough to forget that. I still had nightmares about that night, on occasion, though it had plenty of competition.

"You struck off my counterpart's right hand, that night," she said. "You killed her champion. It was fairly done, but that does not change the consequences."

"I would have expected you to be glad about that," I said. "You wanted me to kill him, as I recall."

"Perhaps," she said, still pacing. "Perhaps not. Tell me, Wolf, what do you imagine the results of your action have been?"

I paused. I'd never really thought about it before. "Removing Pier from the equation changes the balance between the Courts," I said. "His power wasn't that serious in comparison to the Daylight Court as a whole, but he filled the role of the Maiden's champion. He was a symbol."

"Precisely so," Scáthach said. She had stopped moving, and was regarding me with a thin, predatory smile. Her eyes were fixed on mine. "What result would that bring, then? What are the *consequences*?"

I continued that train of thought, and the sinking feeling in my gut got worse. "Imbalance," I said. "One Court having an advantage over the other. Doubly so, given that you recovered your spear the same night." Not that she needed it, but that wasn't really the point. It was a symbol of her power, much like Pier had been a symbol of her sister's.

When it comes to the fae, a symbol can be more important than the reality.

"Yes," she said. She still hadn't moved or broken eye contact, and it was starting to get uncomfortable. I wanted to look away from the power I saw there, but I resisted the urge. I couldn't afford to seem submissive in front of her.

"But surely that's rectified by now," I protested. "She can replace her champion easily enough. Getting your spear back was a coup, of course, but hasn't it been balanced by a comparable victory on the part of the Day?"

"They have won their battles," she acknowledged. "But nothing as dramatic as the battles they have lost. In the final balance, the advantage remains with my people."

I gulped. I so did not want to hear that the Midnight Court was winning their eternal war with the Daylight Court. Not that I'd ever noticed that Daylight was much more benevolent, but at least right now they were busy killing *each other*. I didn't want to think about what they might get up to without that distraction.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. It was getting harder and harder not to look away from Scáthach.

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As I might have expected, she ignored the question. "There are many in my Court who say that I should capitalize on this advantage," she said. "They say that we should attack now, and crush the enemy without mercy."

I gave up and looked down. The moment I did, Scáthach turned and gazed out over the water again. Not a subtle message, but it hardly needed to be. "What do you say?" I asked.

"A more challenging question than it appears," she murmured. "As the Lady of the Isle of Shadow, I would perforce say that the Daylight Court are our sworn enemies. I would say that we have the chance to gain an advantage that our foes could not recover from, and this opportunity is not something that can be ignored."

I thought about that for a moment. Her phrasing was a clue, I knew, a very important indicator. The Sidhe, and especially the high Sidhe, never come at a thing directly. I don't know why; it's in their nature. If you want to know what one of the fae is getting at, you have to think about it in a twisty way.

I suddenly realized what was going on, and I almost laughed. Man, had Aiko and I gotten the implications of that invitation wrong. "It's a good thing, then," I said, "that this is a personal visit. You aren't speaking in an official capacity, right now."

She inclined her head slightly, still staring out across the waves. "Indeed," she murmured. "And I, well, my opinion is more complex. This war has raged for millennia, Wolf. Most of my subjects no longer recall why it began. We have found stability."

"And...what? You don't want to threaten that stability? You'd rather have a war that you know than a victory that you don't?" I guessed.

Scáthach smiled. It was a beautiful expression—I suspected that Scáthach wasn't capable of any other kind—but an entirely different kind of beauty than she had presented thus far in this meeting. This was the sort of expression that reminded you of all the stories they tell about what Faerie Queens do to their enemies. Some of those stories involved fates so gruesome that even hardened werewolves, who were quite accustomed to eating their enemies without necessarily bothering to kill them first, huddled close to the fire when they told them, and had difficulty sleeping afterwards.

I gulped.

"On the contrary," she murmured, in a voice as lovely as a nightshade's blossom. "One day we *will* win this war. The Daylight Court shall be ground to dust before us. I shall tear out my sister's throat, and feast on her heart. Or else she shall do the same to me. There can be no other end to this struggle, but the annihilation of one Court or the other." She shrugged, the motion fluid and graceful and utterly inhuman. "But there is no hurry."

"But if you have the advantage, why not press it?" I asked. "Granted that timing is the key of any engagement, but hesitation can be as damning as rushing. If this is the time, shouldn't you move now?"

I was taking a risk, pressing her like this, but it was a calculated one. That was the best I could hope for, with Scáthach. Even *breathing* was a risk around her. She liked boldness, and she wasn't going to be impressed by timid servility.

She glanced at me and nodded slightly, an acknowledgment of a well-made play. "Your words have some wisdom," she said. "But this is not the time. We have just weathered a storm, Wolf. The uncertainty of recent years has been great, and it is not settled yet. And there is a greater storm on the horizon, an upheaval such as has not been seen in a thousand years. To act now is to risk *everything*." She shook her head. "Our victory has waited three thousand years. It can wait a few more."

I nodded slowly. That reference to a coming upheaval was unsettling, to say the least, but it wasn't like there was much I could do about it. If a Faerie Queen speaks of a storm on the horizon with that kind of fatalism, it goes without saying that people like me can't hope to do much more than take shelter and hope to still be around when it blows over.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. It was the telling question, of course. People like Scáthach don't do anything without a reason, and they don't give *anything* away for free. That goes double for information.

"As I said," she murmured. "There are elements in my Court which have been outspoken in favor of a more aggressive stance. I would like for you to dissuade them from this position."

"No."

She turned to regard me again, her head cocked just a little further sideways than a human neck could comfortably bend. Between that and the way her green eyes caught the starlight, it emphasized the feline cast to her features. "Oh? Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"I would reward you well," she assured me.

"I'm sure you would," I said. "The answer is still no. This is out of my league. Whatever you're offering, it wouldn't be worth it in the long run."

"Are you not afraid of risking my displeasure?" she asked. Her voice was light, almost carefree.

"Not really," I said. "I've done favors for you in the past, and you aren't going to respond by screwing me over. That would be imbalanced, and balance is in your nature." I shrugged. "Besides which, I've done favors for you in the past. There's every chance that I'll do favors for you in the future, for something less cataclysmic than this particular request. You aren't the type to throw away a tool that might still be useful."

She nodded slowly. "Well, jarl, I appreciate your forthrightness. Quercus can conduct you back to your home."

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I blinked. "Just like that?"

"Indeed," she said, with an eerie smile. "Your assessment of me was, in its own way, accurate. I would hardly press you on a topic you clearly feel strongly about, when I may be able to make use of you in the future in any case." She went back to looking out over the water, dismissing me utterly.

I was scared, and I couldn't help but think that this was too easy. But I also wasn't about to argue.

I left.

Chapter Two

I wrinkled my nose as I walked into the bedroom. I like having an enhanced sense of smell, but there are times when it is a definite handicap. Nail polish qualifies.

"Hey," Aiko said. "How bad is it?" She didn't look up at me, being more occupied with painting kanji on her thumbnails with crimson polish, vividly colored against the black background. I was guessing the characters were obscene, although I'd never learned to read them well enough to say for sure.

"Eh," I said, collapsing into one of the overstuffed armchairs. Snowflake butted her head against my thigh and I scratched her ears. "Scáthach wanted a favor. Something about some of her minions telling her to be aggressive against the Daylight Court, and she wants me to shut them up."

Aiko froze momentarily, then continued on to the next finger. "So pretty bad, then."

"Yeah," I said. "I told her no."

The kitsune blinked. "Seriously?"

"Yup. I don't want to touch that kind of mess, and she wasn't going to kill me for turning her down, not when I might still be useful down the road."

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. She won't like it, though. Could cause trouble for you."

I shrugged. "Probably. I guess you're rubbing off on me, though. I just don't *care*. I mean, I'm gonna get fucked over one way or another. As many people as there are trying to screw with me, it's pretty much inevitable. Why worry about it?"

*That's the attitude!* Snowflake said approvingly. *Now hurry up and get ready. We need to leave before long.*

I frowned. "I thought we weren't leaving for another few hours."

"Your cousin wants to get dinner first," Aiko said. She can't hear Snowflake with any reliability, but she's gotten really good at following half of a conversation. "Maybe in Singapore."

"I don't know anywhere good in Singapore," I countered. "How about London?"

She shrugged. "Fair enough. I'll go tell her. You want to get dressed?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll meet you downstairs."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

I hadn't really done much, but I took a long, hot shower anyway. It sounded relaxing, and after that chat with Scáthach that was exactly what I needed.

After that, Itoweled off and started dressing. I went with an outfit not unlike what I'd worn to meet with Scáthach, although slightly less formal. The shirt was still silk, but it was dark green, and didn't have any special decoration. Other than that I mostly went with leather, and draped my cloak over the top. Three knives, a length of chain, two coils of string, two grenades, four pieces of white chalk and two pieces of black, pouches of salt, sand, and ash, and a small bag of my anti-nasty dust went into various pockets, along with half a dozen stored spells.

It was a lighter arsenal than I liked to carry, but this was another social event. Nobody would begrudge me a few armaments—the supernatural world is accepting that way—but there were certain limits to be observed. Walking in wearing heavy armor and carrying a shotgun would violate several of them.

Once I was finally satisfied, I went downstairs. I found the others waiting for me, with varying degrees of impatience, in the entrance hall.

Aiko must have finished getting ready while I was in the shower, because she looked...well, it made an impression. She was wearing a low-cut tunic of green silk and black tights. She'd drawn a complex geometric pattern on her face with some sort of vivid green dye, which contrasted sharply with her cherry-red hair. The end result was...surprisingly appealing.

She also had a tanto displayed quite openly on her belt, of course, because this was *Aiko*. It looked decorative, with a bone handle and jeweled sheath, but I knew quite well that it was a deadly weapon.

Aiko crossed the room and hugged me when I entered. I hugged her back, and blocked her hand when she tried to pick my pocket.

"You two make a surprisingly cute couple," Alexis said dryly. "But as far as I know, there isn't a camera crew here, and we're running later than we should be."

Aiko snorted and made an elaborate obscene gesture in her vague direction with both hands. But we left.

There are times, when the supernatural makes a mess of my life, that I'm not fond of magic. That being said, however, it can let you do some pretty cool things.

On this occasion, for example, we left the castle in Transylvania at around ten, local time. Two quick Otherside portals later, we were standing in a back alley in Soho, having jumped back two hours in the process. Aiko had no more trouble with the portals than I did, for exactly the same reason. As for

Alexis and Snowflake...well, we kept them from throwing up on themselves, at least. That would have been awkward.

After that, we enjoyed a pleasant meal at the sort of seedy backstreet restaurant that had no particular objections to letting the scariest-looking husky ever eat at the table. The food was better than you'd expect, from such an establishment. I ate twice as much as any of the others, and walked away hungry, but that was to be expected. It seemed I was always hungry, anymore. Another side effect of whatever Loki had done to me.

I try not to think about that too much. It isn't too hard, most of the time. The vast majority of the alterations were exaggerations of traits I already had. So long as I don't look in mirrors, I'm only really reminded of all the things I'd lost at mealtimes.

It could be worse. It could *always* be worse.

An hour or two later, the four of us were stepping out of another portal. This one was a great deal smoother than the previous ones; even Alexis hardly seemed to notice it, and nobody passed out. This portal had been made by someone considerably more skilled than any of us.

We'd hardly hit the ground when an androgynous Japanese man stepped up to us. I didn't recognize him, but the fox-and-spice smell of his magic made it clear that this was a kitsune.

Before he could say anything, Aiko dug a crumpled sheet of paper out of her tunic. It looked like it had been torn out of a notebook, complete with coffee stains, a doodle of a crocodile being run over by a tractor, and a half-worked integral. The actual text of the invitation was written in what looked like dried blood in a cramped corner of the page.

Aiko claimed that sort of thing was more or less par for the course for this individual, and certainly the other kitsune took it in stride. He glanced at the page, skimmed the writing, then handed it back to her and nodded. We swept past him without a word being said.

"You said you've seen this guy perform before, right?" Alexis asked as we walked down the narrow corridor leading out of the entrance room.

Aiko nodded. "Yeah, once. All of his cousins were invited to that show. It wasn't nearly as exclusive as tonight's." She shrugged. "That was quite a while ago, though. This is the first show he's done in fifty years."

"That isn't that long," I pointed out. "Not for a kitsune."

"Yeah, but this guy's a special case. He's a bit wacked in the head, even by our standards. Hell if I know what he's planning for his big comeback."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

As Aiko was saying that, we emerged into a larger room. It wasn't built on anything like the scale that some Otherside buildings are, though. It wasn't even that large by the standards of concert halls. The walls were paneled in cherry wood, and there were hanging scrolls and vases of flowers scattered around the walls.

People milled throughout the room, talking quietly in an enormous variety of languages. Most of them were kitsune, judging by the smell, but I saw a handful of tengu in their natural, birdlike forms. Here and there one of the Sidhe moved through the crowd, and there were a handful of less recognizable things mixed into the crowd.

"The show is supposed to start in about fifteen minutes," Aiko said. "We'd better find somewhere to sit."

We eventually found a couple of open seats in the third row, directly behind a thin Asian man who smelled strongly of fish and rice paddies. A kappa, I was guessing, though I didn't have enough experience with them to say for sure. It explained why the seats were empty, at any rate. Aiko had to sit on my lap for all of us to fit, but neither of us particularly objected, and the next available option was eight rows back.

After around thirty minutes, the heavy velvet curtains finally pulled open to reveal an extremely tall kitsune. He looked generally human, but had four enormous fox tails, an intermediate shape which I was pretty sure Aiko couldn't take. Not that that was terribly surprising; power was measured by tail number among the kitsune, and she only had one. There was an order of magnitude between her capabilities and those of a four-tail.

He was surrounded by musical instruments, most of which I didn't recognize. There was a wide variety of taiko drums in a rather absurd range of sizes, a handful of string instruments that I couldn't name, and several varieties of flute. In addition to these classically Japanese instruments, I also saw a grand piano, two cellos, and what looked like a tuba that had been through a pasta extruder, along with several sets of chimes. Here and there black-clad figures moved among the instruments, checking and rechecking them.

The concert itself was...eh. I wasn't able to really appreciate it, not having that much taste in music and having almost no background in this genre. I didn't speak the language, either, which limited my appreciation for the recited sections. Aiko seemed to find them deeply amusing, at any rate, which suggested that this particular kitsune's reputation for eccentricity probably wasn't overstated. For my part, I was mostly just impressed that he had enough grip strength with his tails to use them to play a taiko.

It hardly mattered, anyway. We weren't here for me. From what I'd gathered, this sort of show was one of the few things Aiko could remember from her youth without some degree of bitterness. We were here primarily for her sake, and secondarily for Alexis's. I haven't been the best mentor to my cousin, but I've tried to make sure that she gets a chance to have a wide variety of experiences.

Aiko was enjoying herself, and Alexis was being exposed to a social event that she sure as hell hadn't experienced before. As far as I was concerned, that made tonight's excursion a success. Snowflake and I were pretty much just along to provide tolerably good company.

The good mood lasted until the first intermission, at which point the guests were permitted to mingle and converse while the musicians prepared for the next set.

I was just debating whether I should go and fetch drinks when another kitsune stepped out of the crowd and stopped in front of us. She was taller than me by a decent margin, wearing a grey kimono with a floral pattern below the waist.

I paused and glanced at her again. I was sure that I hadn't met this kitsune before, but there was something familiar about her features. Between that and the relative formality of her dress and hairstyle, I thought I might know who she was. I was really, really hoping I was wrong, though.

"Aiko," the newcomer said. Her voice was melodious, while somehow still coming across as rather stern.

Aiko stood and stared at her. I was scared for a moment that she was about to go for her knife, but instead she took a deep breath and let it out, flexing her fingers at her sides. "Mother," she said after a long pause.

I wasn't wrong.

*Oh shit,* Snowflake said. *Should I hide under a chair, do you think?*

*No,* I replied, watching the situation warily. *And hush.* Not many people could understand her, but it wasn't unheard of, and the last thing I wanted to do was have her destabilize an already volatile situation.

Aiko's mother looked us over, somehow conveying intense displeasure with numerous aspects of our bearing, manners, and dress without altering her expression in the least, and then turned back to Aiko. She said something in a liquid language that I didn't know, but which was presumably whatever variant of Japanese the kitsune spoke. Based on what I'd heard of her, I was guessing she wouldn't be speaking any dialect that had been current for the last several centuries.

"I don't care," Aiko replied. "My friends speak English. If you want to talk now, you can do the same."

The other kitsune sighed. "Why must you be difficult, child?"

"That is *not* a conversation you want to have," Aiko said tightly. "Not unless you want me to cause a *huge* fucking scene, right here, right now."

Apparently her mother wasn't willing to call that bluff, which was a wise choice. She sighed and made a small, graceful gesture of surrender. "As you wish, my daughter."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

Aiko stared at her for a long moment, then sighed. "What do you want?" she asked, sounding suddenly very tired.

"It has been years since we spoke."

"Not a coincidence," Aiko said through gritted teeth. "You made it clear that you didn't want me for your daughter. I was only giving you what you wanted, *mother*."

She sighed. "You know that isn't true, Aiko. You know that I love you."

"No," Aiko interjected. "You don't. You love the person you want me to be. You love the daughter you *wanted* to have. But we both know that person isn't me." Her voice was still tight, but her expression had gone blank, almost masklike.

Holy shit. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen *anything* break Aiko's composure this badly. I knew her tells pretty well by now, and everything I was seeing suggested that she was about six inches from losing it and lashing out physically.

Apparently her mother recognized that, at least to some extent, because she sighed and nodded. "As you wish. You know how to contact me, if you ever want to talk." She turned and vanished back into the crowd.

Aiko spent maybe ten seconds with her eyes closed, taking deep breaths. When she opened them again, her expression had returned to its normal, mobile self. Her voice, though, was still tense as she said, "You guys want to stay here?"

"Not particularly," I said, looking at Alexis. She shook her head. "That kinda killed the mood."

"Just a little," Aiko said dryly. "Okay. Let's go, then. I need out of this room."

Nothing more was said as we left the concert hall, passed through the same portal we'd entered by, and walked a short distance along a Faerie trail to a pond by the edge of the woods. Once there, I paused. "If you want to talk about it, I'm here," I said awkwardly. I wasn't really very good at the whole offering comfort thing.

"No," Aiko said. She mostly just sounded tired, now. "Thanks, but there are some things that talking just makes worse."

I glanced into the pond and saw a monster looking back, frozen amber eyes and teeth a little too sharp to pass for human, hollow cheeks hidden behind grey stubble, one hand little more than a mass of scars.

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

Chapter Three

The next two weeks passed in a blur.

Aiko was in a funk after running into her mother, but she pulled out of it. Two days later, she seemed totally unaffected, though I knew that much of that was a mask.

I started laying the background for my mirror focus, and made minor improvements to my cloak of shadows. I mixed a potion, something I'd only recently learned to do. I added another layer to the warding spells around the castle, though I doubted it was necessary. At this point, the place was so heavily fortified that any more protections were largely redundant. I went with Aiko on a trip to Thailand, where we set fire to a bar, started a minor riot that turned into a major riot, and killed twenty-three members of a gang that was involved in human trafficking.

The whole time, though, I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. I felt like there was a sword hanging over me, just out of sight, and at any moment it might fall on me without warning. Everything I knew about Scáthach told me that this wasn't over, that she wasn't going to leave me be this easily.

Except that, apparently, she was. And that just scared me even more.

It was with that feeling of slowly building dread that I traveled back to Colorado Springs. I didn't spend much time there anymore, though on some level it would always be my home. It was just too dangerous. I was an internationally wanted criminal, of course—there's really no other option, when they think you blew up a decent chunk of an American city and killed twenty thousand people—but most of the time I was safe enough, so long as I kept my face covered. But in Colorado Springs, there were a lot of people who might recognize me, and they were a lot less likely to have forgotten the incident.

But I was still the jarl of the city, and that entailed certain responsibilities. One of them was that I settle disputes among my so-called subjects, which was hard to do without being present. I suppose I could have done it by phone or something, but that would have been seriously detrimental to my image.

It wasn't that much of a strain, in any case. When I first started the gig, I heard petitions every week. Now, well, I went in once a month. Most of the time there were only a handful of people seeking judgments. Most of my so-called subjects were too scared of me to ask.

I stepped out of the portal literally on the front steps of the mansion, where I only had to take two steps to open the front door and step inside. No one would have had a chance to see me.

Stepping inside, I found my face about six inches away from a broadhead arrowhead.

"Good afternoon, Kyi," I said. "Is everything good here?"

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

The jotun lowered her bow, relaxing the tension. "Já," she said, nodding. "All goes well this day."

"Good," I said, stepping past her into the building proper. "I'll want you in your usual position in an hour. Until then, your time's your own. I would appreciate it if you could send Selene in to talk with me."

"Já, minn herra," she said. "I will send her."

"Thank you."

Kyi shook her head, scowling disapprovingly. With the tattoos around her eyes and along her hairline, she had a pretty impressive scowl. "Jarls do not say thank you," she said severely.

"Why are you still here?" I asked, continuing into the throne room. "I gave you an order."

"Better," she said, sounding somewhat mollified. I didn't hear any footsteps as she left, but then, I wouldn't. This was Kyi Greyfell we were talking about, after all. If you heard her, it was because she wanted you to.

In the throne room I walked up and stared at the throne for several moments. It looked dramatic as hell, a massive, solid thing made from black iron. The wall behind it was windowed on the lower ten feet, with my coat of arms above it. The resulting image was more than a little intense, especially at night.

Of course, the throne was also uncomfortable as hell. I didn't notice as much as I used to, but I still wasn't looking forward to sitting in it. Not that that mattered. Maintaining my image was more important than being comfy right now.

So I sighed and sat in the throne, slouching slightly. A minor effort of will reshaped my cloak into a sort of puddle around me, exposing gleaming armor. It was white and black, covered in ridges and spikes, with accents in cold colors. There were tiny runes inset into the colored trim, although I doubted anyone would get close enough to see them.

Besides, the helmet was far more attention-grabbing. It covered my face completely, the mask styled after a wolf's face with startling realism. In the firelight, it could look almost alive.

I've always worn armor to these events. It fits with my martial image, in addition to soothing my paranoia. But I used to leave the helmet off. I wanted to put some semblance of a human face on my organization, and I didn't want to unsettle people too badly.

These days, I didn't care. I was done with pretending to be a kind, supportive ruler. I was even more done pretending to be human. So what if I scared the people who came to me for help? They were scared anyway. They had to be, or they wouldn't be asking me to help them.

I wasn't a person you went to when you wanted good things to happen. At best, I made bad things happen to people that deserved them. At best.

Less than thirty seconds after I sat down, Selene walked into the room. The most recent of my full-time minions, she played a rather different role than the housecarls. She was a demon out of Hell, or a reasonably good facsimile thereof. In her old job she seduced people into evil, figuratively and literally. It showed in her bearing, too; Selene always walked as though she were on a catwalk, and every movement was sensual. It wasn't even conscious anymore.

I didn't give her assignments like that. I did occasionally send her when I wanted to *not* scare someone shitless, as she was far better at it than any of the rest of us. By and large, though, she'd taken on a role as my steward, managing my various minions and making sure that everything was kept in operational status.

Sveinn used to manage that, but I was just as glad to have someone else doing part of it. I hadn't been happy having all that responsibility solely on one person. It was too easy for something to go wrong, and then where would I be?

Besides, my organization had grown considerably since then. When I'd started as jarl, it had just been me and the six jötnar, not counting Aiko and Snowflake. Now I had all of them, Selene, half a dozen mages, a handful of werewolves on retainer, and a gang of half-breed fae and changelings that was somewhere between taking jobs from me and actually being in my employ. That wasn't even counting a sizable network of informants, or the dozen or so normal humans who did odd jobs for me without ever realizing who they were working for. Managing all that was more than one person could do.

"Winter," Selene said, approaching. She treated me a little more casually than the housecarls. That was largely because we were a lot closer to being social equals. As Coyote's granddaughter, Selene was accorded a fair amount of respect. Not as much as I was, just because I had a lot more in the way of personal reputation than she did, but it was still a far cry from my relationship with the jötnar.

"Good afternoon, Selene," I said. "How are things in the city?"

"Not bad this week," she said. "Protesters have been quiet, though *that* can't last."

I sighed. "We aren't going to kill them for speaking up against me, Selene. Not when they're right, at least a little bit."

"You're the boss," she said, though her tone was skeptical. "Anyway, there isn't any real news for the week. There's a report of ghouls hiding out on the edge of town. One of our informants claims to have seen some sort of monster being herded into the sewers downtown. Neither report is corroborated."

"Still worth checking out," I said. "Send Kris, Kyi, and Vigdis to look into the ghouls. Recon only, get out if they think they're in danger. I want confirmation of the ghouls' presence and a location, numbers if they can manage it. For the sewers, I want Matthew, Haki, and...see if Jackal will go, or send one of her people. Standard rates. Same instructions for that group. Identify the thing if they can."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"You got it," Selene said. She didn't write any of it down, but I was confident that she would remember every word. "You want them on this tonight?"

"Yeah," I said. "As soon as possible after the hearings. Is there anything else?" I would have sent them sooner, but I liked to have my housecarls around while I heard petitions. They made for a nice display of force.

"Yes," she said. "Kikuchi sent a messenger this morning. You and Aiko are invited to a dinner he's hosting next month. Katrin also left a message requesting that you provide a security detail for a meeting this Thursday. She's offering payment."

I grunted. "For the dinner, check my schedule. If there's anything conflicting let me know. Otherwise thank him and tell him we'll be there unless something urgent comes up. For the other..." I frowned, thinking. I didn't like that. Katrin knew that I wasn't fond of her. "How much is she offering?"

"Fifty thousand," Selene said promptly. "Half up front. One night, less than eight hours."

I nodded slowly. A considerable payment, but not absurdly so. That said something. She thought I would want to be there without her needing to provide an exorbitant reward. Considering how little I *wanted* to be there, that meant there was some other reason I should go. Information I would want to have, perhaps.

Either that, or she was conning me. Could go either way with Katrin.

"Tell her I'll provide a detail for that price," I said. "But I can't guarantee her security without more information on the nature of the meeting. Not on three days' notice."

She nodded. "Will do. Those were the only messages."

"Good," I said. "Could you send Tindr in? I want to go over the finances."

Selene nodded again. "Of course. Do you want some food? There should be enough time for a quick bite before people start showing up."

"Tea, if it's not too much trouble," I said. "Something strong."

"We have a decent Darjeeling," she offered.

"That sounds great."

Selene nodded and left. A couple minutes later, Tindr came in.

Tindr the Exile was something of an anomaly among my housecarls. He seldom carried weapons, and he normally wore a suit. He wasn't useless in a fight, although I sometimes referred to him as though he were. Like all jötnar he was stronger and, in his natural form, considerably larger than a human. Like all my housecarls, he'd had basic military training. He was more than a match for your

average person. It was just that, in my circles, that didn't *mean* much. I didn't need help for fighting average people.

More importantly, though, I would have to be insane to use Tindr in a fight. He was far more valuable here, helping to manage and coordinate my growing empire. The thing that set him apart from my other housecarls was his *brain*. Tindr was clever, quick-witted, and had a knack for mathematics that I could only envy. It hadn't taken him long to learn the ins and outs of mortal finance.

"Jarl," he said, entering the throne room. He was carrying a folding table in one hand and a heavy binder in the other.

"Tindr," I said. "Give me numbers."

He nodded and walked over to my throne. He handed me the binder and set the table up. I set the binder on it once he was finished.

"We got an anomalous payment on Friday," he said as I flipped the binder open to the current balance sheet. "Some group in Thailand paying for your services?"

"We wiped out a group of human traffickers there not long ago," I said absently, scanning the numbers. Everything seemed to look all right. Not that I would know if it didn't; this was Tindr's realm. It was my money, but I was a stranger here. "Really wasn't expecting them to pay me for it. Hell, I'm surprised anyone knew it was me."

"Really?" he said, frowning. "If you don't mind my asking, my lord, why would you do it, then?"

"Not at all," I said, most of my attention on the binder. "Aiko needed to blow off some steam."

He hesitated, as though he expected me to say more, then shook his head. "You exterminated a gang of slavers just because your girlfriend needed an outlet?" he asked, sounding incredulous.

"Sure. Why? Is that surprising?"

"Coming from you, not really," Selene said, handing me a cup the size of a thermos. She gave a similar but smaller cup to Tindr and then dropped a large roast beef sandwich on the table next to the binder.

"I didn't say I was hungry," I told her.

She rolled her eyes. "You're always hungry," she pointed out. Which, for the time I'd known her, was more accurate than she realized. "Forty minutes to showtime."

"We'll be ready," I promised. I took a sip of tea, and winced; it was painfully hot in my mouth. Not that that took all that much. Since Loki changed me, my body temperature was typically measurably *lower* than the ambient temperature. "Okay, Tindr. Give me the update."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

He turned the binder to face him and flipped through the pages until he found the one he wanted. "Payments from the businesses in town came in as usual," he said. I hadn't *intended* to start running a protection racket, but a handful of people in the local supernatural community had started paying me for keeping the peace, and it sort of snowballed from there. "Katrin made an unusually large contribution. Your investments are also doing well, although we did offload some of the gold reserves."

"Skip the routine stuff for now," I said. "I want to focus on covering any new developments before I hear petitions."

"Of course," Tindr said, flipping past a couple of pages. "Let's see. We finalized the purchase of that construction company in North Dakota. It's been fairly profitable in recent years, and we should also be able to use it as another laundering front. I've also been in talks with a potential factor in South Africa. He's willing to pay ten percent over what we typically charge for stored spells provided we get them there within a week."

I thought for a second, chewing on sandwich. It wasn't great, but I wasn't picky. "There should still be a decent selection in the storage unit on thirty-first street. Send him some of those and if he likes the quality we can enter negotiations for custom work. I assume you can arrange transportation for the shipment?"

"Right," he said, making a note in the binder. "And yes, of course I can handle the shipping. He's also expressed an interest in the armaments Kjaran's producing. He isn't as enthused about those, but I think I can talk him around if you want."

Kjaran was another of my housecarls, the creepiest in my opinion. I'd had no idea he was a competent blacksmith until about a month earlier, when he asked to set up a forge in the basement. If everything was going according to plan, he should start churning out swords, knives, and axes pretty soon. Oddly enough, knowing that he was an artisan just made Kjaran seem even eerier to me.

"Yeah," I said. "But don't promise anything and definitely don't ship anything until I've had a chance to do quality control on what he's making. I've got a reputation for providing quality goods, and I don't want to take any chances with it."

"Understood," he said, making another note. "I think those are the only actions that needed your approval. Regarding expenses, we've got...doesn't look like anything remarkable this week. Standard expenses."

I frowned and thought about the numbers I'd just read. "It isn't enough, is it."

Tindr did not pretend not to understand me. "No," he said. "It isn't. You're paying several thousand in wages every week. Add in upkeep, rent, bribes, material expenses, contract payments, and...no. You're barely breaking even as it stands. When you consider the occasional large payment for a special service or unanticipated expense, we've been seeing a slow but steady drain for the past year."

I sighed. "Give me the balance as it stands."

He flipped to another page. "In the operational account, three and a half million, pending a one and a half million expenditure to purchase that construction company. In your personal account, eleven million. An additional seventy million in real estate, stocks, and other assets."

It was still baffling to me that I could have *so much* money and still need to evaluate the situation every week or risk insolvency. On some level I was still a broke carpenter living hand to mouth, and eleven million dollars was an almost nonsensically large amount.

But I didn't live in that world anymore. With my current lifestyle and activity patterns, I could easily burn through five million in a high-expenditure month. Having less than twenty million in cash between all my accounts was a somewhat risky position to be in.

"Transfer another three million from my personal accounts to the operational fund," I said. "And step back the monthly donation fund by ten percent."

He made a few more notes. "Are there any organizations in particular you want to cut from the donations?"

I sighed. "No, not right now. I'll look at the list later. For now just cut all the donations equally. And I want you to start making inquiries into mercenary work."

"Are you considering hiring yourself out?"

"Not really, no. I was more thinking that I have a shortage of funds, and I have a bunch of bored minions who need something to do. Maybe the one problem can solve the other."

Tindr smiled. "Right. I can start looking into the going rates."

"Do that. But don't make any promises. And keep this to yourself for now."

"Of course."

"Good," I said. "Also, contact the Watchers. Ask if they're interested in buying back Brick's debt. Again, no promises, and don't spread it around. I'm just checking whether they're interested, and if so how much they're willing to pay. Don't limit the negotiations to cash, either; I'm willing to take payment from the Watchers in kind."

"Understood," he said, jotting down several more notes. "I'll open communications tomorrow. Do you want a report when I've got numbers?"

"Save it for our meeting next week," I said. "The situation isn't urgent." I stuffed the last of the sandwich into my mouth and washed it down with the last drink of tea. "Get going," I said. "You've got work to do, and we need to get ready for this."

"Of course," he said, collecting the binder and table. "Good luck, jarl."

I grunted. "Yeah, well, I'm gonna need it."

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## Chapter Four

It was a light month for petitions. There were only three people there waiting to hear me pronounce judgment upon them, as though I were in any way competent to do so.

The first was a dark-skinned man who claimed to have been conned by a local small-time practitioner. Something about using mental magic to steal his identity and rack up some serious debts, along with getting him put on several watch lists. He wasn't involved with the supernatural himself, but the cops hadn't been able or willing to help him, and he'd heard that I could provide an alternative form of justice. I'm pretty sure he thought I was an *extremely* eccentric mob boss of some sort.

He made a pretty good case, and the mage in question hadn't shown up to defend himself, which was rather telling. I handed down a heavy penalty, with some satisfaction.

I wasn't punishing him for the crime, odd as that may sound. I'd known from the start that I couldn't enforce mundane law on the people I was in charge of, and I hadn't even tried. Any kind of law enforcement on my part would be a slippery slope of dangerous and ethically dubious situations, and in the end I couldn't really hope to do much.

But it was one of the unspoken rules of the community that you didn't get normal people wrapped up in supernatural issues. If this guy had used magic to do this? If he'd done it so clumsily that even someone who was utterly clueless about this stuff managed to catch on and figure out what he'd done?

Yeah, I could punish him for that.

The second case was a trickier one, involving a property dispute over a stolen inheritance. Both of the individuals in question agreed that it had been stolen from a third party. The question was whether the changeling or the kitsune had been the one who deserved the proceeds of the theft. Both parties claimed responsibility for the deed, and each claimed that the other had attempted to muscle in after it was already done and steal the credit.

It was a complicated situation, with no clear answer. Making it worse, I was pretty sure that the whole thing was a con of some sort, and I had no idea what the hell they thought they were going to get out of it. So, as much out of spite as anything, I split the money between the two, and then gave each the choice of either owing me a favor or forfeiting their share, as payment for making me waste my time. Both of them agreed to the latter, so smoothly that I was *sure* they hadn't really wanted the money in the first place. Still had no idea what the point had been, though.

The best part? The inheritance was *less than a thousand dollars*. I seriously couldn't make that situation make sense.

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The final petition was a much more pleasant and straightforward one. For one thing, it wasn't actually a variant on a court case. It was just someone wanting help, and thinking that I could provide it. She claimed that a monster of some sort had abducted her nephew off the street the previous week, and she wanted me to rescue him. Failing that, she wanted bloody vengeance, and she wanted it to hurt.

I could respect that.

I ended up sending Selene and Kjaran with her to get the full story, take a look at the area, and maybe canvass the neighborhood. If her story checked out, we'd be going in in force. Snatching kids off the street isn't something I can tolerate, and doing it that openly violated the unofficial code of conduct, as well. All things considered, I was pretty sure I could offer her that vengeance, if nothing else.

She left with my minions, and I looked around the throne room warily. It was barely dusk, my work for the day was done, and nothing catastrophic had happened. None of the issues of the day had been that pressing, and the resolutions didn't seem as though they would be that difficult or muddled. As far as I could tell, nothing had come up that was relevant to the situation Scáthach had been telling me about.

I was pretty on edge by this point. I didn't get this lucky. That just wasn't a thing that happened.

I was just about to tell my remaining housecarls to disperse and go about their business when someone knocked on the door. It was a polite sort of knock, loud enough that we would definitely hear but not loud enough to be obnoxious. Other than that I didn't notice anything remarkable about the sound.

*Of course*, I thought. It couldn't have been easy, oh no.

Out loud, I said, "Sveinn? Get that, if you please."

He nodded and went to the door. A few seconds later he returned, trailing behind a big guy in a pale grey suit. He had very dark skin and an unfriendly expression.

The thing I noticed most about the newcomer, though, was his *attitude*. Most people are afraid when they enter the mansion, at least a little. They're walking into a literal den of monsters, surrounded by a gang of superhuman thugs with a fondness for violence and little in the way of remorse. It's even more pronounced if they know who I am, because at this point, I have something of a reputation as an unpredictable, violent person with a tendency to kill everyone who opposes him. Most people are a little nervous in the face of all that, especially if they're alone.

This guy wasn't. He walked in like he owned the place, and that confidence was a little unsettling to me.

The second thing I noticed was that he reeked of magic. The primary note was the disinfectant-like odor of human magic, with underlying tones of fire and something astringent, almost like ethanol. I'd smelled stronger human mages, but not often, and it seldom boded well.

The third thing I noticed was the piece of metal pinned to his suit coat, almost like a sheriff's badge. It was a starburst of some metal I didn't recognize, a little more reddish than copper, with a pair of crossed spears inset in gold. That was the symbol of the Guards, the branch of the Conclave that dealt with applications of military force. They weren't soldiers, precisely, but there was a lot of overlap.

After noticing all that, I wouldn't have wanted to start a fight with this guy. Not even here.

"Hello, jarl," he said. His voice was a fairly unremarkable baritone, with a definite Southern accent.

"Hello," I said warily. "You're with the Guards?"

"I am the head of the organization," he said, not without some pride.

Wonderful. He wasn't just a Guard. He was Guard, singular, the big one, the highest-ranked out of the bunch, one of the biggest names in the Conclave. If his power was anything like the other people on that level that I'd met, he could chew me up and spit me out without even trying.

"Is this an official visit?" I asked. "Or are you here under the table?"

He grinned, showing brilliantly white, perfectly even teeth. "Some of both."

I sighed. Of course he was. I *knew* there was trouble coming.

"Clear the room, please," I said. I didn't want my housecarls here for the next part. There was a good chance that what Guard had to say wasn't something he wanted spread around, and an even better chance that this interaction wasn't something I wanted them to witness. With minions like them, maintaining a constant image of strength and confidence is critically important. The second they started to think I was weak, I would be in a bad place.

They went without protest, although there was some hesitation and backward glances. Once they were gone, I leaned back in my throne and looked at Guard. "What's this about?" I asked.

"An accusation has been brought against you," he said, still smiling. "An allegation that you caused the unlawful death of the mage Zhang Qiang."

I managed to keep my reaction to *that* statement off my face, though it wasn't easy. "Who am I accused by?" I asked. As far as I knew only Watcher could prove my involvement in that, and she wasn't about to speak up on the topic. Not when she'd been deeper in it than me, and a hell of a lot more exposed to political blowback.

"That's confidential," he said. "It's the policy of the Conclave not to expose any of its members' identities to outsiders."

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I grunted. It was bullshit, but that was to be expected. One of the lessons that had been drilled into me repeatedly was that the major players would walk all over you if you didn't have a comparable force backing you up. It wasn't that surprising that the mage clans would cover for one of their own and refuse to let me confront my accuser. Contrary to any principle of justice, but not surprising.

"The Conclave is holding an assembly tomorrow," Guard continued, not giving me a chance to complain. Not that I would have had anything to say in any case. "The accusation against you is one of the topics being addressed. It would reflect poorly on you if you weren't there to defend yourself."

"Tomorrow?" I said incredulously. "That's ridiculous. You can't expect me to show up and defend myself against this accusation on *one day's notice*. That's absurd."

"You're legally required to be notified in advance of the hearing," he said. "It doesn't specify how much warning you have to have in the codes." He sighed and shook his head, his posture becoming slightly less formal. "Look, Wolf. You've upset a lot of people. You're an unknown factor, and people don't like that. You've gathered a lot of power in a short time, and nobody really knows *why*. Then you killed one of the most respected, well-connected mages in the world, and...well, it makes people wonder."

"Allegedly killed," I said. I wouldn't put it past him for that whole spiel to be a way of slipping that little one by so that he could say that I hadn't denied it.

"Of course," he said. "My mistake. It hardly matters, though, because to these people? You're scary. You're the new kid in school, with an ugly reputation and links to some scary groups. There are a lot of people who don't *care* whether you killed him or not, they just want an excuse to get rid of you."

I frowned, but I couldn't argue too much. I mean, I *did* have that kind of a reputation. I *did* have links to some people that I wouldn't be comfortable confronting. It kind of made sense that people would treat me this way.

Oh, don't get me wrong. It wasn't justified. I wasn't powerful enough to ruffle the feathers of most clan mages, let alone threaten the entire Conclave. But I looked pretty badass on paper, with the things I'd done. They had no way of knowing that it had been mostly luck and assistance that let me pull it off, or that I'd been manipulated every step of the way by people vastly stronger than myself.

The funny thing was that I'd cultivated that rep deliberately, to scare away challengers and make people hesitate before they threatened me. It hadn't quite occurred to me that it would also make me a target.

"Where's the meeting?" I asked, trying to cover for the long pause.

"London, twenty-four hours from now," he said, pulling a small envelope out of his pocket. He handed it to me and I gingerly tucked it into my cloak. "That contains the details and your entrance pass. It will get you through the security cordon."

"Thank you for the notification," I said.

"Just doing my job," Guard said, shrugging. "And, now that I've *done* that job, you mind if I give you some advice? Off the books."

"I'm willing to hear you," I said. "Can't guarantee I'll listen."

"Fair," he said, nodding. "You want my advice? Plead guilty. Admit responsibility, say you're sorry, and odds are good they'll let you off with a blood price. It'll look a lot better than if you deny it and then someone comes up with proof."

"If the concern is that someone would prove me guilty," I said dryly, "then isn't beating them to the punch somewhat counterproductive?"

He shook his head. "The people who are against you won't care," he said. "Like I said, this is more of an excuse than anything. But for the people who are on your side, or on the fence about it, it looks a *lot* worse if you try to cover it up. Trust me."

I nodded slowly. "I'll think about it," I said. "Is that all?"

He nodded. "That's it. Thanks for hearing me out. I'll see you tomorrow, Wolf."

I sat in my empty throne room for several minutes after he left, debating various options with myself. None of them looked good, and thinking about it wasn't helping.

"Screw it," I said, pulling out my phone. I dialed a number from memory.

"Hey, Winter," Selene said a few moments later. "What's up?"

"The two reports you got earlier," I said. "Ghouls on the edge of town, monster in the sewer. Which one would you say is more plausible?"

"Neither one is, really," she said. "But the ghouls were reported by a more reliable source."

"Right," I said. "You gave Kyi the details on location?"

"And Vigdis," she confirmed. "They were planning to leave right after you finished hearing petitions."

"Right," I said. "I'll be taking point on that operation myself."

"That isn't wise," she said disapprovingly.

"Probably not, but I'm feeling the need for a problem that I can solve."

"You're the boss," she said, her tone making it clear that she still thought this was an extremely stupid thing to do. "Just tell me you aren't going to do something reckless."

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"Of course not," I said lightly. "Aiko would feel left out."

Chapter Five

"What's your visual range going to be like?" I asked Kris as I parked the heavily armored truck that I typically used to ferry minions around. As I'd expected, she'd had absolutely no problems with coming out to help hunt ghouls. We'd always gotten along pretty well. I'd recruited most of the mages of the Inquisition, but Kris had been the only one to volunteer.

"Should be pretty much fine," she said.

I blinked. "Really? You don't think it'll be too dark?" Raptors are famed for their vision, with good reason, but there's a reason that you don't typically see them out and about at night. They aren't very good at seeing in the dark, probably worse than ordinary humans.

"Nah," Kris said, grinning. "I've been playing around with adjusting my eyes. The range isn't as good, and I lose a little in the way of detail, but they work a lot better at night."

"Nice work," I said, meaning it. Even for a shapeshifter, that kind of delicate adjustment wasn't easy. I don't know that I would have had the balls to make changes to my eyes like that.

"Okay, people," I said, getting out of the truck. "This is the neighborhood that the report came from. Vigdis, Kris, I want eyes in the sky. You're looking for rapid movement, signs of disturbance or violence, anything anomalous. Try not to give yourselves away unless you have to. If you think you're in danger get to my location and land. Questions?"

"Nope," Kris said, climbing out of the truck. Vigdis, just behind her, grunted and shook her head. Both of them started stripping, quickly and efficiently. Shapeshifters of any stripe tend to have a hard time bringing their equipment with them. Granted they were both smaller as birds than humans, so they *could* have shifted in their clothes, but it was inconvenient and neither of them was particularly modest, so they didn't bother.

"Good," I said, turning to the last member of the group. "Kyi, you're on the ground with me. I want you scouting a perimeter around me as I move, looking for the same things as the fliers. Anything odd or threatening, come find me. If it's urgent or you think you're in danger, give me a signal and I'll get to your position. Otherwise, don't let anyone see you."

She nodded, grinning. The compound bow on her back bobbed with the movement, as did several knives and a pair of kama. Kyi specializes in taking people down without them ever knowing she was there, either by putting an arrow through their face from a hundred feet away or by sneaking up on them and putting sharp things into their squishy parts. She isn't nearly as strong as the other jötunar, but she's *quick*, and in a fight she can do a lot more damage than most people expect.

She stalked off into the shadow at the edge of a building. I didn't bother trying to watch her past that.

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Behind me, there was no sign of the two shapeshifters. In their place was a pair of birds, perched on the truck. One of them was an eagle, huge even by the standards of eagles, which was flexing its wings as though it could hardly stand to put off its flight for even a moment. The other was almost indistinguishable from a red-tailed hawk, though if what Kris had said was right, its eyes were rather markedly different.

"Go on," I said, locking up the truck. Between the armor and the defenses I'd added since I bought it, it locked up pretty nicely. You'd have better odds of cracking a bank vault than getting into that truck without a key.

When I looked back, the birds were gone. I took a deep breath and nodded. I checked the contents of my pockets, more out of habit than anything, and then started walking through the streets. As I went I reshaped my cloak into a long coat, drawing a sheet of shadow up over my head so that none of the armor was visible, before pulling a broad-brimmed hat on over my helmet. In the dusk, it would look like I was just a man in a coat, with a hat casting a shadow over my face. Nothing too remarkable.

The report had indicated that the ghouls were on the eastern edge of the city, out in the plains, but hadn't specified beyond a general neighborhood. We'd been able to narrow it down a little from there, just by knowing the habits of ghouls. They wouldn't be in a populous area. Ghouls were at home in wastelands, deserts, graveyards, and abandoned places. In the city, that narrowed it down quite a bit.

That still left a lot of room to look in, though. So as I started walking, I cheated. I called up my magic and sent my awareness out, casting around for any hints of their presence.

One of the cardinal rules of magic is that everyone has something, some particular *knack*, that comes more naturally than anything else. For Kris, it's the shapeshifting. Alexis is a natural with electricity.

For me, it's always been animals, especially predators. I can communicate with them, and see through their eyes.

Oddly enough, though, I'd never really practiced with it. I'd never seen the need; it came so naturally I assumed that I didn't have anything else to learn. Once I'd been given a motivation, though, it turned out that wasn't quite the case. Over the past year I'd made some considerable strides. I'd learned to manage multiple sets of senses at once, processing input from different sources at the same time. Five was the most I'd managed so far, as I'd said to Aiko, and I couldn't get full detail from more than two at once, but that was still a far cry from being limited to one set of senses at a time.

One of the other tricks I'd learned was to only dissociate a piece of myself, keeping the bulk of my attention in my own body. I couldn't pay attention to details while I did that, and I tended to come across as somewhat distractible, but it gave me some options I wouldn't have otherwise.

That was what I did now, devoting part of my attention to skim the awareness of animals around me. I kept most of my focus on myself, and while my reactions would be a little slower, I could

function normally. With the rest of my mind, I was skipping from one predator to the next, looking for any kind of sensory information that could point me at my target.

Hunting ghouls required different tactics than most quarry. Ghouls have some talent with illusion and shapechanging, and most of them can pass for human when they want to. Their natural forms are a lot more conspicuous, but most of the time they don't use those forms in an urban setting. If you're tracking down a ghoul in a city, you need to look for more subtle cues.

I'd been walking for about three minutes when I noticed something odd. I devoted a little more of my attention to my magic, and confirmed that a dog about a mile north could smell decay. It wasn't garbage; the scent was nastier than that, with strong odor of rotting meat.

Rot isn't a perfect indicator for ghouls, but there's a definite association. At the next intersection I turned north, focusing my attention a little more on the animals I was sensing from that direction. As I did I briefly glimpsed Kyi pacing me on the roof of a nearby apartment building, letting me know she was still pacing me.

It only took a minute or so to establish that numerous animals were smelling rotting meat in the same general area, enough that it was more than a coincidence. Even more tellingly, I couldn't find any actually scavenging for it. That was a definite anomaly; rotting meat is still *meat*, and your average fox, raccoon, or raven isn't going to be too proud to indulge in such a meal.

Once I'd confirmed that there was something funky going on, I started focusing more tightly on the area in question, looking for a sign that I was uniquely suited to find. Ghouls come in a lot of varieties, but one of the major common features is an insatiable hunger for flesh.

Back in the day, ghouls were notorious for luring people into the desert and eating them. They often scavenge in graveyards, digging up corpses for food. In the city, though, both of those behaviors are likely to draw unwanted notice, and as a result ghouls tend to fall back on other sources of meat. One of the most telling indicators of a ghoul's presence is that animals, pet and stray alike, tend to go missing and not be found.

It took several minutes to pick it out, but eventually I found it. There was an area not far north, maybe three blocks in size, with almost no animals in it. There were pets, but they were all indoors, where it would be difficult to snatch them without drawing attention. I found a couple of birds on the streets, but not many, and the ones I could reach all felt wary, especially those towards the center of the area I'd sketched out in my mental map of the region.

I'd found them.

I drew my attention back into my own body and turned towards the location I'd just marked, picking up my pace. My minions would observe the change and know that I'd spotted the target

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It was a bit of a hike, but I didn't hurry. It would give people time to get off the streets. It was getting dark, and it was chilly for a September night. I thought most people would be clearing out pretty quickly.

By the time I was in the right area, the streetlights were coming on and I was starting to feel a little edgy. I couldn't have told you *how* I knew, but I was pretty sure that I was being watched.

That was fine. This was their territory, and ghouls are notoriously territorial; I'd known they would have someone watching. Now it was just a matter of waiting for them to contact me. I wasn't exactly inconspicuous, and it was hard to construe my presence here as anything other than a challenge.

I'd been loitering for maybe five minutes when someone walked up to me. His posture was aggressive, angry, and his expression was fixed into an impressive scowl. His features were human, mostly, but *wrong*, the bones too thick and pronounced, the muscles of the jaw seriously overdeveloped.

There were three people standing behind him, with generally similar features, though he was the biggest by a considerable margin. Glimpses through the eyes of a nearby crow suggested that there were another five or so standing around the corner. I felt a sudden thrill of excitement from the sky, though it was muted and remote. Kris and Vigdis might look like birds, but they weren't, and that difference made my magic clumsy and vague. It was only recently that I'd managed to sense the shapeshifters at all.

"You don't have permission to be here," the lead ghoul said. His tone was hostile, but also wary.

I grinned, though I knew he couldn't see it. "I don't need permission," I said lightly. "My authority was granted by a higher power than yours."

He grunted. "What power?"

"You heard of Winter Wolf-born?" I asked him.

He nodded. "The giant, right? They say he owns this city."

"They say right," I said. "And you're standing in it."

The ghoul grunted again. I was getting the impression that he wasn't all that great of a conversationalist. "You work for him?"

"On occasion," I said, grinning. I wasn't going to *lie*, since that was often a foolish decision and wouldn't be good for my rep if it got out, but that didn't mean I was going to tell them the truth. "You didn't ask him for permission before you settled here. He decided to send someone to find out what the situation was."

"We don't answer to your master," he growled.

I sighed and shook my head. "That was the wrong answer," I said. "If you want to live in his city, you're *going* to answer to Winter."

"Or else what?"

"I've got permission to kill all of you if you don't cooperate," I said mildly. "I can't say I *want* to kill you, but I doubt I'd lose much sleep over it, either."

The ghoul's grin was ugly. "Big words," he said. I noticed that his features were becoming less human, the jaw extending into a muzzle, his eyes shifting color to an unpleasant shade of yellow-green. His cohorts followed suit. "But there's only one of you."

I grinned and held one hand up, gesturing slightly. Almost instantly an arrow flew out of the darkness, moving almost too quickly to see, and slammed into the leading ghoul's knee. It was a heavy, four-bladed broadhead, and the carbon fiber shaft disappeared almost to the fletching. Kyi, unlike most of my housecarls, is fiercely modernist in her equipment choices.

It wasn't a serious injury, not to a ghoul. They have a reputation for taking an ungodly amount of punishment to put down; I doubted that taking an arrow to the knee would even inconvenience this one. They aren't like werewolves, either, where all you need is silver. As far as I knew the only way to kill a ghoul was with massive damage.

An instant later, before they could really react, a hawk streaked out of the sky and slammed into my upraised hand. Kris mantled, showing off impressive plumage, and let out a hawk's distinctive scream.

"I'm seldom alone," I said to the ghoul, who hadn't even reacted to the arrow. "And if I were, I could still take you. Last chance. You sure you want to go this route?"

The ghoul grinned and popped his neck. His features had become distinctly bestial now, almost hyenoid, with pronounced teeth. Glancing down I saw that he'd kicked off his shoes, revealing extremities that were more hoof than foot. "I reckon," he said, his new mouth mangling the words almost beyond understanding, "I reckon you're bluffing. I reckon we can take you. Run now, and I'll leave you a hand or a foot. Your choice."

I nodded slowly. "All right, then. Let's go."

The first thing I did once the fight officially started was jerk my arm, tossing Kris into the air. She moved with it, smooth and practiced, turning the motion into a short flight to my right. She turned human before she hit the ground, the change coming and going so fast you couldn't see a point in between, and landed on her feet.

The leader of the ghouls seemed inclined to hang back and get my measure before attacking. One of his minions wasn't so patient, though. She stepped forward, leering, her jaws open wide enough

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to fit my head in one bite. They were slightly lopsided, and I suspected that she couldn't actually close her mouth properly.

I didn't get the chance to find out. The instant she moved, an arrow slammed home into one eye. The ghoul staggered back, reaching for her face, just in time for a second arrow to pass through her hand and into her other eye. The ghoul retreated and started ripping at the arrows, trying to get them out.

A moment later the other group of ghouls poured out from around the corner. My count had been off; there had to be at least ten of them, a veritable tide of misshapen bodies and dirty, matted fur. Some of them, like the leader, resembled hyenas. Others looked more like gorillas, or even goats. The only commonalities were ugliness, hostility, and some formidable natural weaponry.

They made it maybe ten feet before an eagle swooped down out of the sky. Maybe ten feet from the ground, Vigdis turned into a huge wolf, letting her momentum carry her forward into the group. She hit hard, knocking two or three of them to the ground, biting and tearing. She danced back after a few seconds, blood streaming from her muzzle, jaws open in a savage grin.

Apparently this was enough to spur their leader into action. He leapt at me, jaws agape, both arms ending in oversized claws. I ducked aside, but he was faster than I'd expected. I could see him grinning wider as he realized that I'd moved too slowly, and one paw was going to hit me in the face.

That grin faded as his claws skittered aside, utterly failing to find purchase on my helmet. No surprise there; that armor was forged by dwarves, and reinforced by a god. Not much was going to penetrate it.

Before he could recover from the surprise, I stepped closer, pulling a knife out of my cloak. I slammed the knife into his chest, glancing off a rib before slipping between them. Leaving the knife in him, I lifted him from the ground, grunting slightly with the effort, and tossed him back. He hit one of his followers and both of them sprawled to the ground in a confused tangle of limbs. I grinned, took a step back, and called Tyrting. The cursed sword appeared in my hand, eager as ever, and it only took me a moment to undo the catch and flick the scabbard aside.

Vigdis's entrance had thrown that group of ghouls into disarray, and she'd done some considerable damage while they were down. But a few bites wasn't enough to drop them permanently, and now that they were getting back up she was outnumbered and in a bad position. More arrows flew out of the night, hitting vital areas with incredible precision, but they weren't doing much, and Kyi stopped after only a few seconds. She was smart enough to realize that it wasn't an effective tactic for this situation.

The ghouls didn't pay much attention when Kris stepped up next to Vigdis. I couldn't blame them; Kris really didn't look like much. She was barely over five feet, and while she was in good shape, her build was closer to that of a long-distance runner than a weightlifter. Her shoulders were a little

more heavily muscled, probably because of the flying, but it wasn't something you'd notice on casual observation.

She was also unarmed, and naked. The ghouls were confident that she didn't represent a threat, and one bite would be sufficient to take her down. Only one of them even bothered to move on her; the others kept their focus on Vigdis. When Kris slapped at that one's head, it didn't bother dodging.

Then, too fast to see clearly, Kris's hand melted and reformed as a claw, an absurdly oversized version of a hawk's talon. The claw raked across the ghoul's face a good bit harder than someone Kris's size should have been able to swing, and tore through flesh without slowing. Blood poured out of several broad gashes. One of his eyeballs was gone, impaled on a claw and ripped away. The other was still attached, but only barely, dangling by the nerve. He staggered back, shocked, and Kris followed up by jumping onto his shoulders. She jumped again, throwing him to the ground, and turned into a hawk in midair. The hawk flew away, screaming again, mockingly.

The ghoul hit the ground and stayed there. He wasn't dead, but I was guessing he was in a lot of pain, and it would take time for his vision to recover. I didn't think he was going to get up soon.

The others weren't so lucky. They got to deal with me.

I stepped past the group that had come to confront me before the leader could stand up again. One of the ghouls, the one that Kyi had shot at the beginning of the fight, tried to stop me. I took her claw in the chest without flinching and countered with Tyrting, a short cut that took one of her hands off. She blinked, staring at the blood fountaining from the stump. I continued past her without further delay.

The other group of ghouls were focused tightly on Vigdis. She was staying back, on the defensive, but the ghouls were tougher than she was, and they had her surrounded. Both parties knew that the fight was just a matter of time, and the ghouls were pressing in tighter, all their attention on their imminent meal. None of them were prepared for an attack from the other direction.

I hit the ring of ghouls from behind, without warning. I didn't go for anything fancy, just started cutting them down with Tyrting. Normally I would have gone for broad, sweeping attacks, removing limbs and dropping whole swathes of them, but that wasn't good tactics for ghouls; they were too tough, and hard to incapacitate. I used more precise strikes instead, targeting the head and neck.

In the first two seconds I decapitated two ghouls and split the skull of a third, my motions swift and economical. Those ghouls fell, and didn't move afterward. Ghouls are hard to kill, but Tyrting is *really* good at killing things.

The others reacted quickly, turning to face the new threat. That put their backs to Vigdis, and she was quick to capitalize on the opportunity, darting forward and laying about herself with claws and teeth. She focused on the ghouls' legs and feet, tripping and slowing them. None of the injuries were serious, but they left them vulnerable to me, and at this point the ghouls were well aware of what a dangerous position *that* was.

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I stepped through the ghouls, ignoring several more attacks. Claws and teeth slipped aside on the armor. Hooves did a little better, transferring a fair amount of force, but I ignored those as well. They wouldn't inflict anything worse than bruises, and bruises didn't scare me. One ghoul got her hands on me and started to heave me off the ground, but Tyrfinng chopped through her forearms easily enough, and I was through.

"Nice entrance," I said to Vigdis, stabbing one of the fallen ghouls through the spine. It jerked and went still.

The wolf grinned at me, showing teeth that were more red than white. She was bleeding from a pair of bite wounds on her flank, but didn't seem to care.

"Get airborne," I told her. "You're more valuable if they don't know where you're going to hit next."

She nodded and then flickered back to the giant eagle. She had a harder time taking off than usual, likely as a result of the bites, but she managed it.

I turned to face the ghouls. They were hanging back, clearly reluctant to come any closer to me. I couldn't say I blamed them. The end result was that I had a wall at my back and about ten feet of clear space, but they had me hemmed in with a semicircle of ghoul.

A few seconds later the leader walked up through the center of the semicircle, stopping about five feet from me. He was bouncing my knife in one hand.

"Nice work," he said, regarding one of the dead ghouls. "Shame we're on opposite sides. I could use a man with skills like yours."

"I appreciate the offer, but I already answer to more people than I'd like," I said honestly.

He shrugged and tossed me the knife. I caught it and returned it to its sheath inside my cloak. "That's how it goes," he said. "But it's a pity to kill someone with your talent."

"That's funny," I said lightly. "I was about to say the same thing."

He chuckled. "I appreciate the bravado, but let's get real. You've got your back to the wall. You're good, but this is it for you."

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "Look behind you."

He smirked. Several of the ghouls laughed, a sound which really drove home the hyena resemblance.

None of them looked behind themselves.

Thus, none of them saw Kyi step up out of the shadows on the right edge of the semicircle, kama in hand. The curved blade reached out, almost delicately, and hooked the jaw of one of the

ghouls. She drew the kama back, slicing its throat open from one side to the other, and then faded back into the darkness. The whole thing only took a second or so.

By the time the others reacted to what had just happened, the ghoul had already hit the ground, surrounded by a rapidly growing pool of blood.

While their attention was diverted, I made my move. Two long steps brought me within reach of the lead ghoul. He looked back at me, and started to move, but it was too late. Tyrfin started down on the stroke that would take his head.

And then, with no warning whatsoever, there was someone else standing next to him. She reached out and grabbed my wrist, stopping my swing cold, though she didn't look nearly strong enough to do such a thing.

I wasn't surprised, though. Natalie wasn't the most combat-capable vampire I'd met, but she was still a vampire.

"Peace, Winter," she said, her voice more serious than usual. "These people are here under our protection."

I glared at her and jerked my arm away. She didn't try to stop me. "I wasn't informed of their presence."

"That doesn't give you the right to initiate violence against them," Natalie said. She didn't sound happy.

I smiled. "I didn't initiate violence," I said sweetly. "I approached openly and started a conversation. I was open and honest regarding my motives and authority. I offered them multiple opportunities to discuss the situation and come to a peaceful resolution. I explicitly warned them that I would use lethal force if they didn't cooperate. After all that, I was *well* within my rights to defend myself when they attacked."

Natalie glanced from me to the leader of the ghouls. "Jibril. Is this true?"

He glowered at me. "He didn't say he was Winter Wolf-born," he muttered sullenly.

"No," I said. "But I informed you of the authority I was here under. It isn't my fault that you didn't ask for my name or rank."

"Well," Natalie said, glaring daggers at Jibril. "It would appear that you weren't in the wrong here, Winter. We won't be taking action against you as a result of your actions tonight."

"Hang on," I said. "You still haven't addressed the question of why you've moved a large group of violent ghouls into my territory without my permission. That's a pretty blatant violation of our treaty."

"I'm sorry," Natalie said. "But I'm not in a position to answer that question now."

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There was a long, pregnant pause, broken only by the sound of Jibril's claws extending and retracting. I could see Kyi lurking behind the ghouls, seemingly unnoticed by everyone else, spinning a knife in one hand. She was clearly ready to burst into action at the slightest signal from me.

"I see," I said at last. "There will be repercussions for this, Natalie. There will be consequences."

"Yes," the vampire said. Then, without fanfare, she disappeared.

"I really hate that trick," I said to no one in particular.

"Agreed," Jibril said. "Shame we're on opposite sides, jarl. I suspect we could get along."

"I suspect you're right," I said. "But that's how it goes."

The ghoul sighed and nodded, then turned and walked away, his human guise returning as he went. The other ghouls trailed after him, many shooting hateful glances at me as they left.

I noticed that they took all the corpses with them. Ghouls are always hungry.

I sighed and sheathed Tyrfing, wincing slightly at the pain in my ribs. I was going to be feeling those bruises for a while.

Kris flew down a few seconds after the ghouls left, changing ten feet above the ground. She did a frontflip on the way down, presumably because she could, and landed on her feet with casual grace. "Hey," she said. "What was the deal there at the end?"

"Vampires," I said grimly. "Turns out they're the ones that moved the ghouls in."

Kris grunted and nodded. "Figures. Did you work it out?"

I shrugged. "Sort of. Dealt with the immediate issues, I guess. Didn't really resolve anything."

"We killed a bunch of them," she pointed out.

"Not as many as you might think," I said. "Ghouls are tough. But yeah, we killed a few. Does that bother you?" Kris didn't enjoy violence nearly as much as the rest of my minions, and she had the strongest moral center of the bunch.

She shrugged. "Not really. I mean, you *tried* to solve things peacefully. Not really our fault if they won't give us a chance, I don't think."

"Yeah," I said. "Speaking of, what was that bit with the claw? I haven't seen *that* before." I hadn't seen any kind of partial transformation, in fact. As far as I'd known, all of my shapeshifters were limited to just the one human and one animal form. Vigdis could do multiple animals, but she also wasn't quite a shapeshifter, and even she couldn't do partial forms.

"I've been working out," Kris said, shrugging. "You want to get out of here before somebody shows up?"

"Yeah," I said. We hadn't made that much noise fighting, but it was best to be careful with that sort of thing. Especially for me. "You'd probably better go bird. Don't want to get hit with a public indecency charge."

Kris snorted and made a rude gesture at me, then leapt into the air. I sighed and checked that my disguise was in place, then started trudging back towards the truck. I hadn't done all that much, but I felt exhausted, and not physically. This outing had been supposed to make me feel better, giving me a simple problem that I could actually solve, but I felt more tired than before on the way back.

I saw Kyi every now and then, pacing me, and my allies circled overhead. It didn't comfort me as much as it might have.

Chapter Six

"Are you sure bringing me was a good idea?" Alexis asked, hurrying to keep up with me. It was pretty late, local time, and this part of London didn't see a whole lot of traffic at this hour; I was able to set a decent pace without drawing attention.

"Not really," I said. "I just don't give a damn. There's something oddly liberating about knowing that your life's so thoroughly wrecked that nothing you do can make it meaningfully worse."

"Which is fine," she said dryly, "but I still had some hope of not making quite that much of a mess with my second chance at things."

"That's part of why I'm bringing you," I said cheerfully. "You're as good as I am, Alexis. We both know it. Coming to this meeting, you should be able to make some contacts. You might even find a clan you're interested in joining. Who knows?"

"But doesn't it hurt your chances? Make you look like you aren't taking this seriously?"

I shrugged. "That's fairly low on my list of priorities at the moment. Besides, I think it might have the opposite effect. For me to teach another mage suggests competence and reliability. It might not be bad for my image." I smelled the magic, and checked the note I'd been given. Sure enough, the large building in front of me matched the address I'd been given. "We're here," I said. "You ready?"

Alexis took a deep breath and then nodded. "I guess I'd better be," she said.

I grinned. "That's the spirit," I said. Then I stepped forward and pounded on the front door of the building.

There was a pause of several seconds before the door opened. The guy standing on the other side was pretty normal-looking, only made remarkable by a black three-piece suit and sunglasses. "No entrance without identification," he said, sounding bored.

I paused, confused, before remembering that my face was still covered in shadows. I willed my cloak into the form of a long coat, exposing my face and the same outfit I'd worn to meet with Scáthach. "Happy now?" I asked.

Moray did not look happy. "Come in," he said, stepping out of the way. "You're early."

"It seemed better than being late," I said, stepping over the threshold. I felt the mild tingle of the warding spells pass over my skin as I did, though they didn't try to stop me; I was invited.

"You aren't allowed in early," he said, closing the door and locking it. "But I can show the two of you to a waiting room."

"That's fine. Are you in charge of security?"

Moray nodded and walked through one of the doors leading out of the lobby, Alexis and I following. "They moved me into the oversight department after the last job we worked on."

"They gave you a promotion for that?"

Moray snorted. "Yeah, the very special kind of promotion that comes with a pay cut and doesn't have any more authority than your old job, and where you don't have a chance in hell of advancing further." He shrugged, opening the door to a small cafeteria. It was empty except for the three of us. "A lot of people were upset when Zhang died. Someone had to take the fall."

"That sucks," I said.

He shrugged again and sat at one of the long tables. "It is what it is. So who's the girl?"

"I didn't realize you hadn't met. This is my cousin, Alexis Hamilton. Alexis, this is Moray. He's one of the more pleasant Watchers I know."

"Charmed," he said. "But why'd you bring her here?"

"Alexis is a pretty decent sorcerer," I said. "I thought it might be good for her to start meeting people in the field. She could use some backup."

Moray looked at her, showing more interest than he had up until this point in the conversation. "Sorcerer, eh? What kinds of powers are we talking about, here?"

"I specialize in electricity," she said, seeming a little discomfited by the attention. "But I'm decent with kinetic force, and a handful of other things. You know."

"Lightning and force, eh?" he said, eyeing her appraisingly. "That profile lends itself pretty well to a fight. You ever practice combat skills?"

"A bit," she said modestly. "I kind of want to do some good with my magic, you know? I mean, I've...got some stuff to make up for, I guess."

"I can understand that. You ever consider joining the Watchers? There aren't many places you could do more good than that."

Alexis laughed. "I don't think Winter will appreciate you trying to recruit me out from under him."

"Hey," I said. "Leave me out of this. You need to make your own decisions."

"Just think about it," Moray said. "Winter knows how to contact us if you decide you want more information." He glanced at his watch and then stood up. "We probably better start heading that direction. You're right about not wanting to be late."

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At my insistence, we took the stairs. I was starting to regret that by the time we reached the seventh floor, more because of Moray's griping than any real discomfort. It was still better than an elevator, though.

They had a security station set up outside the doors to the auditorium. It was relatively small, but more thorough than I would have guessed. They had a metal detector and one of the full body scanners they use in airports. They also had a Watcher in attendance, a tall woman with harsh features. She was wearing a reddish-brown cloak and a sword belt. I could also detect half a dozen stored spells and foci in various pockets, and the sword itself was clearly enchanted, although I wasn't quite sure what any of them were supposed to do.

I stared for a second. Then I shook my head and walked toward the security station, Alexis in tow. Moray went back downstairs, presumably to go back to watching the door.

"Laurel," I said, stopping just outside the metal detector. "Did Watcher go out of her way to pick security people I already know?"

"Hi, Winter," she said, cheerfully enough. I didn't trust that at all; I knew damned well that Laurel could fake any emotion she pleased, and she'd have no difficulty stabbing me without losing that cheerful attitude for a moment. "And yeah, she did. I think she thought it would make you more agreeable."

I snorted. "That sounds like her. I'm guessing you want me to go through these?"

"Yep," she said, holding out a plastic bin. "You can dump your stuff in here. I'm sure you're carrying."

I didn't bother answering her, but I did take the bin. I pulled two knives out of my cloak and dropped them in, along with a folding knife that I'd had up my sleeve. Three metal rings followed them, along with a length of chain, a couple spools of wire, a spork, and my belt. A handful of needles and a sack of ball bearings came out of the cloak, followed by a pouch of dust and a pair of handcuffs. I had a couple of darts in my pants pocket, which I dropped in, along with a couple of stored spells and a small sheet of lead.

"Jesus," Laurel said, sounding a little disgusted. "Do you always carry that much kit?"

"This is actually a fairly light loadout," I said, dropping a couple of pitons in the bin. "Okay, I think that's everything."

"Right," she said. "Step through the detector and then face the scanner."

I did so. The metal detector didn't go off, suggesting that I'd actually managed to remember everything I was carrying. "Alexis, do you need to drop anything?"

"Hang on," Laurel said, looking up from the scanner controls. "The girl isn't authorized for entry."

"On the contrary," I said. "She's my apprentice. From what I understand of Conclave protocol, that means she's entitled to entry under my invitation."

"Yeah, but you aren't part of a recognized clan. That makes it something of a borderline case." Laurel spent a moment chewing her lip, then shrugged. "Screw it. They want her gone, they can kick her out themselves. Drop your stuff in the bin."

A minute or so later, following two unremarkable scans, Laurel gave both of us a quick and impersonal patdown before grabbing a crystal prism hanging from a silver chain. I was pretty sure it wasn't her work; it lacked the odor of bleach and dust that I associated with her magic.

"I'm reading a fairly strong signal off you, Winter," she said, looking at me through the prism. "Doesn't seem to be localized."

"That's the cloak," I said. "It's harmless. So is the clothing; I just have basic reinforcement on it. Strictly defensive."

"Right," she said. "I can see that. And it looks like you're carrying a couple of stored spells?"

"Forcewalls, for the most part," I said. "I can't do a kinetic barrier worth noticing, so they're useful things to carry. I put all the aggressive stuff in the bin; what I'm carrying is all defensive."

"All right, then," she said, turning to Alexis. "I'm willing to let that by. *You*, on the other hand, are carrying a couple of foci that I'm definitely not comfortable with."

Alexis flushed and pulled off a pair of wooden rings, dropping them into the bin. "Sorry," she said. "I forgot about those."

"It's no big deal. But I'm going to need you to drop the rod, too."

"It's nonlethal," she protested. "No worse than a Taser."

"Doesn't matter," Laurel said, sounding bored. "It goes in the bin, or you stay out here. Your choice."

Alexis looked like she wanted to argue, but she pulled a small copper rod out of the pocket of her suit coat and handed it over.

"Great," Laurel said, putting a lid on the bin and taping it shut. "Winter, you're technically a visiting dignitary, so you get a Guard escort and you sit in the VIP section, right in front of the stage. The Guards will get you to your seat. Alexis—did I get the name right?—you're in the apprentice section. Turn right just inside the door and find a seat. Go ahead inside. Winter, your escort should be here in just a minute."

Alexis didn't seem to be in a hurry to enter the auditorium, but Laurel herded her inside. I stood around and felt increasingly tense for about thirty seconds before a pair of men emerged from the staircase. They looked almost identical, generic thugs with a fashion sense less sophisticated than but

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otherwise similar to Moray's, and had small reddish starbursts prominently displayed on their coats. The only way I could distinguish them was that one was blond and the other had muddy brown hair.

"Ivanov," I said, relatively warmly. "Neumann. They really pulled out all the stops to surround me with familiar faces, didn't they?"

"Looks like," Ivanov agreed. His voice was a lot more cautious than mine; I don't think he was ever quite convinced that I wasn't the one summoning monsters, when I met the pair. "Although that's standard practice. Someone who knows your style is more likely to be able to work with you and make sure you're safe if something happens."

"Right," I said skeptically. Somehow I didn't think it was *my* safety they were concerned with, primarily. "Well, we might as well go in."

"Right," he said as Neumann stepped past and opened the door of the auditorium.

The room wasn't terribly large, as such things went, but it wasn't small. There were probably two hundred people sitting in there, and they weren't all that crowded. We'd entered at the very top of the room, and everyone got a chance to watch as I was escorted down the stairs.

The variety of humanity in the room was staggering. Male and female, old and young, there seemed to be nothing in common among them. Every ethnicity was represented, and the variety of languages in the quiet conversations I overheard was dizzying. Many of them were dressed in fine robes, cloaks, and similarly antiquated garb, but a significant minority wore modern suits. None of them were dressed informally, and I was very glad that I'd worn decent clothing.

The vast majority of them had metal badges or cloth patches prominently displayed, indicators of rank and accomplishments. I knew enough of the code to recognize some of them—the Seal of Solomon indicated a master of summoning and binding creatures from the Otherside, for example, while a braid of numerous metals indicated a master enchanter. The vast majority, though, were obscure to me.

Far more noticeable was the smell of their magic. None of them seemed to be actively working any magic, but a couple hundred mages had enough power to be pretty overwhelming even resting. There was enough power in that room to make my nostrils burn, and the disinfectant odor of human magic was incredibly strong. Every step brought new undertones to the scent, as I picked up on the auras of different mages. It was hard to ignore, and impossible to process.

The two Guards escorted me down to the lowest row of seating. They didn't seem inclined to converse and there was no one else in that section, so I had plenty of opportunity to look at the people on the stage.

There were nine of them, each standing at a podium. They were dressed in simple robes, one in each of the colors of the rainbow, flanked by a white robe at one end and black at the other. There was a roughly even mix of men and women, and a wide variety of ethnicities as well.

I knew almost half of them, at least vaguely. The old woman in the violet robe carrying a black cane was Watcher, who'd been more or less on my side in the past. At any rate, she had a fair amount invested in me, and she knew that I could be useful in the future. I was pretty sure I didn't have to worry about Watcher.

On the other side of the stage, Guard looked unsettlingly cheerful, his crimson robe startling against his dark skin. He watched me all the way down, in a manner more than slightly reminiscent of a bored cat watching a small bird. It was uncomfortable, to say the least.

A slender Hispanic man was standing directly next to him, wearing orange robes. He smiled encouragingly at me as I took my seat. He was Caller, and while I'd only met him once, I knew something about how he operated. Caller had an interest in the balance of power on the Otherside, and he wasn't afraid of interfering to nudge that balance in the direction he wanted. I didn't know him well enough to say whether he would see me as a dangerously unpredictable factor to get rid of, or a potentially valuable tool to keep handy.

And, last but most definitely not least, was the man in the indigo robe, standing next to Watcher in the lineup. I knew him very well indeed, although seeing him on that stage was such a shock that I'd very nearly tripped on the stairs when I realized who it was.

The room went silent as the man in the white robe cleared his throat. "It is time to introduce the next item," he said in English. His voice wasn't particularly loud, but it carried through the room with perfect clarity, likely due to some kind of magical assistance. Behind me I heard a number of hushed voices, as his words were translated into a dozen languages. "Namely, the accusation of the jarl Winter Wolf-Born as the murderer of esteemed mage Zhang Qiang. Jarl, please stand."

I did so, feeling the eyes on me as an almost literal weight. "I am present," I said.

The man in white regarded me. "How do you plead in response to this accusation?"

I opened my mouth, intending to follow Guard's advice and admit my guilt. I could eat a little crow and pay the blood price.

Then I paused. Guard looked too cheerful, too happy. It wasn't a good kind of happy, either. It was more the kind of happy that came along with a decisive victory.

On impulse, I instead said, "The accusation is inaccurate. I played no part in the crime you described." Which was true, really. As far as I was concerned, killing somebody *that* messed up wasn't murder, it was an entirely rational response to someone too monstrous to live.

Guard's expression became very, very ugly when I said that. It only lasted a second or two before he reinstated his calm mask, but I saw it. It made me feel better about my decision. He wouldn't have looked like that unless he'd lost something when I didn't admit my guilt, and I didn't think he had enough invested in my wellbeing to get that upset over me screwing myself.

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"Your plea is noted," said the man in the white robe, with an inscrutable smile. "Let a vote be taken by those present to determine whether it is convincing, or further investigation is needed."

"I move to restrict the vote to the Conclave," said the woman in the yellow robe. She was elderly, and looked vaguely Middle Eastern to me. "Conveying all the evidence associated with this accusation to all of those assembled would be impractical."

"Seconded," said Watcher, in her hoarse, raspy voice.

"Motion passed," the man in white said, still smiling. "The vote shall be taken by the Conclave, rather than all members present. Are there any objections?"

The room went silent. I heard someone cough in the apprentices' section at the back of the room.

"Very well," he said. "I am Prophet. I vote that the jarl be held guilty. The accusation was placed by a member in good standing, and the jarl's claims of innocence ring hollow in the face of his reputation for violence. Guard, how do you vote?"

"Guilty," he said. "The jarl is known to be a man of war, and has shown little regard for the law in the past. This murder is well within his capabilities. Caller, how do you vote?"

Caller grinned at me. "Innocent," he said, his voice marked with the same Spanish accent as the last time I'd heard him. "Winter has acted to support the balance of power in the past. I believe him when he says that he did not behave in such a disruptive way as he has been accused of on this occasion. Keeper, how do you vote?"

"Innocent," the woman in the yellow robe said. "The accused has acted to assist the Conclave in the past. His actions were instrumental in returning several artifacts to my keeping. Guide, how do you vote?"

"Guilty," said the heavyset Asian woman in green. "He has killed those under my care in the past, and while those killings were lawful, they speak poorly for his character. Walker, how do you vote?"

The slender, young-looking woman in the blue robe smiled at me. Her teeth were very white, but still looked dingy next to the snowy tone of her skin. "Innocent," she said, with what sounded like a Russian accent. "My contacts speak well of the accused, and I have no reason not to believe his claim. Maker, how do you vote?"

The man I'd known as Alexander Hoffman glowered at me. "Innocent," he said, sounding more than a little grudging. "I've worked with this man. Taught him most of what he knows. Kid's a bit dim, but he isn't stupid enough to do something like this. Watcher, how do you vote?"

I relaxed a little. I had four votes in my favor, now, and my strongest supporter was still coming up. I was pretty sure they were going on a simple majority, which meant that I should be okay. For the first time since I saw Scáthach's letter, I was feeling like everything might turn out all right.

It was only natural, then, that the first word out of Watcher's mouth was, "Guilty."

Chapter Seven

"My investigations have not uncovered the responsible party," Watcher continued, smiling at me the whole time. "It is plausible that the accused was responsible. As has been stated, the act was not inconsistent with his character. Arbiter, how do you vote?"

The man in the black robe regarded me for a long moment. "I would like to speak with the accused prior to casting my vote," he said at last.

"Granted," Prophet said. "A recess for discussion and refreshment is in order, I think. This Conclave will reconvene in a quarter-hour."

Almost instantly, the room erupted into whispers. None of the conversations was that loud, but there were a *lot* of them, and the noise was considerable. I caught snatches of English, but they were fragmentary to say the least, and I couldn't get any useful information out of them.

Arbiter glided across the stage toward me, moving so smoothly that I wasn't entirely sure that he was actually walking. Whatever means of locomotion he was using, it was surprisingly quick; it only took him five seconds or so to reach my section of seating.

"Guards," he said. "Your services are not presently needed. Kindly vacate the area, so that I may have a private discussion with the jarl."

My escort wasted no time clearing out, leaving me alone with the mage. Up close, his appearance was a little bit unsettling, almost unnatural. He was tall enough to stand out in a crowd, but I doubted that he weighed any more than I did. His features were long and narrow, with dark hair and eyes; the result reminded me more than a little of Aiko.

A couple of seconds later, I felt a kinetic barrier snap into place around us. Arbiter didn't make a big deal of it, or show any effort, but I was confident that it was still one of the strongest barriers I'd ever encountered. "There," he said. "That should prevent us from being overheard."

"Good," I said, eyeing him warily. I was acutely aware of the fact that I was isolated with one of the strongest mages in the world, and he was ideally positioned to kill me without anyone realizing what had happened. It wouldn't be hard for him to claim that I'd been threatening him, if no one could hear a thing we said.

"So," he said, sitting down and facing me. "Did you murder Zhang Qiang? I will not take this as a confession or admission of guilt; I ask out of simple curiosity."

"I have your word on that?"

"You do."

"Then no," I said. "I killed the bastard, but it wasn't murder. Murder implies wrongdoing, and he deserved what he got."

Arbiter considered me for a moment. "Interesting," he said. "I wondered whether you might say something along those lines."

"Did you really not know whether I was responsible?"

"Of course I knew," he said dismissively. "We all know. I wanted to see whether you would try to deny it. It speaks well of you that you told the truth. This does place me in a rather interesting position, however."

"How so?"

"As the name implies, my role is to resolve disputes," he said. "Balancing the needs and desires of multiple parties is a large part of my duties. This time, however, there are a great many more interests at play than is usually the case. There are a great many possible resolutions to this situation, most of which end poorly for you. For reasons of my own, I would prefer to find an alternative which does not end in your death."

"Thanks, I guess," I said. "So you'll vote in my favor?"

"The situation is not that simple," he said, shrugging. "Tell me, jarl, why have you been accused of this crime?"

I shrugged. "Zhang had a lot of friends in the clans, as I hear it, and I don't. It isn't that surprising."

"Perhaps, but why *now*?" he pressed.

I sighed. "Scáthach has ties to most of the clans," I said, feeling very tired. "I imagine that she arranged for them to make this happen right now. Pressure me into helping her with her problem."

"In part," Arbiter agreed. "But things are more complicated than that. Arranging for this to happen was as much a favor to you as anything. Giving you an *opportunity*. Do you understand?"

"Not really," I admitted. "You're speaking in riddles. I hate that."

His lips twitched. "There is a reason for that, I promise you. One day you may understand it. Or not. It hardly matters, really. What is of immediate significance is this. You are in a precarious position at the moment, Winter Wolf-Born. You have made some foolish choices, and they *will* have consequences. To this point, those consequences have been mitigated by a great many factors. But now, you are tangled up in so many different plots that even a small movement on your part can have vast repercussions. I strongly recommend that you take the time, in the coming days, to think about what you are and are not willing to sacrifice. A storm is coming, and none of us will be able to weather it without change."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"I don't get it," I said. "You and Scáthach both have talked about a storm on the horizon. But she's a Faerie Queen, and you're the Arbiter of the Conclave. What the hell is going on that neither of you could do anything to stop it?"

"I suspect you already know the answer to that question," he said, standing. "I cannot save you from the consequences of your actions, Winter. What I can do is give you the chance to avoid them yourself. This conversation has convinced me that you're worth that opportunity. If you take it, I think you can make it through. If not, you will most likely still survive, but the price will be considerable."

He glided off before I could say anything else, the barrier collapsing just before he reached it. Ivanov and Neumann were in their chairs on either side of me almost before the barrier had fallen, although neither one seemed inclined to ask what Arbiter had to say. I got the impression that they might not want to know.

It was an agonizing ten minutes or so, waiting for the Conclave to reconvene. None of them had moved from their podiums, but I didn't expect that they would say a word before the scheduled time, and I wasn't disappointed. The whole time, I was agonizing over what would happen next. From what Arbiter said, I thought he might be about to say that he thought my plea of innocence had been rejected, in which case I would be in for a world of hurt. If the investigation went any further, I would almost certainly be convicted, in which case the best I could hope for was a quick death.

Finally, exactly fifteen minutes later, Prophet cleared his throat again. "Arbiter," he said. "How do you vote?"

The man in the black robe folded his hands under his chin and regarded me levelly for thirty seconds in total silence. "I find," he said at last, pausing between each word, "that I am not as informed about this topic as I would like to be. I hesitate to question the honor of such a distinguished citizen as the jarl without greater evidence than I have. However, I also would prefer to avoid dismissing the accusation at such an early stage without a more convincing rebuttal than has thus far been presented."

"Your words show wisdom," Prophet said. "I'm pretty sure I was the only one who noticed him roll his eyes as he did. "But a decision must be made, and the deciding vote falls to you."

"I am aware," Arbiter said placidly. "But I will not speak hastily. As I said, I lack information. I choose to defer the decision for a fortnight so that I may gather this information, as is my right."

Prophet stared at Arbiter for several long seconds. When he finally spoke, it was so quiet that I must have been the only one not on the stage to hear him. Even my hearing, which was noticeably better than human, could barely make out the words. "This is unnecessary," he said. "And cruel, to drag things out."

"A great deal can change in two weeks," the other man said calmly, looking at me. "As you know."

"Yes, and you know that this outcome was decided long before today," Prophet countered. "There is no reason to extend the proceedings like this."

"Be that as it may, it is still my right."

Prophet sighed, but nodded. "Arbiter, your request is granted. This Conclave will reconvene a fortnight from today to determine whether the plea of innocence entered by jarl Winter Wolf-Born is to be accepted, or further investigation is merited. In the meantime, let the next matter of consideration be brought before us."

Ivanov, sitting next to me, nudged me with his elbow. "That's our signal," he murmured in my ear. "You aren't cleared for the rest of the meeting. Let's go."

I didn't bother arguing with him—honestly, I seriously doubt that I wanted to be there for the rest of the topics, anyway. The internal politics of the mage clans weren't that interesting to me.

So I let the two Guards escort me, politely but rather quickly, up the stairs and out of the door, at which point they promptly vanished back into the auditorium. To my surprise, Alexis was already outside, talking with Laurel. The two of them went silent when I came out of the auditorium.

"How'd it go?" Laurel asked a moment later. She didn't make much of an effort to sound interested.

"I'm not dead yet," I said gloomily, grabbing the bin with my stuff from the shelf. "Apparently I get two weeks to 'avoid the consequences of my actions,' whatever the hell that's supposed to mean. What about you? Seems like the two of you were having a nice chat."

Alexis cleared her throat and looked at the floor. "We were talking about the Guards," she said, not meeting my eye. "I think I want to join."

"Don't you have to be in the clans to do that?"

"No, actually," Laurel said. "You just have to pass the aptitude tests. Do that and they'll support your bid to be recognized by the Conclave. Based on what she's described of her training, Alexis could probably make the tests and be recognized as a journeyman. There's still a lot of oversight at that level, but she'd have a fair amount of responsibility."

I nodded slowly. "You're an adult," I said. "You can make your own decisions. But I have one recommendation, if you're willing to hear me out."

"What's that?"

"Don't do it yet," I said. "I have it on good authority that a storm is coming, and it sounds like a big one. You might want to give that some time to settle before you make any big moves. Especially ones you can't take back."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"I'll consider it," Alexis said after a moment. "But I'm not going to wait forever. I want to make a difference, and working with you...well, it hasn't been all that I might have hoped for."

"That's fine," I said. "Like I said, it's up to you. Just something to keep in mind."

"Hang on," Laurel said. "A storm is coming? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. But I've heard it referenced by a Faerie Queen and a member of the Conclave now, and neither of them seemed to think there was anything they could do about it, so I'm guessing it has to be pretty epic in scope."

The Watcher winced. "Which member?"

"Arbiter."

Laurel shuddered at that. "Damn. I was afraid you'd say that. That guy is...I don't know. There's something messed up there, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "But my life's riding on his decision, at the moment. I kind of have to hope for the best out of him."

"Good luck with that," she said. "I really did enjoy working with you, Winter. It'd be a shame if you died for something like this."

"Thanks for the sentiment," I said dryly, starting for the door. "But I don't have any intention of dying. Not yet."

Alexis decided to stay and talk more about the possibility of joining the Guards with Laurel. As a result, I made my way back downstairs alone, feeling more than a little dismal. I hate it when I actually decide *not* do something stupid, for once, and then circumstances force me to do it anyway.

I was met at the door by a man in an indigo robe.

"Hello, Winter," he said, falling into step beside me.

I eyed him warily, and not particularly happily. "Alexander. Or should I call you Maker?"

He shrugged dismissively. "It hardly matters. Both names were assumed."

"Right," I said. "Aren't you supposed to be on stage right now?"

"This isn't the first time I've annoyed the rest of the Conclave," he said dryly. "I doubt it will be the last, either. And I owed you an explanation."

"I'm surprised you'd care," I said tightly. "Given that you never bothered to tell me about the Conclave in the first place."

He considered me for a moment. "Ah. I'd wondered what that was about."

"What?"

"You've been avoiding me for some time," he said. "I was wondering why."

"Well, you kind of did screw me over with that," I pointed out. "I mean, all of a sudden I've got Watchers chasing me for something I didn't do, and I don't even know who the hell they are. Don't you think that's the sort of thing you should *mention* to someone, when you agree to show them the ropes?"

Alexander was silent for several steps. "It wasn't intended that way," he said at last. "I didn't expect it to cause you trouble. But it's been my experience that the less involvement one has with clan politics, the happier they are."

I snorted. "How'd you get on that stage with an attitude like that?"

"It's somewhat traditional. Some of the other positions are assigned based on politics, but Maker has always been passed down more on the basis of skill. I'm quite possibly the best maker in the world, and I have connections to everyone else who might lay claim to the title. My predecessor evidently thought that was sufficient."

"The title of Maker is an inherited one, then?"

"Yes," he said. "All of them are. Nine mages, titled after the nine mages of the original Conclave. Though the resemblance is thin. They were giants among men, fit to stand among the gods. Next to them, we're just pretenders to the throne, and inadequate ones at that."

"Having seen your work," I said dryly, "I find that difficult to believe."

Alexander paused again before speaking. "The original Maker was Solomon. His ring could compel any spirit to do his will. He could trap a demon or a djinn in a bottle for a thousand years without difficulty. His bindings could hold a lesser god. The weapons he made are strong enough, even two thousand years later, that one of Keeper's most important duties is making sure that no one ever uses one. Next to his works, the things I do are parlor tricks."

"Oh," I said. "Those stories were accurate?"

"Many of them." Alexander shook his head. "I've strayed off topic. I imagine you're curious as to why that vote went the way it did."

"Not really. I figured it was Scáthach's doing. She wants a favor, and this is some pretty fine leverage."

He nodded slowly. "Not inaccurate, but not entirely correct. While she likely did play a role in the timing, it was as much doing you a favor as applying pressure. She reminded people that you're *connected*."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"I don't get it."

"Look," he said. "Most people in the supernatural community choose a side and stick with it. They sign up for the Pack, or join a mage clan, or whatever, and they spend their life working their way up the ranks there. That means they have the chance to gain a great deal of influence, but it also makes their position in the world a simple one. You, on the other hand, have done the opposite, intentionally or otherwise. You have very important friends in the Pack, you've worked for two of the Conclave, you have connections to three separate pantheons of deities and both Courts of the Sidhe, not to mention Skrímir's support."

"Yeah," I said. "But I've made a lot of enemies, too. Some of them are even still alive."

"Exactly," he said, gesturing animatedly. "See, that's exactly what I'm saying. You've made yourself *complicated*. You're linked to so many different groups, in so many different ways, that any action involving you has the potential to have serious consequences that weren't intended. Pull one string and you can't predict what tangles might develop, you see? And each of those groups has relationships with others, to the point that the second-order interactions are far too complex to model with any confidence. By declaring her continued support, Scáthach reminded the Conclave of how delicate this issue is."

"I don't get it. How is getting people to accuse me of killing Zhang a declaration of support?"

"The accusation was going to be made eventually," Alexander said flatly. "If only for the sake of appearances, the Conclave would have been obligated to consider the topic at some point. By pressuring the parties in question to make the accusation now, she ensured that they wouldn't have time to arrange things to their liking. She also reminds you that her support can be withdrawn at any time, which is why I said you weren't incorrect about this being a threat of sorts. If she becomes hostile to you, then killing you is a much more advantageous action, politically. There's a very real danger there."

We walked in silence for around thirty seconds after that, while I processed what he'd said. I might be involved in politics now, however reluctantly, but there was a far cry from being a politician. I wasn't at all accustomed to thinking in circles that twisty.

"Arbiter said I had a chance," I said at last. "That I could avoid the consequences of my actions. What does that mean?"

Alexander was quiet for a long moment. "The balance isn't favorable," he said at last. "You have enough advocates to delay things. But in the end, what you did was too blatant. Allowing you to get by without any punishment would invite consequences. And there are enough people in the Conclave who think you're dangerous that pushing it through anyway isn't likely to happen. At this point, the only chance you have is to either change the relative value of your life, or mollify the people accusing you."

"What happens if I'm found guilty?"

"You're already a fugitive in the real world," he said dryly. "I doubt you want to be on the run from the mages, as well." He shook his head. "You could survive. You might take refuge with Skrymir, for example, or in Scathach's Court. I'm sure you're aware of other options."

"But there would be a price." I didn't have to ask about that. There was *always* a price.

"Yes."

I was silent for several more steps. "The Zhang clan has close ties to the Courts," I said at last. "A word from Scathach could go a long way towards evening that scale."

"Precisely," Alexander said approvingly. "She did you a favor by rushing them into accusing you, but gifts from the fae have a tendency to only draw you in deeper."

"Man," I sighed. "Fuck faeries."

"A sentiment which has been expressed by a great many people, throughout history," he said dryly. "Now, I really should be getting back. Did you have any other questions?"

"Not really. I mean, at this point there's only really one way to go forward, isn't there? As much as I hate the idea of getting mixed up in Court politics, keeping Scathach happy is kind of important right now."

"That's how it goes," Alexander said, shrugging. "Once you get involved with the Courts, there's no backing out. I tried to warn you."

"Yeah," I agreed. "You did. Thanks, Alexander. I'm sorry I've been distant."

"It's not important," he said, turning back towards the meeting. "Try not to die."

I watched him go, and then I kept walking.

Chapter Eight

"Hey," I said after a few steps. "Scáthach. Are you listening?"

"Obviously," a voice said from about six inches behind me. A moment later she stepped up and started walking next to me. She was dressed more casually than the last time I saw her, in a black T-shirt and cutoff jeans, and she looked very nearly human, but it hardly mattered. She was still the kind of beautiful that makes people start wars. People on the streets turned to stare as we passed, clearly wondering what a guy like me was doing walking with a woman like her.

"I thought you might be," I said, trying to ignore the people watching. I felt uncomfortably exposed, being the focus of so much attention, but it wouldn't be wise to let Scáthach know that.

She regarded me for a moment, her expression inscrutable. "That's it?" she asked. "I was hoping for some kind of a reaction."

I snorted. "Please. I'd have to be an idiot not to have seen this coming." I took a few steps before saying, "I'm in a bad place."

She smiled. "Indeed."

"I'm going to assume you know pretty much everything that was said in there," I said. "So I won't bother explaining what I need. You already know."

"Correct."

"If I help you with your thing, will you make my problems with the Conclave go away?"

"That is hardly within my power," she murmured, her voice dry and amused. "But I could certainly mitigate the harm caused by your current circumstance."

"That's not good enough," I said. "I want a clearly defined agreement. Exactly what you want, and what you're going to provide for me in return."

"Very well," Scáthach said, still sounding amused. "There is a single, very specific faction within my Court which is advocating a reckless offensive against the Daylight Court. I wish you to silence them, or enable me to do so without the negative consequences which I would currently incur. If you do so, I shall intervene with the members of the Zhang clan who have brought an accusation against you before the Conclave. While I cannot guarantee that my intervention will prevent this accusation from causing you harm, I can say that I have considerable influence with them, and it is my belief that I will be able to convince them to drop the charges."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. I get it. So do you know which of your people are responsible?"

"Of course."

I waited for several seconds before it became apparent that she had no intention of continuing. "Are you going to tell me who they are?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "I don't believe that I will. You're a resourceful man, after all. I have confidence that you are capable of finding that information yourself." She smiled, the expression bright and cold and very, very scary. "Unless, of course, you would like to incur further debt in exchange for the knowledge."

"No," I said sourly. "That's fine." I nodded slowly. "Okay. I think we understand each other."

"Yes," she said, still smiling. "And you are working on a deadline, jarl. I recommend you get started."

"I don't get it," I said, before she could disappear. "Why are you screwing me over like this?"

"Did you think we were friends?" she asked, sounding amused.

"Of course not. But I thought I was useful. Why would you take the chance of losing that usefulness?"

"You're a weapon, child," she said patiently. "A tool. And any tool is precisely as valuable as its utility. You have served a function in the past, and I expect you to do so in the future. But that is not sufficient reason not to make use of you in the present. An analogy, perhaps, will be more clear. A card has worth in its use, or in the *threat* of its use. A good card one cannot play is no more valuable than a bad card."

"So...what? This is all a ploy to make sure that I keep being useful?"

Scáthach considered me. It reminded me uncomfortably of a hawk watching a prairie dog. "I have already explained," she said. "If you have not listened, that is not my concern. Good day, jarl."

"Right," I sighed. "Good day, Queen."

"You were right," I said. "Scáthach found a way to screw me over."

"I'll try to contain my shock," Aiko said, not looking away from the retro platformer she was playing. "Welcome home, by the way."

"Thanks. Apparently the mages are pretty divided about what to do with me. I have two weeks to change their minds before the deciding vote is cast."

"And Scáthach offered to make the problem go away if you do that favor for her?"

"Pretty much," I sighed, sitting down next to her and scratching Snowflake's ears.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"I figured it would go something like that," Aiko said, turning the game off. "So where's your cousin?"

"Decided to stay and look into signing up with the Guards. Probably just as well; I've been trying to keep her out of the politics, and this is about as political as it gets."

She blinked. "The Guards? Seriously?"

I shrugged. "That's what she said. Wouldn't have been my first pick for her, but I guess I can understand it. Anyway, I was thinking I might go talk to Jacques, see if he has any information about who the people are in Scáthach's Court that I'm supposed to be silencing. It might go better if you were there."

"You have *two weeks*," she said incredulously. "Don't you think it can wait a day?"

"Considering what happened the last time I had a deadline like that," I said dryly, "I'd rather not waste more time than I have to."

"Fair enough," she said reluctantly. "I just want it on record that this is *not* how I wanted to spend my morning."

*I think we can all agree with that sentiment*, Snowflake said, standing up and sauntering off towards the stairs.

Jacques answered his door after only thirty seconds of pounding, which might have been a new record. That seemed a little odd, given that it was somewhere around four in the morning locally, but I supposed that he probably hadn't gone to bed yet. Certainly he *looked* like he'd been on a three-day bender; even by his standards, his eyes were impressively bloodshot.

"Cupcake," he said. "And Shrike. What the hell do you want?"

"Information," I said. "As usual. Now let us in already, we aren't talking business out here."

"Fine," he grunted, undoing the six chains on the door. "Hurry up, it's too fucking late for this shit."

"You're telling me?" Aiko said, snorting. She strode in with an assurance I could only envy; I walked gingerly in Jacques's apartment, and Snowflake was seriously reluctant to walk at all.

"Okay," Jacques said, grabbing a fifth of vodka off the table. "What are you here for?"

"There's a faction in the Midnight Court that's pushing for a new offensive against Daylight," I said. "I need to know who they are and how I can get to them."

He snorted, spraying vodka out his nose. Snowflake and I both flinched away a little. "Now what the *fuck* makes you think I'm willing to deal in *that* kind of shit?" he demanded.

"Money," Aiko said dryly. "Lots of it."

"You don't get it, Cupcake. You want to know about mages, werewolves, that kind of thing? Sure, screw it, whatever. But the fae? Those motherfuckers hold *grudges*. They don't *make* the kind of money that would convince me to stick my nose into their business on the level you're talking about."

"This is sanctioned," I said. "Personal request of Scáthach."

"That's even worse!" Jacques shouted. "Jesus, man, you just don't get this, do you? Look, I'm not doing it, and that's final." He took another swig of vodka. "Not that it would matter if I were willing to help. My contacts in the Courts are strictly low-level. Bottom-feeders, thugs, general scum of the earth types, I've got you covered. Nobility? Not so much."

"That's not so helpful," Aiko said. "We kinda need this info. Soonest."

He leered at her. It made me want to take a shower, and it wasn't even directed at me. "Well, Cupcake," he drawled. "I guess you need to go home, don't you?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, but Aiko's reaction was instant. "No," she said. "Hell no. Fuck that, there's no way I'm going back there. Not after what happened last time."

Jacques shrugged. "Suit yourself. Look, Cupcake, you know I love you and all that, but I don't have what you want and I don't have the contacts to get it. You go there, I guarantee you'll find somebody who does. Now, if that's all, get the hell out."

I wasn't going to argue.

"Okay," I said when we hit the street. "So what was he talking about there at the end?"

"The Clearinghouse," she said sullenly.

I waited a moment, then rolled my eyes when it became clear that she wasn't going to say anything else. "And what's the Clearinghouse?"

"Look," she said. "You know I used to run with the Courts."

"Yeah. I've been meaning to ask how you got out."

"I didn't," she said grimly. "Not clean. Anyway, this is all tied up with that. I wasn't in the good part of the Courts; I was hanging out with the scumbags, the shady types."

"I can picture that."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"It isn't hard, is it?" Aiko said, grinning. "So while I was hanging out with them, I spent a lot of time at the Clearinghouse. If you want to buy something you can't get anywhere else, that's where you go."

"Wait a second," I said. "I thought that, if you wanted to buy something on the Otherside, you went to the Grand Market."

"Sure. But the Market has rules. No weapons of mass destruction, no obvious contraband. You can't trade slaves there, and the indentureship contracts are pretty heavily regulated. That sort of thing."

I was starting to get the picture. "And the Clearinghouse doesn't have those rules?"

"Exactly. You can make deals there that would get you shot anywhere else. Nothing's off limits, and there's nobody looking over your shoulder."

"Okay," I said. "So what happened the last time you were there that was so terrible?"

"Yeah," Aiko said reluctantly. "About that. I've told you I used to hang out with a slave trader."

"The one that bred half-trolls?"

She winced. "Yeah, that's the one. I knew him for a few years. I guess I thought we were pretty good friends. I managed to convince myself his business wasn't that bad. There were a lot of things I didn't know about what went on with it. I didn't *want* to know."

"And then you went to the Clearinghouse with him," I guessed.

She nodded. "Yeah. We were on the way to a date, sort of. He had to stop and finalize a deal. I...got a look at some aspects of what he did that I hadn't let myself see before that." She shrugged. "So I stabbed him in the back and cut his throat. Then I stabbed two of his business partners and one of the customers, and shot half a dozen other vendors on my way out. Good times all around."

"Ah. So what does this have to do with you getting away from the Courts?"

Aiko shrugged. "After that I was pretty done with the whole thing. So I went to Ryujin, and I told him I wanted out. He told me what it would cost, and I said yes. He made sure nobody tried to drag me back into it."

"What'd it cost you?" I asked. "Maybe I could make a similar deal."

"Ten years of service," she said. "And a few other things. I'll tell you the details if it ever comes up. Like I said, nobody gets away clean. You can trade it in for another cage, but that's about it."

"Yeah. I figured it was something like that. Well, so much for that option. I guess asking around in the Courts is the next step?"

Aiko gave me a confused look. "Aren't we going to the Clearinghouse first? There's almost certainly someone there who can help."

"I thought you said you weren't going back. And after what happened, it probably isn't safe, is it?"

"Screw that," she said sharply. "I don't need coddled. If that's where we need to go, that's where we're going."

I wanted to argue, but I could tell she wouldn't take it well. So I just shrugged and said, "Fine. You're driving."

A short jaunt through one of the sleazier backwaters of the Otherside later, we were standing in the antechamber of the Clearinghouse.

It was a small room, not much bigger than a closet, but the roof was high enough to be lost in shadow. The air was cool, and smelled strongly of industrial-strength room freshener.

"Well, they haven't changed this place much," Aiko said, walking over to the door. It looked like little more than a concrete slab set into the concrete wall, but it swung open of its own accord before she reached it. "Let's see if we can find someone I know."

The main trading floor of the Clearinghouse was a strange, ominous place. It was cavernous; walls and pillars broke up the lines of sight, but the air currents suggested that it was at least the size of a small stadium. We were standing on a relatively narrow catwalk, with four more layers below us and at least as many above. I could only see them by looking for the dim, widely-spaced lanterns that provided the only illumination.

There were a lot of shadows there, and I was quite sure that we were being watched from some of them. It was only with difficulty that I kept myself from looking over my shoulder as we followed Aiko out onto the walkway.

We passed a number of stalls as we walked, set into alcoves in the walls or crouched in the shadows between lanterns. They were staffed by an astonishing variety of creatures, many of which I didn't recognize, none of which looked friendly. None of the ones I looked at had any signage, or indication of what goods or services were available. Clearly, if you had to ask, you didn't need to know.

*Okay, Snowflake said, peering over the edge of the catwalk at the next level, nearly thirty feet below. This is more like it. This is what a black market should look like.*

"This level mostly deals in smuggling," Aiko said, looking around as we walked. "I'm hoping there's someone here that knows me from back then. They might be able to tell us who to ask."

"But do they want to?" I asked. "I didn't exactly get the impression that you left on good terms."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"Not *all* of them hate me," she said dryly. "There are two or three that are sort of friends, and a handful that still owe me favors.

For the next several minutes, Aiko led us in a wandering path around the narrow walkways of the Clearinghouse. I didn't bother trying to keep track of where we were going, or the people we passed; there wasn't much I could contribute, in any case. I focused on keeping an eye out for trouble instead, in case we ran into someone that *didn't* remember Aiko fondly. This was shitty territory for a fight, but there wasn't much I could do about that. I *could* try to make sure we weren't caught by surprise.

We'd been walking for around five minutes when a female voice called, "Aiko? Is that you?"

Aiko looked in the direction of the voice and winced. "Trouble?" I asked immediately, reaching for a weapon.

"Not exactly," she said, walking towards the stall she'd been called from. "It's just....well, this ought to be entertaining." She did not sound entertained.

The stall was one of the smaller ones I'd seen, barely large enough for a person to stand behind it, with an orange silk canopy that served no apparent purpose. The woman standing behind it could blend in anywhere with a sizable Mediterranean population, though her attitude would make her stand out, as would the elaborate domino mask. She came across as the sort of person I could picture an adolescent Aiko hanging around with, and that was a pretty major statement.

"Hi, Fiona," Aiko said as we walked up. "How's business?"

Fiona shrugged, the motion just loose enough to make me wonder if her shoulders were articulated like a human's. "It's business. Long time, no see. Who's this, your latest boy toy?"

"Something like that. Listen, do you think you could do me a favor?"

"For you?" Fiona said, grinning. Her teeth sparkled a little *too* brightly in the dim light, and I realized they were inlaid with silver. "Of course. But come on, you just got here. Don't you want to tell me what kinds of trouble you've gotten into in the last decade or two?"

"Yeah, but this is kind of time-sensitive. Look, I promise I'll get in touch, but right now we need to keep moving."

"That's fair. What do you need?"

"We're in the market for information," Aiko said. "Something fairly high up in Scáthach's Court. Do you know where we might find something like that?"

Fiona frowned. "I don't really deal in secrets, Aiko. You know that."

"Yeah, but I thought you might know someone who does."

Fiona sighed. "Two levels up, three walkways south. Look for the guy with the eyepatch. But I'm not endorsing him, you hear me? He's not a friend, just someone I do business with occasionally."

"That's fine. Thanks, Fiona. I owe you one."

"Don't mention it. And don't be a stranger, you hear me?"

"That wasn't so bad," I said, as Aiko led us on another meandering route through the maze of the Clearinghouse. Fiona's directions had seemed fairly clear to me, but apparently actually *getting* there was a good deal more complicated. "She seemed pleasant."

"Yeah. A little too much so, sometimes. She's...bubbly. I don't really do bubbly."

"I could see that. I guess she's one of the ones you said was a friend?"

Aiko nodded. "I used to work for her as a courier. She specializes in moving small, high-value items. Here's our way up," she said, gesturing at a nearby ladder.

I carried Snowflake up the ladder and we started meandering back across the catwalks. I had to wonder about whoever had built this place; this setup was inconvenient on all sorts of levels. Several of the bridges were rickety, and few of them had any kind of railings, even disregarding the impossibility of taking a direct route anywhere.

It was surprisingly easy to find the person Fiona had pointed us towards. He was a slender Sidhe standing behind a battered oak table, visually unremarkable except for brilliant red hair and a greenish eyepatch covering half his face.

I would have hesitated, trying to make sure we were in the right place, but Aiko walked straight up to his table, ignoring the people standing around. Looking at them, I was pretty sure that around three or four were a little *too* casual to just be loitering. Bodyguards or something similar, most likely.

"I hear you might be able to do us a favor," Aiko said, leaning on the table.

The man on the other side smiled. It looked more like a gash carved across his face than an expression of pleasure. "I do many favors," he said. "What sort of favor might you require?"

"My associates and I have heard rumors of a certain group among the Sidhe," Aiko said. "Members of Scathach's Court, as we've heard it. This group has recently been making rather provocative statements about escalating hostilities with the Seelie Court."

"I've heard similar rumors," he said, sounding blandly disinterested. "What of it?"

Aiko's smile was no friendlier than his, but for rather different reasons. His expression looked like it had been cut into his face; hers looked like one you'd wear while you did the cutting. "We would

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quite like to have a conversation with these Sidhe. We think it would be quite productive for everyone concerned."

He nodded once. "This is a favor I can provide. What might you provide in return?"

Aiko leaned closer and whispered something in his ear. I couldn't hear it, but I saw his eyes widen. She leaned back, looking self-satisfied, and he nodded again. "That will be quite sufficient," he said, producing a scrap of paper and a quill from somewhere. He scratched a short, almost illegible note on the paper and handed it to her.

She glanced at it and then folded it and put it in her pocket. "Excellent. A pleasure doing business." She turned and walked away without waiting for a reply.

"Is that it?" I asked, falling in beside her before she'd taken more than a couple steps. Snowflake was sticking close to my heels. She felt vaguely discomfited, but she hadn't said anything, so I didn't think it was too much of a problem.

"Yep," Aiko said. "They're having a meeting next week."

"Great. Let's get out of here, then."

"Sooner the better," she agreed. "Didn't expect this to go so smoothly, to be honest."

Naturally, it was at exactly that moment that a voice whispered, "Hello, kitsune. It's been a while."

Aiko went very pale, and I didn't have to ask what that voice meant.

*This time, it was trouble.*

Chapter Nine

I looked around, but there was no one close enough to have whispered in my ear except Aiko, and I was pretty sure it hadn't been her. I mean, she has an off-color sense of humor to say the least, but this seemed like a little much.

Well, that couldn't be good. I could only think of a handful of explanations for it, and none of them were very pleasant to think about.

Certainly Aiko seemed seriously nervous, and that in itself was frightening. "Serval," she said, looking around a little frantically. She'd drawn her tanto at some point, which said a lot about what I could expect. If she had a knife out, then Serval was going to be trying to get within knife range, and Aiko didn't think she could prevent it. "Assassin. She's quick, vicious, almost invisible when she wants to be."

"So you *do* remember me," the same voice whispered. "I'd wondered." Serval sounded feminine, now that I'd heard a little more, but I wasn't surprised I hadn't been able to tell at first. Her voice was odd, almost more of a hiss than normal speech, with odd enough accents that I doubted her vocal cords were equivalent to those of a standard-issue human being.

Aiko winced. "I told you," she said. "Something came up. I couldn't exactly put it off, and I didn't have another chance."

"I know," Serval whispered. "I let it go. But now that you've come back here? I think that merits a response."

With no more warning than that, a figure stepped out of thin air and shoved me in the chest.

I'd had a moment of warning—Serval was only *almost* invisible, and it's really hard to hide a rapidly-moving person at close range—but only a moment. Long enough to brace myself somewhat, but not nearly long enough to dodge or counter the attack.

I hadn't expected the shove to be quite that strong. She didn't knock me over, but I stumbled back a few steps, and then my foot came down and found no floor to meet it.

As simply as that, almost before I'd realized what was happening, I was falling.

Fortunately, I have a pretty quick reaction time. I'd barely started to fall before I started analyzing the situation.

The tangled mess of walkways in this place meant that, in any given place, there might be a highly variable amount of empty air underneath you. I'd been paying attention, and from where I'd fallen there had been about fifty feet before the next solid surface.

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I could survive a fall of that height, but there was a significant chance of injury, and it would take an unacceptably long time to get back up here. So the first thing I did was push magic into the air around me, thickening and moving it. The increased viscosity slowed my fall, and the movement pushed me sideways until I hit the side of the walkway.

This section was made of something that looked and felt like stone, and it was smooth enough that I couldn't really have hung from it on my own. But I managed to get enough of a grip on the underside of the walkway to hold some of my weight, and I could support the rest with the air. It would tire me out pretty quickly, but there wasn't much I could do about that.

*I'm fine, I told Snowflake. What's the situation?*

Rather than answer, she sent me a picture of the scene as it was unfolding. I was too focused on keeping myself in the air to get all the details, but I got a general sense of what was happening.

Aiko was standing in the middle of the walkway, looking all around almost frantically. Snowflake was directly beside her, and doing a better job maintaining her composure. There were plenty of onlookers, but none of them seemed inclined to step in. Aiko might not be killed on sight when she came here, but it didn't seem she had enough goodwill for people to help her, either.

Serval was nowhere in sight. Snowflake could hear footsteps, but only very faintly, and they were erratic. There was no apparent scent to use at all.

This was bad. Without some kind of information to use for locating her, there wasn't a lot that either Aiko or Snowflake could do to fight back. And neither of them could catch themselves if they fell.

I was already pushing it, holding myself against the bottom of the walkway and processing Snowflake's perceptions, but I didn't see any other way to proceed. So I extended myself further into the air around me, aiming for *sense* rather than movement.

I lost control of the air, and for one sickening moment I thought I was going to fall. I let go of Snowflake, focusing everything I had on maintaining my grip on the air around me, and just barely managed to cling to the stone. A moment later I managed to get the sensory input I'd been trying for.

For once, I got lucky. The Clearinghouse wasn't trying to mimic a natural environment, and as such it had no real air currents. There were a few disturbances, caused by the movement or speech of other people, but they were relatively easy to control for.

In the relative stillness, it wasn't hard to pick out a clear signal. Someone was walking an irregular, looping course around Aiko and Snowflake, moving steadily closer. Their movement would take them over my hiding place in just a few seconds.

There was no time to think about it. I called Tyrving and flicked the sheath off, letting it fall into the dim chasm below. I checked once more against Snowflake's perceptions, making sure nobody I cared about was standing above me. I couldn't be sure—I was trying to compare two vastly different

perceptions of the world, after all, and I couldn't focus on either one without risking a catastrophic failure—but none of us had made it this far by refusing to take chances.

So, when I estimated that Serval was standing directly above me, I slammed Tyrfing up into the base of the walkway.

With most swords, that would have accomplished little but to break the weapon and leave me looking rather silly. With Tyrfing, it's generally other things that do the breaking.

There was a moment of startled silence. "Impressive," Serval said a moment later. "It looks like your friend didn't really fall. Decent aim, too. He almost hit me."

"Look, Serval," Aiko said, sounding afraid and exhausted in roughly equal proportions. "I know that you're upset, but do you really think this is the best way of dealing with that? Don't you want to at least *try* to talk this out?"

"I was willing to talk," Serval said, in a normal speaking voice, for once. "I *tried* to discuss this like rational beings. As I recall, *you're* the one who rejected that particular idea."

I made it to the edge, and wrapped my fingers around the lip of the walkway. Serval just as promptly stomped on them. I didn't react, except to bring my right hand up next to my left.

She was still for a moment, apparently wondering why my fingers hadn't been crushed, and I got my first look at the assassin known as Serval. She was smaller than a human, almost closer to a child's size. I couldn't see much detail, between her veil of almost-invisibility and the dark cloak she was wearing, but I got a glimpse of coffee-colored skin and patchy fur.

That was all the time I had before Snowflake hit her from behind, jaws clamping on the ankle of her supporting leg and jerking sideways. At the same time I yanked my hand away, further destabilizing her.

Serval wobbled on the edge for a moment. Then Snowflake let go and lunged forward, slamming one shoulder into the assassin's hip. She tumbled silently over the edge, quickly vanishing from sight in the shadows below.

Aiko walked over and gave me a hand, and I pulled myself easily up and over. "Never thought I'd be grateful for this," I said, staring at my left hand. Serval had stepped on my fingertips, which were mostly gone. What was left of that hand was mostly scar tissue, and I didn't really have enough feeling in it to register pain.

"Let's get moving," Aiko said, disregarding my comment. "That fall won't kill her."

"Right. You want to get started on the portal, and I'll watch out for more unwelcome company?"

She nodded, and started spinning magic into the air.

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"Okay," I said, while we waited for Snowflake to wake up and I made sure my hand wasn't actually broken. Normally I wouldn't have been willing to expose that kind of weakness in such a dangerous environment, but I didn't think I had to worry in this neighborhood. They still remembered my first visit. "Do we need to worry about her chasing us?"

"Nah," Aiko said confidently. "Serval's scary, but she's not the type to really hold grudges. If she were going to hunt me down, she'd have done it by now."

"That's good. I can't say I like the idea of having her chasing us."

"You have no idea," she said dryly. "I've seen her in action. Deeply scary stuff. If she really wanted to hurt me, we wouldn't have made it out of there in one piece."

"What'd you do to piss her off?"

"I kind of screwed her on a business arrangement. I was supposed to provide transportation and a distraction on a job. But that was at the same time as the other mess, and I'd signed up with Ryujin by the time the job went down."

"You know," I said after a moment, "I don't think you get to make fun of me anymore. I've gotten mixed up in some questionable stuff, but you've got me beat."

"Don't be ridiculous," she sniffed. "Serval's a nasty sort, but she isn't remotely as scary as a deity. Speaking of, it sounds like the next chance to find the people Scáthach wants dead is next week."

"Right." I rubbed my hand; none of the bones were broken that I could tell, but it ached more than usual. Thanks a bunch for that, Serval. "There are a few things I'll probably need to take care of in Colorado before then. But do you want to go home for a while first? I could use a break."

"Sounds good to me."

"Cool," I said, and started working on the next portal.

Eleven hours later the phone rang, waking me from a relatively sound sleep. I grabbed for it, forgot that one of my hands was semi-functional at best, and fumbled it in the dark. By the time I managed to actually answer the thing I was thoroughly awake, tangled in bedding, and not in a particularly pleasant mood.

This was not significantly changed when Sveinn said, "*Heill, herra*. Katrin's messenger just arrived with information about the meeting she was requesting a security detail for."

Shit. I'd forgotten about that. "Tell me."

"It's intended to settle a dispute with another vampire. Something about property or personnel; the messenger wasn't very clear."

"Wonderful," I said sourly. "When and where?"

"At Pryce's, midnight tonight."

I tried to work out how many hours that was from now, but wasn't awake enough to do time zone conversions in my head. It hardly mattered, anyway; my response wouldn't change because of that, after all. "All right," I told him, getting out of bed. "Get a team together. I want you, Kjaran, Vigdis, and Brick ready to go an hour before the meeting. Dress to impress. Understood?"

"Understood," he said.

"Good," I said, and hung up on him. I glowered at the phone, grumbled to myself, and started throwing on clothing more or less at random. Snowflake laughed at me in the back of my head, at which point I started grumbling at her too.

I ended up having several hours of spare time before I had to leave. I checked that Alexis had made it back safely, which she had, and then left her to sleep. She hadn't come home when I went to bed, so I knew she still needed more sleep. Then, feeling somewhat at a loss for what to do, I went down to the lab and ran my modified schematics by Legion. He mocked me to what I felt was a slightly excessive degree, but eventually agreed that the adjustments I'd proposed to the power flows should stabilize it considerably.

At that point, the only real problem still getting in the way was the actual mirror, which was more of a challenge than it sounded like. I needed to be present for the manufacturing process to properly enchant the thing, which ruled out just buying one, and the choice of materials was rather important as well. Silver was the traditional choice, but for rather obvious reasons that wasn't a very good option for me. Steel was better, but not very good for reflection, and from what I'd read aluminum wasn't that great of a material for taking an enchantment. Mercury took magic pretty well, and you could make a decent mirror with it, but the toxicity issues made that somewhat problematic as well.

Eventually, though, I couldn't really justify spending more time working on it, and left for Colorado Springs. None of the others came with me, which I couldn't really blame me for. I mean, I was going to provide security for a meeting between two factions of vampires. I didn't want to be there, either.

It caused a bit of a stir when I walked into Pryce's. The patrons there tend to be fairly hard to rattle, but I was fully armored and openly armed, and most of these people had a pretty good idea of who I was. Intentional or not, I'd become a pretty major player on the local scene.

I walked straight to the bar, where Pryce was standing, clearly waiting for me. The housecarls drifted behind me, while Brick maintained some distance from them.

"Meeting," I said. "I'm here for security."

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Pryce nodded. A moment later, without any clear signal from him, one of his employees stepped up next to me. I followed him through a few narrow hallways to the private room, where he left us.

My group was the first to arrive, which was good. I glanced around the room briefly, making sure that nothing had been moved, and then arranged my minions around the edges of the space. For my part, I stood by the door, where I would be able to greet each person as they entered.

Less than ten minutes later the door opened. Katrin stepped through, followed closely by Hrafn. He nodded at me, the gesture as close to friendly as a vampire could reasonably hope to get, and went to sit at the table.

"I appreciate your providing this service," Katrin said to me. Her bearing was more pleasant than it often was around me, but I wasn't fooled. Katrin and I might not be enemies, precisely, but we were never going to be allies.

"I appreciate that you are willing to entrust your security to me," I said. The implication that she *needed* me to provide security was clear enough that everyone would probably notice, but not blatant enough that she could really complain.

"You are the jarl of this city," she said sarcastically.

"Speaking of which, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, after the meeting."

"Very well. In the meantime, I expect you to remain impartial throughout these proceedings. The funds will be transferred within a week." She went to sit beside Hrafn without waiting for a response, which was just as well, given that I didn't really have one.

As I'd expected, the vampires didn't talk while we waited for the other side of this negotiation. Or move. Or breathe. On the whole, they were fairly boring people to pass the time with. I wouldn't have cared so much—it wasn't like I *wanted* to pass the time with them—except that it turned out the other side was running late.

Really late. By the time the door opened again, it was almost one in the morning. Compared to the punctuality I was more accustomed to when dealing with supernatural beings, it was hard to see it as anything other than a deliberate insult. The only question was who the insult was directed at.

Finally, just when I was seriously considering telling Katrin to go to hell, another vampire walked in. This one was male, inasmuch as sex could be assigned to the walking dead, with dark skin and terrible taste. Seriously, I had seen flamingoes that were less eye-searingly pink than this guy's suit.

He walked by me without even looking at me, for which I was more than a little grateful, and went straight to Katrin. "Good evening, my dear," he said to her, taking off his purple top hat and bowing.

Katrin did not look amused, or impressed. "Lucius," she said. "You're late."

"I was delayed," he said with a grin, vaulting the table and landing in the chair opposite her. "It happens."

"Be that as it may," she said. "We had an agreement. If you were going to be delayed by this much, you shouldn't have agreed to meet at this time in the first place."

"Oh, get over yourself," he said lightly. "If you're in such a rush, why don't you get to the point?"

I would have expected Katrin to react rather badly to that kind of impudence, but she didn't say a word. I could see by the tension in her posture that she was exactly as upset as I had imagined, but there was no overt reaction at all.

Well, that was concerning. If Katrin was that hesitant around this vampire, I was pretty sure I should be even *more* grateful that he'd overlooked me.

"Your people have been in my territory," she said after several long moments. Her voice was tight. "Repeatedly."

Lucius yawned, showing teeth that were more than slightly too long. "What's your point?"

"My point is that this city is mine. The vampires here answer to *me*. I don't tolerate intruders or poachers."

"So kill them," he said lazily. "They're just spawn. I can always make more if I want some."

Katrin took a deep breath and let it out, though I knew that she didn't need to breathe. "Are you saying that you won't keep your people under control?"

"Why should I? If they decide to go to another continent and get into trouble, what should I care?"

"Don't give me that," she snapped. "Your spawn don't do anything without your command. So tell me, why have you been sending them to poach in my territory?"

"Because I want to," he said. His voice was no longer lazy or amused. "Remember your place, my dear. You may have found a city to govern in your exile, but I rule a continent. I am an *emperor*. If I choose to take this city from you, you will know. Because it will be mine." He stood and smiled at her. "Now, if that's all, I should be going. So much to do, you know."

Katrin said nothing.

"I thought so," he said. "Good evening, my dear. Jarl, I hope your day goes well, and good luck with the faeries." He grinned at me as he sauntered past.

"I despise that man," Katrin said, almost a minute later. "Wolf, what did you want to talk about?"

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I blinked. "Huh?"

"Before this farce, you said you had something to say," she said impatiently. "What is it?"

"Oh," I said. "Right. Why did you bring ghouls into the city without notifying me?"

"I didn't. That would be ridiculous."

"Then explain why, when I went to confront them, they said they had permission to be in my city. And why Natalie then showed up and stopped me from killing them, saying that they were here under your protection."

Katrin was silent for several seconds. "Natalie and I have our differences," she said at last. "You know that."

"Wait a second. Are you *seriously* telling me that isn't resolved yet? You've had *years* to deal with her. How have you not fixed this problem?"

"Don't tell me how to do my job," she snapped. "I didn't bring any ghouls into this city, and any that are here are most certainly not under my protection." She stood and stalked past me out the door, her attitude clearly conveying that anyone getting in her way could look forward to a very bad day. Hrafn followed her out, giving me an apologetic look on the way.

The room was silent for several seconds. "Well," I said at last. "That was unpleasant. Let's go."

Back in the main room, things had quieted considerably. By which I mean that Pryce was the only person left in the bar.

I looked around. This wasn't right; it was late, but not *that* late. There should still have been plenty of people here.

"What happened?" I asked.

Pryce grunted. "People were worried. Didn't want to stay."

"I don't get it. I've had meetings with Katrin here before, and she didn't bother people *this* much."

"Problem isn't the vampire."

I worked that through. If people were concerned, and it wasn't the vampire....

"Oh."

He nodded. "You scare people."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"You *are* trouble, Wolf. Don't come back."

I blinked. "You're banning me?" Of all the things I'd ever expected to have to deal with, that hadn't been one.

"Yeah. Nothing personal. Business."

"Business," I said dully. "Right. I understand." I took a deep breath and let it out. "Sorry, Pryce. I'm...sorry."

He grunted and picked up an empty glass, polishing it with a spotless white rag that he produced from somewhere. I turned and left, my minions trailing silently behind me.

Chapter Ten

I was expecting something bad to happen, after that. I mean, it wasn't all that much of a leap of logic. All was clearly not well with the vampires in my town, and while I had little to do with them, my experience has been that that doesn't really matter much. When supernatural beings get into shit, there's plenty to go around. When *politics* is involved, there's even more.

So I was fully expecting there to be trouble. If Natalie was making a move, and Katrin wasn't in a position to stop her, I was logically going to be one of her targets. I was an authority figure, a *symbol*, and taking me out would be a powerful statement. Not to mention that, if she didn't, I would probably be a thorn in her side later on. I might not like Katrin, but I can at least recognize that she's a force for stability and calm, and Natalie could hardly say the same. As much as I hated to admit it, in a fight between the two, I would support Katrin.

I was expecting an attack of some kind. I don't think I can reasonably be faulted for not expecting it less than twelve hours after I met with Katrin.

Back in Romania, it was just after sunset, locally, but I'd already been asleep for several hours. When you're jumping back and forth through time zones on a daily or hourly basis, fixing your schedule to the sun is basically impossible.

I woke groggy, and it took me several seconds to figure out what had actually woken me. I'd rigged wards to detect anyone with magic approaching the castle, but it had basically just been a measure to assuage my paranoia. They'd never actually *done* anything before.

Now they were going haywire, screaming at me that there was a lot of power climbing the stairs up our little mountain. *Fast*; the outermost layer of wards was at the base of the stairs, and by the time I was fully conscious they were already tripping wards halfway up the mountain.

That was enough to wake me up, and then some. Coffee has nothing on an imminent threat on your life, believe me. I scrambled out of bed and started belting on armor frantically, simultaneously calling up power and reaching out.

It took only a moment to locate Snowflake, a long ways down from where I was. She was sitting in the dining room on the ground floor, helping herself to a steak in anticipation of a nap. A moment's communication was enough to confirm that Aiko and Alexis were both in the castle. My cousin was asleep, and the last thing Snowflake had heard from Aiko suggested that she would be in the library.

I told Snowflake that there were probably enemies incoming, and then looked further, outside the walls. There weren't many birds moving around at this time of day, but I'd made a concerted effort to encourage the presence of predators around our castle. As such, I was hopeful that I could find *something*.

I got lucky. There was a nesting pair of boreal owls a few miles away, and the female was in the area. A small nudge convinced her to alter her course slightly, giving me a good view of the path leading up to our door. It wasn't great—it was at a distance, and even an owl can only see so much on a cloudy night—but I could make out general shapes.

At a glance, I counted around fifteen figures ascending the mountain. Most were misshapen, just grotesque enough to make it clear that they weren't anything natural. Ghouls, most likely, and I was guessing that there were more around that I couldn't see. They wouldn't bother to send that few against me, not after what I did earlier.

The other four were much more concerning. They looked human, generally, but they moved with a speed and grace that was entirely at odds with that. It wasn't the sort of agility that could really be achieved by a human, or even a werewolf. This was more something that would make you complain about the obviously fake special effects if you saw it in a movie. They ignored the stairs entirely, running up the rough ground and leaping boulders, and they *still* made it up the hill faster than I could have.

Vampires. Well, *that* wasn't good. I'd never fought a single vampire before, and from what I knew of them, I wasn't sure that I could. Four of them at once was...problematic.

Maybe they were staying away from the stairs to avoid any booby traps I'd placed. If so, they'd underestimated how thorough I'd be; as I watched one of them stepped on the wrong stone, and set off a landmine. The blast of flame and shrapnel didn't kill it, but they did knock it a ways down the mountain, and it wasn't too quick getting up.

I grinned in satisfaction before releasing my grasp on the owl, returning to my own body. I grabbed my cloak and threw it over myself as I ran for the stairs, leaping down them considerably faster than was safe.

Aiko was already standing when I reached the library, having heard me on the stairs. "Trouble?" she asked, grabbing her carbine off the floor. She was already wearing armor.

"Vampires," I said. "At least four, and they have a shitload of ghouls with them. Incoming fast."

She said something rude in Italian and followed me. "What's the plan?" she asked.

"Wake Alexis and get down to the front hall. Hopefully the wards will slow them down, and there'll be a choke point as they come in the door."

She nodded. "I'll get your cousin. You get down there and get ready."

Only a few seconds later I was standing in the entrance hall, watching the door nervously. Snowflake was standing at my side, grinning. Her steel teeth were stained red from the steak she'd been eating, which looked rather ominous.

She wasn't wearing armor. I was more than a little worried about that, but there was not time to go and get it and I knew better than to think that she would leave.

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"What's going on?" Alexis called from behind me, sounding bleary.

"Vampires," I said, glancing back. She was wearing a heavy leather coat, the best armor she had, and she'd at least remembered to grab her staff. That was some consolation. I glanced through the owl's eyes, and saw that the vampires were moving more slowly now, taking care to avoid traps. "They'll be here within a minute."

"How do we fight them?" she asked, moving further into the room.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never done it, and it's hard to find reliable information." I shrugged. "Cut off the head or destroy the heart if you get the chance. I want you and Aiko providing ranged support. We'll try to hold them at the door with wards and grenades."

"Got it," she said, moving into the corner of the room opposite the door. I felt her gather her power as she went, the scents of ozone and snow hanging in the air around her. Aiko took the time to hug me before going to the other corner, aiming her carbine at the door.

Bullets wouldn't kill vampires, not in that light of a caliber. They didn't inflict the kind of large-scale tissue damage you need to put down a ghoul, either. But they might slow them down, keep them busy while Alexis and I lined up the big guns.

We waited like that for a tense thirty seconds or so while the enemy climbed up to us. Finally I started to smell them, a disturbingly strong odor of magic. The predominant odor was blood, but there was something *wrong* about it, a touch of too-sweet decay, mixed with unpleasant spices. There was a weaker odor of ghoul, not unlike rotting meat, and I caught a hint of something else as well, something even nastier.

There was a pause of several seconds before a male voice, just familiar enough that I felt like I should recognize it but couldn't, said, "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down."

There was a rush of power, strong enough to leave me blinking, that smashed the wards on the door, rendering most of them useless. Then something hit the doors, hard enough to make them buckle.

Those doors were taller than me and wide enough to drive a truck through, made of heavy ash and bound with iron. They must have weighed half a ton, and they were barred with another piece of iron the size of a load-bearing I-beam. A team of men with a battering ram would have needed probably around ten minutes to get through it.

It took three hits from this thing to knock the iron beam off its supports onto the ground. One more and the lock shattered, the doors lolling open.

Well, that wasn't good. I'd been counting on the wards to do some damage, and those doors should have held at least a *little* while. This was going to cause some serious problems with my plans.

Almost the instant the doors were open, ghouls started pouring through, hideous, misshapen things with patchy fur and oversized teeth.

I didn't get a chance to see any more details than that, because the moment they moved in, Alexis hit them with a lightning bolt.

Ghouls are tough, but lightning is a hell of a weapon, and she'd been working out pretty hard. Ghouls hit the ground left and right, screaming and convulsing, and the stench of burning fur filled the air.

But more ghouls came behind the first wave, stepping on their kin without any hesitation. Aiko started shooting, short, well aimed bursts of fire, and I could see and smell the blood, but they didn't stop. There were already ten or fifteen ghouls in the doorway, and more coming up behind *them*. In only moments they would be through, and that many ghouls in a confined space would go badly for us.

Fortunately, only *most* of the magical protections had been destroyed.

I sent a spike of power at the doorway, triggering one of the remaining wards, and the doorway burst into flame, a sudden and unnaturally intense fire. It washed over the ghouls, and now it wasn't just fur burning, it was *flesh*. It smelled like roasting meat, because that was exactly what it was.

More ghouls hit the ground. There was some screaming, but not as much as I'd have guessed. Something was telling me that wasn't because the fire hadn't hurt them. At a glance, it looked like a lot of them weren't going to be getting up.

There was still screaming, though, and smoke and smoldering flame and writhing bodies, and in all the chaos I didn't even see the first vampire jump over the whole mess.

The first thing I knew about it was when he was standing about three feet away from me, grinning. I didn't have time to register much more than that before Snowflake lunged forward, biting at his legs.

I didn't even see him move, but he jerked back about three feet, and Snowflake's teeth snapped shut on empty air. That gave me enough time and space to draw Tyrfing, though, and he didn't look nearly so eager to move into reach once that happened.

I felt and heard another bolt of lightning from Alexis, but I didn't have the time or attention to spare. Even one vampire was enough to kill us all if given a chance.

Not that I could do much about it. He backed away as I approached, still grinning, and I didn't want to push too hard and leave myself exposed. I ended up standing about ten feet away from him, between him and the rest of the room. Behind him I could see that the pile of dead or disabled ghouls had grown again. There were still plenty up and moving, though, and Aiko was still dumping bullets into the mass.

Then her magazine ran empty. She started reloading, her motions quick and smooth, but it would take a second.

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In that time, another vampire stepped up, ripped one of the doors off its hinges, and threw it at Alexis.

It wasn't a particularly hard throw. By the time it hit her, it wasn't moving under much more than gravity. It wasn't a particularly good throw, either; it barely clipped her.

But that door weighed several hundred pounds. Even a glancing blow was enough to knock Alexis down, effectively removing her from the fight for a few seconds.

In that brief window of opportunity, while both of our ranged attackers were ineffective, the other three vampires entered the room.

Snowflake and I fell back towards the others, watching the vamps warily, as the rest of the ghouls filed in behind them. Not counting the downed ones, there were only around ten ghouls left. Something to be proud of, perhaps.

Not much, though. Not enough. Not when there were four vampires inside of our defenses.

"I thought you couldn't enter a home uninvited," I said, more to buy time than anything. Alexis was still trying to stand, and it would go very badly if the fighting started up again while she was down.

One of the vampires—the last one in, I was pretty sure—smiled at me. It looked like a completely normal smile, no fangs or anything. He looked almost bland, except for vivid yellow eyes. "A house is not a home, Mr. Wolf. You may live here, but you don't claim this land, you haven't made it a part of yourself." His smile broadened slightly. "Obviously."

As though that had been a cue, the other vampires fell on us. We tried to fight. It didn't go so well.

"Not bad," the lead vampire said, wandering around the room looking at things. He seemed completely unaware of the fact that his minions were beating the shit out of us. "A little ostentatious, maybe, but not a bad place. Your patron knows how to make a statement, I have to give him that."

I tried to push myself back to my feet, but a vampire stepped on my hand and grinned down at me, her teeth just a little bit sharper than a person's. There was a gash across her face where I'd managed to land a hit with Tyrfing, but it wasn't bleeding the way it should be. There was red liquid oozing out, true, and it smelled *mostly* like blood, but there was no pressure behind it.

No heartbeat. Blood loss might actually be a viable way to kill a vampire, based on where they got their power from, but you'd need to open a major blood vessel and hang them out to drain.

"Disarm them," the leader said, turning towards us. "But don't kill them."

Apparently the vampires felt this task was beneath them, because it was the ghouls that moved to comply. They took Tyrfing, Alexis's staff, and Aiko's carbine, but they didn't search us with any thoroughness. Sloppy work. I only hoped we'd get a chance to take advantage of it.

"You know, I'm surprised that you've been so quiet," the lead vampire said. "Based on our previous encounters, I was expecting at least a few snide comments by now."

Previous encounters? I couldn't remember having run into this vampire before.

And then I looked at those yellow eyes, and realized why that hint of *wrongness* lying under the other smells of magic in the room was so familiar. "That's impossible," I said, stammering a little. "You aren't a vampire."

The skinwalker smiled at me. "No," he agreed. "Fortunately, the vampirism process is deeply flawed. It's to be expected when they're still using what was, frankly, only ever supposed to be a very early prototype. The results are mixed. Sometimes they produce highly refined killing machines of the sort you see with me. Other times, the outcome is more of an empty shell, hardly more than an animal."

I realized what was going on, and my heart sank even further. "You're possessing him," I said. It wasn't a question. I knew the principle—it wasn't that far off what I did with animals, after all—but I'd never seen it go quite this far.

He answered me anyway. "Obviously," he said. "I would hardly take the risk of assaulting your stronghold in person. Fortunately, Natalie was quite willing to loan me one of her puppets. I still owe you, after all."

"If this is personal," I said mockingly, "why'd you need to bring so many friends?"

He regarded me curiously. "Are you trying to goad me into a duel of some sort? Because if so, I'm a little offended. Do you really imagine I would have survived as long as I have if I were *that* stupid?"

I shrugged, prompting a warning hiss from one of the vampires watching us. "It was worth a try," I said.

"Your effort has been noted," he said dryly. "Now, I need to think of what to do with you. Something suitably extreme, I think, to make up for the embarrassment you caused me the last time." He turned away from us and started toward the throne.

I must have been getting better at lying, because none of them noticed my excitement when I saw that. Alexis wasn't quite as smooth, but it hardly mattered; she was literally shaking with terror already, and hyperventilating. No one was going to notice a minor tell through that.

Not that I could blame her. Not knowing something about what she'd gone through at the skinwalker's hands in the past.

He reached the throne and sat down, smiling at us.

Then things started to happen very, very quickly.

The instant his weight settled onto the throne, there was a loud click. At the exact same time, I pulled a small glass sphere out of my cloak and threw it at the nearest vampire.

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The land mines rigged to the throne went off an instant later. These weren't cheap land mines, either, or antique models. I'd been able to afford several modern anti-personnel mines, the sort that even military forces aren't really supposed to be using. They were designed to produce a very intense, very localized blast.

In the field, the expectation is that they enemy will step on one and the blast will damage or destroy their foot and leg. Here, there were four set into the throne, with the intention of turning anyone dumb enough to sit on it into a sack of pulp. The nice thing about that type of mine, as opposed to a shrapnel-based one, was that it was *very* localized, meaning that I didn't have to worry about it hitting *us*.

Even at a distance, the sound of four mines going off was impressive. I couldn't spare the attention to look, but I was confident the look of surprise on the skinwalker's face was *priceless*. Hopefully I'd be able to pick it out on the security footage.

The vampire caught the sphere I'd thrown, of course, moving almost too quickly to see. The speed of that movement was enough to break the glass, though, releasing a burst of heat and force. Trapped by her hand, it acted a little like an explosive, shredding her hand. She staggered back, on fire. One of the other vamps reached out to support her, moving on instinct, and the fire jumped to him as well, *clinging*, burning cloth and flesh with equal ease. They dropped to the ground, trying to smother it, but this wasn't normal fire. There was so much magic packed into it that it was almost *alive*.

And that was my opportunity.

I scrambled to my feet, Aiko and Snowflake right beside me. I reached to give Alexis a hand up, but had to flinch away when she hit the final vampire with another bolt of lightning. Lacking a physiology, he wasn't affected nearly so badly as the ghouls had been, but he still staggered away.

The vampire being possessed by the skinwalker was almost unrecognizable as a human body, there were so many broken parts, but he managed to make it stand. Not too surprising; vampires aren't alive, as such, so there isn't much you can do to really hurt them. Short of destroying the heart or the head, they were functionally indestructible. Between that and the fact that this particular vampire was being puppeteered by a skinwalker, it wasn't a surprise that it wasn't down for the count.

It stood there, glaring at us hatefully with those vivid yellow eyes. It opened its mouth, maybe to shout orders to its minions, maybe so the skinwalker could cast some kind of spell or something.

Then an anvil fell out of the rafters and hit it in the head. It was a fairly glancing blow, but it still shattered the thing's skull. The body dropped at once, apparently damaged beyond even a vampire's ability to function.

In the brief window of opportunity that afforded, we bolted, sprinting for the door leading deeper into the building. I was expecting at any moment to be snatched from my feet by one of the vampires, or hit with magic from the skinwalker, but we made it out of the room without incident.

We weren't safe. I could hear the ghouls chasing us, heavy footfalls and hungry panting, and the vampires wouldn't be far behind. The fire and lightning wouldn't do much more than slow them down, and I wasn't sure that even the explosion and the anvil would be enough to put the other one down permanently. Not when it was being possessed by a fucking *skinwalker*.

We were on our home ground, though, and we'd had the advantage of knowing that shit was about to go down. We made it to the central tower without being caught, and slammed the heavy steel door behind ourselves. The ghouls hit it moments later, screaming and tearing at the door, but it would take them some time to get through. That door was designed to hold off an army.

Of course, that was no guarantee with vampires around.

"Come on," I said, stumbling toward the stairs. I hadn't noticed at the time, but apparently one of the vamps had wrenched my leg while disabling us, because I was limping a little.

"Where are we going?" Alexis asked, glancing back. She threw another blast of electricity back, but I could tell that she was getting tired. This one couldn't have had half the power of her first attack.

It was still strong enough that the ghouls screamed in pain and jerked away when it hit the door, though. Inexperienced she might be, but my cousin packs a good bit more raw *power* than I do.

"Upstairs," I said. "I'm hoping the ghouls will take a while to get through, and the vampires shouldn't be able to come in. The rest of the castle might not be a home, but this tower is *my* territory."

We stopped in the armory long enough to pick up Snowflake's armor and some spare weapons, then kept climbing up to the roof. I walked over to the edge and spent a moment looking around, both on my own and through the boreal owl outside, but I didn't see any more enemies in the vicinity.

We'd gotten lucky. They were dumb enough to commit all of their assets to the attack. Not that this was all that much of a surprise, given that the skinwalker was calling the shots here. He was terrifyingly powerful, not to mention flat-out *evil*, but he'd also struck me as deeply arrogant. I wasn't surprised that he'd failed to have a fallback plan.

"Um," Alexis said. "Not to cramp your style, but we're kind of trapped up here."

"No we aren't," I said. "You're thinking like a human. There are other ways out."

She looked at me doubtfully. "Open a portal?" she said doubtfully. "I don't know if we have that much time."

As if to punctuate her words, I heard the distant crash of the door being broken down far below. We still had plenty of time, though. There were another six of those doors between them and us. That should take them at least twenty minutes, and Aiko would only need ten to open a portal.

Assuming that had been the first door. Assuming I'd been correct about the vampires not being able to get in. Assuming they hadn't brought a ram, or explosives.

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Shit.

Alexis was right.

"Okay," I said. "New plan. How do you feel about flying?"

"Oh, no," she said. "No way. You've got to be kidding me."

"Up to you," I said. "You want to take your chances staying here, be my guest." Next to me, Aiko was already grinning and stripping off her armor, bundling it up neatly.

"Can you even carry that much weight?" my cousin asked. She didn't sound confident.

"Not for long, and not steady. It'll be more like a steep glide." I shrugged. "I don't have a better idea of how to get out of here. You *might* be okay waiting here, but I wouldn't count on them leaving without making it up here. If nothing else, there's a chance that they might just blow the whole building up."

"No," she said reluctantly, as Aiko finished stripping and turned into a fox. She jumped up on my shoulder, clinging tightly to my cloak. I grabbed the bundle of armor and weapons she'd left on the ground and put it on my back, extending the cloak into thin ropes of shadow to hold it and Aiko in place. "I'll go with flying."

"Okay," I said, walking over to stand on the parapet of the tower. I scooped Snowflake up in one arm, took a moment to settle her weight, and then held my other arm out to Alexis.

I wasn't quite sure what happened then. Maybe my foot slipped on a patch of ice. Maybe Snowflake shifted a little and I wasn't expecting it. Maybe my injured leg picked exactly the wrong time to spasm. Maybe I got a dose of my signature bad luck, and all of that happened at once.

Whatever the reason, one of my legs went out from under me. I started to fall back, toward the empty air beyond the parapet. Alexis was standing near me and I stretched my hand out to grab her, thinking that I could still pull this off. Sure, it was a little less graceful than I'd hoped, but I'd take it. My cousin reached to grab my hand, looking scared and surprised but hopeful.

And then I remembered which hand I'd used.

My maimed, scarred fingers couldn't exert enough of a grip to hold her, and the slick surface of my gauntlet didn't provide enough friction for her to hold on. Her fingers slipped through mine, and then I was watching her face fall at about the same speed I did.

I couldn't reverse my momentum, not when I was off balance and carrying probably a hundred pounds of husky and armor.

I might have been able to get back up. I could—just barely—support this much weight with air magic, at least for a few seconds. I could have held us in place and scabbled at the edge, tried to drag us back over the lip. With Alexis helping, it might have worked.

But if it didn't work, it would go very badly. We would be falling uncontrollably, tumbling straight down, and there was no good landing under us. I would already have spent a lot of power to hold us up trying to climb back up, and I didn't have that much to spare. It would only take a few seconds of freefall for us to build up enough momentum to turn all three of us into smears on the ground.

I could say that it was necessary. I could say that it was the best choice available at the time. It wouldn't even be a lie.

But in the end, what it comes down to is this. I had the choice to take a risk, or leave Alexis to her own devices on that tower, knowing that there were enemies rapidly approaching and she might not be able to get out. I had that choice, and I chose the latter.

I turned away from her, pushing out from the tower with my legs. For a long, dizzying moment the night spun around us, cold air rushing by us, and then I caught that air and used it, directing it to my own ends. I thickened it and forced it up against myself, supporting our weight and slowing our fall.

We were still falling fast, and I hadn't been able to get as much of a leap off as I'd hoped for. I ended up diving for almost a hundred feet, eating up a good twenty percent of our height, then using body positioning and a ramp of thickened air to convert some of the speed that generated into horizontal travel.

It worked, in the sense that we started getting distance. The ground around the castle was trapped pretty heavily, and there was a definite risk of the vampires coming out to hunt us down, so farther away was better. But it also meant that we were coming in fast, and there wasn't much open ground between the edge of the minefield and the start of the primeval woods that sprawled around our castle.

I overshot it.

We were going to hit the trees, there was nothing I could do about it, and while I diverted some of my attention to braking our forward progress, we were still going at almost highway speeds. In that sense, the trees were actually a *good* thing. They would slow us gradually, prevent us from hitting the ground with lethal force.

The way they would do that was more problematic, of course. But there wasn't much I could do about that, either.

I did what I could, turning over and holding Snowflake and Aiko in front of myself. Hopefully the armor would protect me from the worst of it, and if not...well, of the three of us, if I had to choose one to get battered to death by tree branches after jumping off a tower, I'd pick me.

That was all I had time for before we hit the first of the trees, and after that there was no more room for thought.

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Branches slapped at me painfully, hitting hard enough to bruise even through the armor. The metal did serve its purpose, though, keeping them away from my skin. I'd have been flayed, without it, but as it was I only had to deal with the blunt force.

Not that that was insignificant. We were pretty high up in the mountains, and most of the trees were fairly stunted, but not all of the branches were small. I saw one thick enough to bear my weight coming straight at my head, and barely managed to tuck my chin against the impact in time to avoid whiplash. It shattered on my helmet, sending us into a terrifying spin.

We hit the ground at an oblique angle, fortunately, and skidded, bouncing off of rocks and tree roots for maybe thirty feet. We would have gone farther, but I slammed into a tree, cutting our momentum short.

I collapsed on the ground, unable to think straight through the pain. Maybe twenty seconds later Aiko leaned into my field of view, dimly silhouetted against the moon. "Winter?" she said cautiously. "Are you okay?"

"Ow," I whispered, whimpering a little at the pain that even that much vocalization caused. "I'm...alive, I guess."

She nodded. "I'm fine, and I think Snowflake's just got a few bruises. How bad is it?"

"Broken ribs," I whispered. "Several. Head hurts." I tried to push myself to my feet, tentatively, and had to bite back a scream. "Broken arm."

She nodded again. "I'll do the portal. We'll get you back to Colorado to see a doctor."

I wanted to protest, to say that we should go back and save Alexis, but what would be the point? Fighting three vampires, even three half-dead vampires, was daunting at the best of times; in my current condition, it wasn't even a good joke. Besides, by the time we got back, they would have made it to her position if they wanted to.

There wasn't much I could do, then. Not for her, and not for anyone else, not right now.

It was almost comfortable, being absolved of responsibility like that. I lay my aching head back on the ground, and let the world fade to black.

Chapter Eleven

Several hours later, I was sitting in my throne room back in Colorado Springs. I wasn't sitting in the actual throne—that thing was agony when I *didn't* have seven broken ribs—but a suitably impressive substitute had been found, and ample cushions had been placed in it.

It was still agony to sit in. But *anywhere* was agony at that point, so it was something of a moot point.

In addition to the ribs, I had a cracked skull, although the doctor didn't think it was a serious problem. I was covered in bruises, and I had a cast on my left forearm.

On the bright side, I was at least in good enough shape to be darkly amused by the *luckiness* of my injuries. I mean, it wasn't like my left hand was good for much anyway.

Aiko was making arrangements to deal with the group of fae undermining Scáthach's position, and she'd taken Snowflake with her. Brick was reporting to the Watchers. It was Kris's day off, and the rest of the former-Inquisition mages only came in to work for me when I had a specific task I needed them for. Alexis was safe, having managed to get a portal up in time after all, but she was exhausted and currently passed out in a warded safe house in France.

At this point I was injured and alone with my housecarls, most of whom were brutal and violent, all of whom were at least a little bit psycho. If I were the sort of guy to regard others with distrust, it might almost be the sort of situation to make me a little uncomfortable.

Good thing I'm not one of those or anything.

About an hour and a half before dusk, Selene walked up to me, nodding to Sveinn on the way by. He'd taken it upon himself to stay by me while I was injured, somewhere between a servant and a bodyguard. Knowing him, it wasn't exactly a surprise that he would adopt that role.

"Jarl," Selene said, nodding to me in a way that wasn't quite a bow. "Katrin has arranged payment for your services, but requests that it be picked up in person from the drop point."

"Take care of it," I said. "Take Tindr with you to make sure the money is right. "

She nodded. "Understood. Also, we've got a confirmation on that thing in the sewers. Sounds like it's some kind of wyvern variant. Fairly small, and not intelligent. Apparently they tend to avoid people."

I frowned. "Still possibly dangerous, though. Send in the rest of the housecarls before you go."

She nodded again and left. I lounged in my not-throne and waited.

Maybe five minutes later, the other four jötnar were standing in front of me, waiting for orders.

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"There's a wyvern in the sewers," I said without preamble. "I want you to kill it, preferably without attracting any notice. Haki, you know the location?"

He nodded. Haki isn't like Kjaran, who never spoke at all, but he still didn't like to waste words.

"Good. Take Kjaran and Vigdis and get the job done. Kyi, I want you with them to do scout work. I think the plan we discussed earlier should work."

Kyi perked up at that, ever so slightly, and gestured with one hand. It was a small movement, and even if someone had been looking they wouldn't probably have noticed. Not that anyone was looking. It was Kyi, after all, and people didn't really *look* at her.

I couldn't gesture in response, not without being noticed. But I nodded, very slightly, and saw her nod in acknowledgment. The order had been conveyed.

A few minutes after that, I was alone with Sveinn. "You know," I said, "you're really very good at this. The vast majority of people would never have caught you."

He looked at me in confusion. "Jarl?" he asked.

"See, that's the problem," I said. "Your one real mistake. Why would someone like you have come to work for *me*?" I gestured vaguely, and winced at the pain it caused my ribs. "The others, I get. If you're desperate and nobody in their right mind would take you, then it makes sense for you to take a risk on a low-value employer. But you're competent, you're reliable, you're sane."

"I don't understand."

I sighed. "Drop the act, please. I'm aware that you've been less than honest with me. I know that you're a traitor. Let's just accept that you aren't going to be able to bluff your way out of this and move on, shall we?"

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "What gave it away?" he asked curiously.

"Like I said, you're competent. Why would you take a position with me, when you could work for basically any jarl you want?" I shrugged, wincing again. Why do I never seem to learn how to cope with an injury? "Anyway," I said to him. "Once I realized that, I started paying a little attention. It didn't take much to realize that someone had to be giving information about my activities to Katrin, and the only suspects were my housecarls. It wasn't hard to narrow it down from there."

He nodded again. "I can't really complain," he said. "I mean, you only caught me because I was doing my job *too well*. That's not so bad."

"Nope," I agree. "Honestly, I really respect you for pulling it off for so long. You're good, like I said."

"Thank you," he said, drawing his sword. "I would have said the same, but then you confronted me about it while we were alone. And you're injured. That wasn't smart."

He took a step toward me, and suddenly an arrow sprouted from his knee, causing him to stagger. A moment later another arrow hit him in the other leg.

"Yeah," I said, watching calmly as he fell. "About that. I think you guys can come out now."

Kyi stepped out of the shadows near the entrance, a third arrow already nocked. A moment later Selene walked down the stairs, watching the whole thing with a kind of detached sadness.

Sveinn looked around, saw who I was talking about, and then looked at me incredulously. "You're mad," he said, pushing himself up to a seated position. "You trusted a *demon* above me?"

"Trust?" I said. "Sveinn, you're missing the point here. Of course I don't *trust* her. Selene reports everything I tell her to Coyote, and probably also to Iblis, or whoever runs the little mockup of Hell she comes from."

"In fairness, that was never a secret," she said, walking over to stand at my left hand. "I told you up front that was the deal."

"Yeah, and you have *no idea* how grateful I am to you for being honest about it." I saw that Sveinn still looked dumbfounded, and rolled my eyes. "Okay," I said. "Let's go through this in order, shall we?"

I pointed at Kyi. "You," I said, "answer to Loki. You've been sending monthly reports to one of his agents since you started working for me. You've also taken several independent contracts as a hitman."

She blinked. "You are knowing, that I have these things done?"

"Obviously," I said dryly. "I just don't *care*. Loki's going to know what I'm doing regardless, and you're smart enough not to have killed anyone I care about. Oh," I said after a moment, "and also you can drop the accent. I know you speak perfectly good English, and that shtick got annoying years ago."

She blinked again, then nodded. "Yes, my jarl."

"Better. Okay, what next?" I grinned. "Oh, right. Tindr keeps Skrýmir up to date on all my financial dealings. He's also embezzled almost a million dollars from me. Vigdis is working for Hrym. Haki was sent here by the Volsung family, presumably to make sure I'm not planning to make a bid for the title. He's *also* being blackmailed for information by someone else, and a few steps up the chain that information also gets to Skrýmir. At this point the only one I'm not sure about is Kjaran, and I'm not sure about *anything* when it comes to him."

Sveinn considered that for a moment, then nodded again. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I respect you," I said. "And I want to make it clear why I'm taking steps to deal with you when I haven't with anyone else. My other housecarls might not be entirely honest, they might have other deals going on, but they're still loyal. They do what I need done, and their side projects aren't

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actually hurting me. You, on the other hand, were put here specifically to undermine my position and prevent me from maintaining stability in this city. It's a pretty freaking important distinction."

"Understood," he said. "So what now?"

"I cast you out, Sveinn Wartooth. I call you a traitor. You swore loyalty to me as my housecarl, and you have broken that oath."

"Witnessed," Kyi called from across the room.

"Witnessed," Selene repeated.

Sveinn glared at the succubus. "You are not a jotun," he stated.

I smiled at him. It was the kind of smile that shows more teeth than happiness. "No," I agreed. "But she is a member of my court, and two witnesses are all I need to expel you."

He slumped. "Understood," he repeated. "What happens now?"

I looked at the jotun for a moment. How much had he hurt me, I wondered? How much of my strife with Katrin could be attributed to the fact that he had generally been the go-between? How much of my difficulty keeping people in line had to do with him keeping information from me?

How much of the blame for the Inquisition's collapse could be attributed to him?

Some. Not all, but some. And while the fault was still rightly mine—a more competent jarl would never have allowed a traitor to have such influence—that didn't negate the portion of guilt that belonged to him.

Even a little bit of guilt is a hell of a lot when your actions lead to tens of thousands of people dying.

"The traditional punishment for a traitor is death," I said at last. Jotun law is old-school, and there's only one crime old Norse culture condemned as harshly as betrayal. "I don't see much reason to lighten that sentence."

Sveinn took a deep breath, let it out, and nodded. "Understood," he said again. "As your housecarl, I have the right to ask that you do the deed yourself."

"My housecarls have that right," I agreed. Another interesting facet of jotun law; jarls are expected to do their own dirty work. "But you took that oath in bad faith. You are no housecarl of mine."

Kyi's arrow hit him in the nape of the neck, just above his coat of mail, and punched clean through his neck.

Sveinn hit the ground in a pool of his own blood, already dead or dying, and a knife bounced out of his sleeve. It looked and smelled like silver, and I was guessing the oily sheen to the metal was *not* the kind of poison a werewolf could ignore.

"Predictable," I sighed. "Competent enough to try and get me into reach at the end, but he couldn't see how *obvious* he was being about it."

"That's Sveinn for you," Kyi agreed, moving closer. "Well, that *was* Sveinn."

"You're sure he's dead?"

She shrugged, knelt down beside him, and drew a knife. A moment later she stood up, holding his head in one hand, and nodded. "I'm sure now," she said.

"Good. When the others get back, I want you to inform them of what happened, and that you're now the leader of my housecarls."

"Really?" she said. "Even after I...." she trailed off and gestured vaguely.

"Sure. You know that I know about it, and you know what happens if you go further than I can overlook. I'd say that makes you a perfect choice."

She snorted and shook her head. "There's something broken in your head, jarl. I'm not even a fighter, not really. No one in their right mind would put me in charge of their housecarls."

"Yes," I said, meeting her eye. "I know. And I know that means that this is the best chance you'll ever have of being the right-hand man of someone important. I recommend you think about that, the next time someone makes you an offer."

She eyed me, and then knelt and bowed her head. "I am your housecarl, jarl. Whatever else may come."

"I know. Selene, get someone in to clean this up. Thorough is more important than fast."

She nodded. "On it. Do you have anyone in mind?"

"Not really. Maybe talk to Pellegrini's people. I'm sure they have a cleaner on retainer. Pay them out of the operational fund."

"Understood."

"Good. Kyi, I would appreciate if you would clear the room; I have business to take care of that I would rather you weren't here for."

She glowered at me. "Jarls do not request," she chided. "Jarls *order*."

"If you think that wasn't," I said dryly, "try disobeying it."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

She chuckled and left. Selene followed, off on her task. I looked at Sveinn's body, and then looked away.

No point putting it off any longer. The situation needed to be resolved. And, as Scáthach had so helpfully reminded me, a good card is no better than a bad one if you're too scared to play it.

"Loki," I said aloud.

Nothing happened.

"Loki the crafty in lies, Loki the Sky-Traveler, Loki Laufeyjarson, I call you."

Nothing continued to happen.

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, hurry up already. I know you can hear me. I want to make a deal, and I'm short on time."

"A deal, you say?" a voice said in my ear. I startled, almost falling out of my chair, and turned to glower at him.

Then I blinked. Loki was standing at my elbow, grinning at me, and he looked pretty bizarre. His skin was greyish, his eyes were the kind of green that made you think of poison, and he was wearing what looked like an nineteenth-century businessman's suit.

"What's with...this?" I asked, gesturing vaguely.

"I was at a party," he explained. "One I'd rather like to get back to. I believe you mentioned a deal?"

I made a conscious decision not to ask. "Yeah," I said. "You owe me nine answers. I want to call one of them in."

"Understood," he said with a sharky smile. "Ask away."

"Where is the sanctum of the vampire called Natalie, who was until recently the lieutenant of the vampire called Katrin Fleischer in this city?"

"I thought I told you that you didn't need to worry that much about the phrasing," he said dryly. "Well, in any case, I think it's easiest to show you."

With that warning, I didn't stumble when the next blink found me standing, rather than seated. We were on a low hill out near the edge of the plains, looking over a small strip mall.

"There," he said, pointing at the strip mall. "Mostly underground. The stores are a front."

I looked at it and nodded. "Okay," I said. "I'm not using another of my questions. But I would like a bit of clarification, the same way I did more for you than we'd agreed."

He was still grinning at me. "You're welcome to ask."

"Natalie is in there?"

"Yes, at present. This is where she comes to hide from the sun."

I nodded again. That was almost the definition of a sanctum, but it didn't hurt to confirm. "Is there anyone else in there?"

Loki closed his eyes momentarily, then opened them and nodded. "Eight other vampires. Forty-five humans. Eleven ghouls. Twelve hounds, which you might say were built on the chassis of a dog, but they're something much more dangerous. Aside from Natalie, there's nobody you know."

Wow. I'd...not really expected that she had that kind of force. I mean, nine vampires is...a lot. If Katrin was to be believed, that was at least twenty percent of the vampires in the city. Add in the human minions, the ghouls, whatever those hounds were, the skinwalker, and you had...a much more credible threat to Katrin's position than I'd been expecting.

Could I take them?

I thought about it for almost a minute, and I couldn't think of a way. Forty-five humans could bury me in bodies, even if they weren't armed. I'd fought that many ghouls before and come out okay, but I'd had a lot of assistance, and I'd still relied heavily on catching them by surprise and taking them out before they realized what kind of threat I posed. And I had no *idea* what the hounds were capable of.

Not to mention the vampires. If even one of *those* were up and active, it was likely to be more than I could handle.

Maybe I could manage something. I could get my housecarls, the mages, Katrin and her forces, maybe even some assistance from Kikuchi. We could mount an assault on the place, and maybe we could take them out. But it would take time to arrange, time to assemble them, time to plan and coordinate.

I looked at the sun, hanging low over the mountains. We had, at most, an hour before sunset freed the vampires to go about their business. Once it did, I might never have an opportunity like this again.

Clearly, another avenue of attack was called for.

Luckily, I had something in mind.

"Okay," I said, turning to Loki. "You remember that deal I mentioned? I want this place gone. I want it destroyed in a way that's dramatic enough to make a statement, and I want to be sure that nobody escapes to cause trouble later. You do that, and I'll forgive one of the answers you owe me."

He made an interested sound. "No one escapes? Not even the humans?"

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

I frowned. What are the chances that some of the humans are innocent victims? Basically a hundred percent. There were nine vampires in there, and that meant that at least some of the humans were food.

Then again, not every human that a vampire took went against their will. There were plenty that signed up by choice, for power and the chance at eternal life. With forty-five people in there, it was almost certain that both groups were represented, which made letting them go a risk to say the least.

Not to mention the possibility that Natalie would possess one of them, the same way that the skinwalker had possessed one of the vampires. I wasn't sure she could do something like that, but I wasn't sure she *couldn't* either, and if she could it would make the whole exercise a waste of time.

"No," I said to Loki. "Nobody gets out. Not the humans. Nobody."

He nodded. He wasn't smiling anymore. "As you say," he murmured, turning towards the strip mall. He raised one hand, and a bead of golden fire the size of a marble formed just above his palm. It flew out, disappearing from sight in a few seconds.

Loki glanced at me, looking for a reaction. I didn't give him one. He sighed dramatically and then turned back to his work. He gestured slightly.

And then a column of golden flame a hundred feet across fountained up to the sky with a roar like a thousand engines sparking to life all at once.

I managed not to scream. I'm pretty sure I did, anyway; it's not like I'd have heard it. But I stumbled back, raising one hand to block the light. Too late; I was already dazzled, blinking away tears.

When I could see again, I saw that the strip mall was gone. Just...wiped away, like it was never there. In its place was a circular pit maybe fifty feet deep, lined with glass. Just the same as, although a whole lot smaller than, the one that marked the center of the destruction on the north side of the city.

Not surprising. It had the same cause.

There was no collateral damage this time, at least. No other buildings were on fire. As far as I could tell none of them had been affected at all.

"There we go," Loki said, turning to me and bowing grandiosely. "I believe that fits your criteria."

"I can't complain," I said, staring at the pit. It was almost hypnotic in how *clean* it was. No blood. No bodies. No lingering fires. Just...gone.

"Very good," he said with a smile two shades too sharp. "You have seven answers remaining, Winter Wolf. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a party to be getting back to." He tipped a black tricorne hat to me and vanished.

Chapter Twelve

I stood on that hill for what felt like a long time, watching the sunset and looking at the hole in the ground, watching as emergency vehicles began to cluster around it and a crowd began to gather. I felt oddly disconnected from what I saw; I knew, logically, that I was responsible, but on an emotional level it felt like I was looking in from the outside.

I wasn't concerned about being found there. I was far enough away that it would take a while for them to look here, and my face was hidden behind my cloak.

And besides, what did it matter if they *did* connect this to me? It couldn't make them hate me any more than they already did.

The sunset was fading and I was trying to decide what to do next when I heard a familiar voice behind me. "Good evening, jarl."

I looked back and saw the leader of the ghouls I'd fought earlier. He was wearing the human guise I'd first seen, but as before, it was...less than perfect. He didn't seem aggressive, so I nodded politely to him. "Good evening, Jibril."

He walked up and stood next to me, looking at the hole in the ground. "Your work?" he asked idly.

I shrugged and nodded. "Close enough."

"I'm guessing the boss was in there?"

"Yeah. Her, a bunch of the vampires working for her, a lot of her soldiers."

"Any of my people?"

I hesitated, but there wasn't much point in lying. "Eleven. They're dead now. Nothing personal, it just seemed...wiser not to take chances."

He sighed and nodded. "I don't blame you. It's just...." He trailed off and shook his head. "Damn shame. People like you and her getting in your wars, but it's the little guy stuck in between that dies."

"You aren't going to cause problems for me, then?"

He snorted. "After this? That'd be stupid. The boss is dead, anyway, so there's no reason to stick around. I figure we'll get out of your town. Probably stay away for a while, maybe try to find work back in the old country."

I considered him for a moment, then sighed. "You don't have to, if you don't want."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

He regarded me with what I thought was an expression of curiosity. It was hard to tell on those features, but I was fairly confident that was the gist of what he was trying to convey.

"I could use some employees," I explained. "I can't promise it'll be safe, but I won't ask you to do anything I'm not willing to do myself. And I can offer you reasonable pay." I shrugged. "Or you can stay in town without working for me. Just don't cause trouble."

He pondered that. "Huh," he said after a moment. "My people might not want to fight for you after all this. But we'll see."

"Just let me know," I said. "I won't hold a grudge against you either way."

He left. Shortly thereafter, so did I.

"How'd it go with Sveinn?" Aiko asked, ladling mashed potatoes and a mushroom-based gravy onto her plate.

"I had Kyi shoot him in the head," I said, sitting down next to her. Snowflake headbutted me in the thigh and I scratched her ears absently. "Then I traded two of the answers Loki owed me for the destruction of Natalie's gang and made a job offer to a bunch of cannibalistic ghouls."

There was a moment of silence after I said that. Eventually, Aiko whistled appreciatively. "Damn. I should let you go out on your own more often."

"When you say 'the destruction of Natalie's gang,'" Alexis said carefully. "What do you mean by that?"

"What it sounds like. Loki blew their hideout up. Nine vampires, eleven ghouls, forty-five humans."

"Forty-five people," Alexis repeated.

"Yeah."

"And...you're okay with that?"

I looked at her. "Alexis. I just had my lieutenant killed for lying to me. I made a deal with a devil to destroy my enemies. I voluntarily offered a job to a group of ghouls that I know damn well enjoy killing and eating people. And the next thing on my agenda is killing a bunch of people as a favor for the queen of evil faeries so that she'll help me cover up the fact that I murdered somebody." I started scooping food onto my own plate. "I think it's safe to say, at this point, that I'm not the good guy in this particular story."

"But are you *okay* with that?" she pressed.

I shrugged. "Does it matter? This is where we are. Maybe it isn't where we wanted to be, but that doesn't count for much."

"Hey," Aiko interjected. "I take offense to that. I mean, maybe *you're* in too deep to get out, but I'm not. I stick around with you because I *want* to."

Not much was said for the rest of the night.

The rest of the week passed without much of note happening. I bought a bunch of mercury, the other chemicals I would need to make my mirror, and half a dozen large sheets of glass. I was only expecting to need two, but this was delicate work; the chances that I would mess something up were very, very high.

I'm pretty sure the people from the chemical supply company thought I was crazy. I mean, it isn't every day somebody buys almost ten grand worth of mercury and pays cash. I'd had to pay a good bit extra, too, to get them not to ask too many questions about why someone would want ten thousand dollars in mercury. But it was worth it.

Other than that, not a lot happened. Aiko bought a video game from a sketchy dealer online, and then we went and burned down his house when he sent her a disc of particularly exotic pornography instead.

Alexis spent a lot of time away, talking to the Guards about signing up. I tried not to be bothered by that, with mixed results.

It's strange, how *casual* you can get about looking at terrifying threats. I mean, I knew that, if we missed this chance, it wasn't likely that I'd be able to do Scáthach's favor. The consequences of that would probably be all kinds of ugly. And on some level I was aware that I should feel tense about that, but I just...didn't. It was like I'd spent so much time under the sword that it was starting to feel comfy.

All of which does a lot to explain why, in the days leading up to the actual event, I didn't really feel any different than normal. If anything there was a sort of vague anticipation, almost like waiting for Christmas.

It was surprisingly easy to find the secret meeting of secret faeries secretly trying to overthrow Scáthach. We took an Otherside portal to London, then a train to Wales, followed by a bus into the middle of nowhere in Wales.

I'd never really done the public transit thing before. It was...about as unpleasant as I was expecting, really. Crammed into a metal tube with hundreds of people, none of whom had any concept of personal space, was not my preferred way to travel. Never mind the security risk it posed, which was significant. *Anybody* could be a threat in that mess, and you'd never know it until it was too late.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

Snowflake enjoyed it even less, although her issues had less to do with security and more to do with it not being very much fun.

Alexis wasn't coming along. I didn't want to drag her into Court business, and she had been...less than enthusiastic about dragging herself.

Next time, I resolved, we would just buy a car. We had the money for it, after all.

Finally, the bus stopped in the middle of some town the name of which I hadn't bothered to pay attention to. It really wasn't *worth* paying attention to; there might have been a thousand people in that town, but I doubted it. It was the sort of place where you could step out your front door and walk for an hour or two without seeing another person.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked dubiously as we got off the bus, looking around.

Aiko shrugged. "This is what the guy said."

"It just seems odd. Why would you have a meeting out here?"

"Tradition?" she guessed. "I don't know. This part of the world is where the Courts have the strongest ties, I guess. That might count for something."

I sighed. "I guess. Well, lead on."

"Cool. It's a few miles away, so I guess the first step is to steal a car."

I stopped. "No. No way. You did not make me sit on a *bus* just to steal a car as soon as we got here."

"You really want to walk five miles to get to the meeting?"

"We have a few hours to spare," I said dryly.

She rolled her eyes and started walking.

We'd budgeted plenty of extra time, so I wasn't too concerned about being late. As it turned out, that wasn't the best attitude I could have had. We were going at a leisurely pace and Aiko got turned around twice, so by the time we made it to the meeting location there was only an hour left before it was supposed to start.

Not a huge problem. But I'd have liked to have a little more time to spare.

At least it was a pleasant walk. It was surprisingly warm for a September day in Wales, warm enough that the cool breeze was welcome.

After we got there, we killed about half an hour playing dice—Snowflake won, somehow—before moving in. I didn't want to scare anyone off, after all; my deal with Scáthach called for their total extermination. Getting there too early might mean that I only got *some* of the conspirators.

We hadn't approached too closely, for much the same reason. So it wasn't until we moved in for the kill that I got my first good look at the place.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," I sighed.

Aiko gave me a funny look. "What?"

"A house on a hill," I said dryly. "Surrounded by a ring of mushrooms. Could you *get* more stereotypically fae than this?"

She shrugged. "They're traditionalists." She took a step across the line of fungi.

And froze.

"Aiko? What is it?"

She didn't answer. A moment later, I realized that Snowflake wasn't saying anything, and looked at her.

Frozen. Not moving at all.

I looked around, starting to panic, and saw that the grass had stopped moving in the wind.

"Okay," I said, relaxing a little. "You might as well come out now." Then I turned around.

My timing was good. I turned to face the woman who had appeared directly behind me just before she could start talking.

She closed her mouth and glowered at me. "You're no fun," she said.

"I try," I said, studying her. There was something familiar about her, in a way that I couldn't quite place. She was Sidhe, obviously, and even by the standards of the Sidhe she had an unearthly beauty about her, but more than that there was some quality about her that I recognized.

Then I got it. She looked like Scáthach. Not in any individual feature—she had white hair instead of black, and her features were more rounded, less *hungry* looking—but in her overall bearing. She had the same sense of power, the same *presence*.

I bowed my head slightly. "Queen. Might I have the honor of knowing whom I address?"

She glared at me. It was an odd expression, imperious and angry, but with a sense of amusement still lurking underneath. On another face I might have called it petulant, but the notion of applying that word to a Faerie Queen was...inadvisable.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"I am Aoife," she snapped. "The Lady of Radiant Beauty, the Maiden of Daylight, the youngest Queen of the Seelie Court of the Sidhe."

"Try fitting that on a business card," I said mildly. "Altering the flow of time for the two of us? I'm impressed. I thought that took god-level power."

"I am a deity," she pointed out.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, and so am I, or at least that's what I've been told. There are gods, and then there are *gods*. I wouldn't have guessed you were this high on the list, is all I'm saying."

She regarded me for a moment, and the anger seemed to fade from her expression. "Are you not frightened?" she asked. "Knowing that I hold you within my power?"

I shrugged. "Not really. If you wanted to kill me you'd have done it already. I'm guessing that means you want something. You showed up right when Aiko stepped over those mushrooms, so I'm guessing you were using them as the basis for a ward. That means you want something about this, specifically. Am I getting close?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly. "I know that you were sent here by my sister to kill these people. I would rather you didn't."

"Okay," I said. "These people are from the Midnight Court, right? So why are you trying to save your enemies?"

"That is none of your concern."

"No," I said dryly. "See, I'm here because I need Scáthach to do something pretty important for me. So yes, actually, this literally is my concern." I frowned. "They're speaking out for war, right? So that would suggest you want the war to heat up. I doubt you want to lose, so you must think that an increase in the war effort right now will be to your gain later on."

"*Stop*," she hissed at me. "Stop *thinking*. You're only buying trouble. I tell you truly that you don't want to help my sister achieve her aims. Do as I ask now, and I will reward you."

I eyed her. "Reward me how? Specifically, please."

"You killed my previous champion," she murmured. "That would seem to qualify you for the position."

I laughed. "Wow. That's a new best, I gotta admit. I don't think I've ever gotten an offer that assumed I was quite *that* dumb before. Congratulations."

"You do not wish for the power I could offer you?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "I mean, really. You don't think I have enough people telling me what to do already?" I shook my head. "Nah. The power you're offering has a price tag attached, and I don't think I like what it says."

She nodded slowly. "I didn't really expect you to," she said. "But I had to offer the position to you before I could give it to anyone else. Tradition, you know. So what *do* you want?"

"A lot of things, most of which I doubt you can offer me. But your sister offered to smooth things over with the Conclave. I'm accused of killing a clan mage, and it would be awkward if they decide I'm guilty."

"Ah," she said. "I'm sure you know that I could do something similar."

"Yeah," I sighed. "But would it be worth it?" I shrugged. "Look, Aoife. I'm not going to pretend that I know what's going on here, or what the deeper meaning is. I'm a pawn, and I *know* I'm a pawn. And, you know, I've got nothing against you, I've got nothing against working for you. But I don't think it would be a very good idea for me to get drawn into your conflicts any more deeply than I already am. Not when I'm already under contract by the other side."

"You won't do it, then."

"I'll *think* about it," I said carefully. "If leaving these people be seems like the better idea, I'll do it."

"I could make you," she said. "But I won't. I get the impression that you're working for my sister out of ignorance, rather than malice, and I try not to hurt people for making honest mistakes."

"And also Loki would skin you alive if he thought you were poaching me from him," I said dryly.

She laughed. It was an odd, sweet sound, somewhere between wind chimes and birdsong. "And that," she said brightly. "Good day, jarl." She vanished.

"Ugh," Aiko said a moment later. "I hate being paralyzed like that. Nice job telling her to screw off, though."

"Hah," I said. "I *knew* she couldn't actually mess with time."

"Or she just didn't need to."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, although I was pretty sure I knew. The same thing had occurred to me, and it wasn't a pleasant thought.

"Let's find out," she said. "You guys should be fine to cross the faerie ring. I think the ward was just to alert her."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

Nothing obviously bad happened to us as we did, and we started up the hill. I knew before we got halfway up that I'd been right; the door of the dilapidated house was hanging open, and it hadn't been before.

Sure enough, when we got up to the house, there was no one there. I was sure this was the right place, though; there were plates sitting out, and it smelled like recent occupancy. I could smell magic, too, not *quite* the same as an Otherside portal but close enough that I was confident it served about the same purpose.

I almost wanted to laugh. That whole conversation, Aoife offering me deals, it had all been a cover, buying time for them to get out. And I, like a sucker, had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

I was getting pretty sick of dealing with the fae.

"Damn," I said. "*Damn*. Do you think we could track them?"

"I doubt it," Aiko said. "I mean, I could *maybe* follow one of them. But they took at least three or four different Ways out of here. And even if I could, we'd still be chasing a bunch of high-ranking Court types onto their home ground."

"Right," I said, thinking. "Could you two keep an eye on things here for a while?"

She shrugged. "Probably. Why?"

"Scáthach said I should kill these people, or give her an excuse to," I said. "It seems to me that demonstrating that they were getting support from her archenemy would be a decent excuse." I grinned. "So I think I should get an expert in to look at it."

Chapter Thirteen

About forty minutes later, I walked back up to the house. A vaguely canid skeleton walked next to me, its movements utterly silent. You'd have to look closely to see the thin coating of black fog around the bones, or the tiny sparks of blue light burning in the eye sockets.

Miraculously, nothing appeared to have gone disastrously wrong in my absence. Snowflake met me at the base of the hill. *Oh*, she said, sounding less than thrilled. *You brought that thing.*

"That's right," Legion said. "Now shut up, mutt. Adults are talking."

"This is where the ward was anchored," I said hastily, before Snowflake could say anything. "Can you see it?"

"Oh, yeah," Legion said, barely even glancing at the faerie ring. "Definitely recent Sidhe work on top."

"On top? What's that mean?"

"Oh, this is old work. Looks like the bottom layer is maybe five hundred years old? Something like that. Tylwyth Teg, I'm thinking, although that far back the distinctions start to get a little fuzzier."

"That's ridiculous," I said automatically. "Five hundred years? You can't make a ward last that long. It would degrade."

"Sure, but you've got faeries dancing in this thing almost every night, I'm guessing. That kind of ritual keeps it fresh, builds on it. Say what you want about them, but they build to last."

"Right," I said. "Okay. Explains why they were doing this here, anyway, if they've been using the location that long. Let's keep going."

We hiked up to the house without seeing anyone else. "Look around," I told Legion. "I want to know what's going on here, what kind of residues you can find."

"You got it, Boss," he said, trotting off around the building.

I walked inside and looked around. I didn't see anything out of place, but that didn't necessarily mean much. "Any trouble?" I called.

There was a brief pause before Aiko appeared from under a veil, on the other side of the room. "What's the password?" she called, pointing her carbine at me.

I stared at her. "We didn't set up a password before I left. Besides, do you *really* think an impostor could fool Snowflake? Seriously?"

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"Good," she said, lowering the gun. Her expression was relieved as she dropped the weapon to hang from its strap. "And no, I haven't seen anything."

"Okay, this level of paranoia is not normal for you. What gives?"

"This is Court business," she said, pacing around the room. "You can't be too careful with that sort of thing. Besides, I was expecting someone to show up by now. They know we're here, and they have to know there's a chance that we'll find something they'd rather we didn't. Sending some people to scare us off and destroy any evidence would make sense."

"Maybe they aren't willing to do anything that overt," I suggested. "It sounds like this is still fairly subtle."

"Maybe," she said doubtfully. "But you're talking about Sidhe politics. It's a sucker's bet that there's *some* scheme going."

I sighed. "Thanks for reminding me. Hopefully Legion will finish up soon, and we can get out of here. This place makes me itch."

Less than ten minutes later, the demon walked up to me. "I've got it, Boss," he said. "But you aren't going to like it."

"Of course not," I said sourly. "First off, what can you tell me about the people that were here?"

"There are some definite Sidhe signatures," he said cheerily. "I'm reading at least half a dozen, maybe more. A bit of troll residue, a bit of goblin. You walk in on a party or something?"

"Something. What Court are we talking about, here?"

"Solidly on the Midnight side of things, it looks like. A few of them might be unaffiliated. Honestly, it's hard to get details on a magical residue."

"Okay. And now for the big question. Can you get anything about a Faerie Queen in the area?"

"Yes, and let me just say that you are *incredibly* stupid to be getting into *that*. I mean, you've done some dumb things, I think we all know that, but this really raises the bar."

"Less backtalk," I growled. "More answers."

"I'm getting there. Yes, there was a Queen around here. Definitely from the Daylight Court, I'm guessing Aoife. She did one of the wards on that faerie ring, and a few more around the building. Solid work, a little on the passive side, but solid."

"Yes!" I said. "Can you show that she was in communication with the Sidhe that were meeting here? Telling them we were coming, or something like that."

"Give me a minute," he said. The shadows around his bones seemed to draw back a little, and the sparks of light dimmed; he was focusing most of his attention on what I'd asked him to do, and he'd shifted some of his essence back to the spiritual side of things to do so. I'd seldom seen him do it, because I generally used Legion more as a lab assistant than a field researcher. He was simultaneously too valuable and *much* too dangerous to take out often.

"Doesn't look like it, Boss," he said after a few minutes. "I'm not actually seeing anything from her in the same time frame as they were here. Honestly, there's no reason she would have; she could have just sent a messenger, or tripped one of the wards *they* had set up. Just as good and a lot less noticeable."

"Damn," I said. "*Damn*. Okay, let me think for a minute."

I couldn't see where to go from here. If we couldn't track them, and there was nothing here incriminating enough that I could use it against them, then there wasn't much I could take to Scáthach. I could always wait for the group to meet again, but I must have spooked them pretty badly just now. And the fae are, generally, patient; they're immortal, after all. It might be *years* before they felt comfortable enough to gather again. That was time I didn't have.

I was confused, though, because everything I'd said to Scáthach was still true. I was a tool, and maybe even a valuable one. She could easily have predicted that I would find out where they were, and once I did, it wasn't hard to see the cause-and-effect chain leading to this moment. Which, in turn, meant that there must be *some* way to proceed, because otherwise she'd put a fair amount of effort into a pointless investment.

Except...now that I thought about it, I wasn't so sure she wanted me to succeed. Yes, I'd be in trouble with the Conclave if I didn't, but Alexander had flat out said that it wouldn't kill me. It would just cause problems, force me to take steps to protect myself. It would make me desperate.

In other words, it would make me even *more* useful to her. A desperate man, hunted and on the run, is an easy one to manipulate. She might even be able to talk me into signing on with her Court, just because it was one of the few forces around that could protect me from the Conclave if they got upset with me.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get out of here. We can come up with something else to try once we're somewhere safe."

"Sounds good," Aiko said. Her expression was relieved.

I started to walk to the exit, and then paused.

Why wasn't Aiko wearing her armor? Under the circumstances, I would have expected her to want as much iron between her and the world as possible. There was no reason for her to take her helmet off.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"Legion," I said, thinking through what was going on as I spoke. "Identify everyone present, please."

"Sure, Boss," he said, conveying the impression of a shrug without moving. "I'm here, obviously, and so are you. The mutt's over there, and her shadow is too." Snowflake growled at him, and he laughed. "Anyway, then there's the doppelganger. Nice try, but you really don't know what a kitsune smells like, do you? Come on, even *Winter* caught you."

"Right," I said, looking at Aiko. Or, rather, at the person *imitating* Aiko, and doing a pretty subpar job of it, if I'd caught her this quickly. "I believe this is your cue to explain yourself, doppelganger."

She paused, and then darted one hand at her pocket.

Before she could grab whatever she'd been going for, Snowflake bit her leg and jerked it out from under her. The doppelganger hit the ground, screaming, even though Snowflake hadn't done any real damage. I was pretty sure that bite hadn't even broken skin.

"Iron teeth," I said, squatting next to her. "Burns, doesn't it? I mean, iron doesn't hurt *me*, so I wouldn't know, but I imagine it's similar to silver."

She snarled at me, doing a surprisingly good job of mimicking Aiko's expressions, and started to go for that pocket again. Snowflake growled, just behind her head, and she flinched and stopped.

"I'm not in a very good mood," I said. "I don't have a lot of time, and I don't think you comprehend just *how much* you just pissed me off. So I'm going to explain things in simple terms. I'm going to ask you some questions. You're going to answer them, honestly and without keeping anything back. If at any point I think you're trying to fool me, I'm going to start putting iron filings under your skin. I doubt it will kill you, but I expect you know better than I do how much it will hurt. Are we clear?"

She glared at me some more. I reached into my cloak and pulled out a small leather bag and a knife. She blinked and said, "You wouldn't dare."

I smiled at her. She flinched a little. "As I said, you *really* pissed me off with this. I don't enjoy causing pain, and I don't generally condone torture. But you took Aiko, and I don't know how long I have to find her before something bad happens. So yes, I *absolutely* dare. If you don't start talking, you're going to find out just how *much* I dare. Again, are we clear?"

I must have been pretty convincing, because the doppelganger looked away and then nodded. "Crystal."

"Good. Where is the kitsune?"

"In the bedroom, in the closet. There are illusions around her, but she's there."

"Snowflake," I said. "Confirm that, please."

*And leave you alone with this thing?* she said. *That doesn't sound like a good idea.*

*I've got plenty of iron, and Legion is here. We'll be fine.*

She snorted, but she went. As predicted, the doppelganger made another try for whatever weapon or escape route she had in her pocket, but she stopped when I grabbed her wrist. Steel gauntlets are lots of fun when it comes to grappling with a faerie.

*She's here,* Snowflake reported a moment later. *Out cold. Hang on, I'm bringing her out there.*

"Good," I said, once they were back in the room with us. Aiko had been stripped to the skin, probably so that the doppelganger could use her clothing, but she didn't look injured. Snowflake resumed position behind our prisoner, and I let her go. "What did you do to her?"

"Sleeping potion," the doppelganger said. "I don't know how it works."

"How long until it wears off?"

The doppelganger started to shrug, then stopped when Snowflake growled at her again. "I don't know."

"Okay," I said. "Why did you drug her? Why did you try to impersonate her?"

"Those were the instructions I was given," she said. "Wait for someone to be vulnerable, take them out and replace them."

"Given by whom?"

"The person who hired me. I don't know who he is, not reliably."

I nodded. That wasn't surprising; they wouldn't have told her anything more than they absolutely had to, not if she was hired help. "What can you tell me about him?"

She licked her lips and looked from me to Legion, then glanced back at Snowflake. The husky growled at her, and she flinched. "He's Sidhe, fairly powerful," she said. "Part of the Midnight Court, but not that highly ranked, I think. He and the other people here have a shared interest, something political."

"What part of the Midnight Court is he in?"

"I think he answers to Scáthach," she said. "But I don't know for sure. He doesn't like it where he is, I know that."

"This is a lot of information, for someone who doesn't know much about the guy," I noted.

"I'm a mercenary," she said bluntly. "I have to know something about the people I'm working for, just as an insurance policy."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"Right," I said, nodding slowly. "Stay where you are. I need a minute to think about this." I stood up and walked away, pacing.

And then, very suddenly, I saw how to deal with this, and I almost wanted to laugh. Apparently I'd been wrong, and Scáthach actually *did* want me to pull this off. Or, more likely, it was a test of some sort, and she was happy with either outcome. Or, hell, maybe she actually hadn't anticipated this.

"Scáthach," I said, loudly and clearly. "I know you're listening. This is too important for you to *not* be paying attention. I have something to say."

"And what would that be, my dear jarl?" She chose to appear behind me, much like Aoife had done, but unlike her sister she was slightly to the side, so that she was whispering in my ear. Her breath felt cold on my skin and smelled sweet, with just a touch of something uglier underneath. I wanted to shiver.

I took a step away and nodded to her instead. "Queen," I said. "I have reason to believe that a group of your subjects was here very recently. They have done harm to me unlawfully, and I demand satisfaction."

"What evidence do you have for your charges?" she asked, with a vulpine smile. She *knew*, and I wasn't sure why she was going through with this charade.

But I could play along. "Logic and common sense," I said. "The fact that one of my people is currently unconscious. The word of someone who isn't in a position to lie." I gestured at the doppelganger, who was cringing away from Scáthach. That put her uncomfortably close to Snowflake, almost touching the steel armor she was wearing, but apparently the Queen was frightening enough to outweigh the pain.

"Your evidence is convincing," the goddess said, not even glancing at the doppelganger. "But not compelling. Allow me to bring the leader of the group in question here, so that we may hear his side of the story."

I opened my mouth, though I wasn't sure what I was going to say. It didn't matter, in any case; Scáthach wasn't interested in my input. She gestured slightly, and I felt a gentle surge of magic. Maybe ten seconds later, a portal opened and a male Sidhe stepped into the room.

That fast of a reaction seemed a little suspicious in itself to me. Then again, maybe Scáthach really *did* expect that degree of responsiveness from her people.

"You are accused of doing harm to a foreign power in a time of peace without due cause," she said without preamble. "What say you?"

"I am innocent, my Queen," he purred in a voice like chilled silk. "I have done no such thing to this man."

"Doppelganger," I said. "Is this the person who hired you?"

She cringed even more as everyone in the room turned to look at her. "No," she said weakly. "But he was giving my employer orders."

I turned to Scáthach. "There you have it," I said. "Under your law, he must answer for the actions of his subordinates, when those actions were taken in the context of that role. Or am I wrong?"

"On the contrary, your grasp of the legal principle involved is quite accurate," she said. Alone of everyone in that room, she seemed to be enjoying herself. "It would seem I am faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, your accusations have some evidence to support them, and your word's value is well known. On the other hand, you are accusing my Duke of a crime, and his word, as well, is known to be good."

A Duke? That couldn't be good. I wasn't sure what the hierarchy of the Courts looked like, but from what I remembered of human nobility, a duke was near the top. I hadn't been expecting the ringleader of this group to have that much authority.

"Decisions, decisions," she murmured. "How shall I resolve this, then?"

Nobody offered any suggestions. Hell, I wasn't even *breathing*, and I doubted I was alone in that. Nobody wanted to be the center of attention in that room.

"I know," Scáthach said, sounding so self-satisfied that I just *knew* I wasn't going to like what she said next. "Let us have a trial."

I hate being right.

Chapter Fourteen

"What manner of trial?" I asked, with a sort of morbid curiosity. I was sure it wasn't going to be the boring kind, with a judge and a courtroom. It was never that easy.

"Precisely the question I was just considering," Scáthach said, with a smile that looked uncomfortably similar to that of a cat watching a canary. "Trial by ordeal would be amusing, but there aren't many ordeals that would be fair. Most of those I could think of would be crueler to one of you than the other."

*Most*, I noted. Not *all*. She was playing with me, and I suspected she was playing with him just as much. Not just a cat watching a canary, a cat *holding* a canary. She knew what choice she was going to make. Probably she'd known since before I'd even called her.

"Trial by combat," she said, as though she'd stumbled onto some great revelation. "That would be fair. Let you prove the rightness of your respective positions."

"You really like your duels, don't you?" I said. "First Pier, then this."

"I am a traditionalist," she said, smiling even wider. "Speaking of which, let us consider the rules under which this duel shall be fought. I think it would be appropriate to follow the traditions of my people, as this accusation is entirely within the framework of my Court."

The traditions of her people? What was that supposed to mean? And why was she *smiling*?

I realized it a moment before she continued. "Iron, naturally, will be banned," she said. "The duel shall be fought within the confines of the circle; any exit shall be considered a forfeit. The duel shall be fought to surrender, or to the point of death if neither party concedes."

Shit. At one stroke, she'd effectively crippled me. Forbidding iron and steel meant that I wouldn't have my armor, or Tyrfing, which were my only real advantages in a fight with one of the fae. If I fought as a human, I would be reduced to a handful of knives and some stored spells. As a wolf, my greatest strength was mobility, which was almost useless if we couldn't step outside the circle.

I eyed the Sidhe noble I was supposed to be dueling, sizing him up. He was wearing armor, some material that looked like silver, and carrying a sheathed sword. He was smiling, a confident, smug sort of smile.

"What if I do not like these rules?" I said, thinking furiously. I was trying to come up with options, and so far I wasn't having much luck.

"I would consider it an admission that your accusation is false," Scáthach said. "In which case you would owe a debt to my Court, as recompense for unfairly having insulted the honor of one of my subjects."

Wonderful. Behind one door was a fight which was stacked against me so hard that it wouldn't surprise me at all if the person I was supposed to fight had been coached on my weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Behind the second was owing a favor to Scáthach, being found guilty by the Conclave, and having whatever reputation I'd managed to accrue ripped to shreds.

Did I even *want* to know what was behind door number three? I suspected not. I could probably talk her into changing the rules, or dismissing the whole concept of a trial by combat, but there would be a cost. It was almost guaranteed that I wouldn't be making my situation any *better*. Dealing with the fae was not unlike quicksand; they were experts at ensuring that every move you made just drew you in deeper.

The one bright side, in this situation, was that same patience I had been bemoaning earlier. They were immortal; a few minutes was essentially immaterial to them. Neither of them seemed to have any problem with standing there in total silence while I thought through my situation.

Okay. Things were bad. But the *reason* things were bad was that I'd gotten myself into this position. If you wanted to beat the fae, you had to think in twisty ways, you had to move so far away from what you wanted that it had to come to you instead. Above all else, you had to do something they weren't expecting, because if you gave them what they were expecting they'd play you like a fiddle. I'd been moving in straight lines this whole time, thinking that the situation was straightforward, and I'd gotten screwed as a result.

So. In this situation, she was expecting me to back down. That was the smart, rational, *predictable* thing to do. I would back down, eat crow, and she'd own me. Slightly less rational was that I'd try to talk my way out of it, attack one of the positions she'd used to justify these rules, or worm my way out of it somehow. I was confident that she had something planned if I tried that. It's pretty much impossible to beat the fae at rules lawyering. They *invented* it.

So I couldn't back down. I couldn't talk my way out of the fight. Could I actually *win*?

I looked at the duke again, more critically. He was armed and armored in what I was willing to bet was a silver alloy, which was a problem, but the fact that he'd felt the *need* for that equipment was telling. He was a noble, a politician. He'd probably fought to get there—it would be hard to achieve a high position in the Midnight Court without being a hardened killer—but since then he'd had minions to do his dirty work for him.

I had minions, too, but I'd kept myself hands-on. Jöttnar, much like werewolves, expected their leaders to lead from the front and handle threats personally. The Sidhe were basically the opposite, considering it an admission of weakness to fight for yourself. There was a good chance that I'd done more fighting recently than he had.

It would be risky. But hell, that was inevitable. If I kept playing the odds, the house would inevitably win in the long run.

"The terms are accepted," I said.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

Scáthach didn't blink, but I thought there might be the tiniest hesitation before she continued. "Very well," she said. "I shall draw the circle."

"Draw?" I said. "Why? We are standing in a circle, at present, one which has been used by your people for hundreds of years. We would be following an ancient tradition, in using it as our dueling ground."

I was sure she hesitated, this time, but there wasn't a lot she could do. She couldn't argue with what I'd said without admitting that her reasons for restricting my choice of weapons had been a front. She could have overruled me, of course, but this was a Faerie Queen; she'd rather die than admit she'd been outmaneuvered, even for a moment.

"Very well," she said at last.

"Good," I said with a smile. I'd managed to retain some advantage, at least. "Allow me to remove my associates from the field and prepare myself, and we can begin."

They didn't argue, and I walked down the hill to the edge of the faerie ring. I carried Aiko, and Snowflake herded the doppelganger along. Legion walked at a distance from us, silent as usual. He gave no indication of his thoughts or feelings about the duel, if he even had any.

The same could not be said of Snowflake. *This is stupid*, she said. *You're going to get yourself killed. Remember the last time you tried to fight a duel against someone from the Courts?*

*That was Carraig*, I pointed out. *He's a much better fighter than this guy*. He had to be, in order to maintain order as Scáthach's champion. He had to be. I was relying on that, because Carraig had kicked my ass so hard there was no question of fighting back, and while my skills had improved since then, I knew for a fact that he could still take me down any time he felt like it.

If I was wrong in my estimation of their relative competence, this trial by combat was going to be short and embarrassing.

*It's still a stupid idea*, Snowflake said. *You just set yourself up for a fair fight against someone who came here expecting to fight you. Since when is that your specialty?*

*True*, I admitted. *I'm hoping I can make it less of a fair fight than it's supposed to be. If not, well...you have a better idea? Because I spent a while thinking about it, and I've got nothing.*

*No. Just don't be stupid. The way she phrased it, you can always just back down.*

*I might be better off dying*, I said, not entirely joking.

*I wouldn't.*

Great. No pressure.

At the base of the hill, I stepped over the line of mushrooms and set Aiko on the ground. She didn't respond at all, not even a reflexive twitch. If she hadn't been breathing I'd have wondered whether she was even alive.

Then I started stripping off my armor, stacking it neatly on the ground. I kept my cloak, although I had to take quite a few of my toys out of it. The rest of my clothing I folded and set on top of the armor. My leather bracelet I took off and wrapped loosely around my neck.

The pain of the change was distracting, but I was used to thinking through distractions. As my body started to warp and shift, I focused on the coming fight, planning my attack. It was hard, just because there were so many unknowns, but I could establish some broad strategic goals. My priorities were disarming my enemy, maintaining my own mobility, and keeping him from landing a decisive blow. He was likely to go for a quick win, simply because he knew what I was capable of and I had no idea what he could do. That gave him an advantage, but it was one that would fade quickly as I observed his behavior.

So. Keep moving, aim for the long game, and assume every attack was possibly lethal. Try for hit-and-run tactics, using the larger space I'd managed to arrange. Debilitate him if I got the chance. It was a vague plan, but that was the best I could really hope for under the circumstances. Good enough.

I pushed myself to my feet, wincing a little. My left foreleg was mostly numb, which made me a little slower on my feet than I'd once been, but I was still quicker than a human. With luck, it would be quick enough.

I stepped across the line of mushrooms again, leaving the others outside. My cloak dragged against the ground as I did, and I reshaped it to hug my body more closely. The result looked a little like those sweaters some people put on dogs, which wasn't exactly the fashion statement I'd have liked to make, but screw it. It would work.

The center of the circle was in the house at the top of the hill, so that was where I went. As expected, I found Scáthach and the other Sidhe standing in the same room I'd left them in. I'd been gone for almost twenty minutes, arranging things to my liking and changing, but they didn't even seem to have moved.

"Jarl," she said as I walked into the room. "Are you prepared?"

I nodded, my eyes on the person I was supposed to be fighting. He was smiling, a little, but I could tell that he was more nervous than he wanted me to think. It was easy to see in the way he was standing, the way one hand rested on his sword. He hadn't been expecting me to fight, I was guessing.

"Excellent," Scáthach said, holding one hand out in front of her. She was holding what looked like a black silk handkerchief, which twisted in a nonexistent wind. "Let no weapon be drawn until this cloth touches the ground."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

I tensed, ready to move. The Sidhe duke was gripping his sword openly now. The room was dead silent, not even the sound of breathing to disturb the stillness. My heart was pounding, rapid and strong, ready for the coming exertion.

Scáthach disappeared, leaving the handkerchief to fall. I paid her no mind, all my attention focused on the scrap of cloth drifting through the air. It caught a crossbreeze and fluttered sideways, teasing, before it fell again. I heard the whisper of silk against wood as it brushed against the floor.

He heard it, too. At the exact moment it touched down, he lunged forward, drawing his sword as he did. It crackled with some kind of energy, and I no longer had any doubt that it was silver. Out of its scabbard, it *ached*, even at a distance.

But he'd reacted too fast to *think*. He'd been expecting me to hesitate, or back away, and I did neither. I charged straight at him instead, throwing myself forward with all four feet. I hit his left knee with my right shoulder, knocking him off balance, and then I was past. I was inside the arc of his swing, and he barely clipped my tail on the way by.

It hurt, a little. More from the proximity of the silver than anything; I was fairly confident he hadn't even touched skin. I leapt for the window while he was off balance. I'd been expecting to shatter it, and relying on fur to stop most of the glass, but I got lucky. It popped out in one piece and I was through, leaving the glass to break on the ground behind me.

I trotted over to the open ground in front of the door, waiting. It took a minute or so for the duke to come out, but he wasn't favoring the leg I'd hit. Pity. He had his sword in one hand, and the other upraised. He pointed at me with his empty hand as soon as he came through the door, and I jumped aside. There was nothing *visible* there, but I wasn't taking chances.

Which was just as well, because an instant later the grass I'd been standing on started to wither and die. I still couldn't see anything, but I could smell some kind of magic, distinctively Sidhe with notes of death and decay. Not something I wanted to get hit by, I was pretty confident.

He rushed at me without waiting to see whether his magic would connect. I was still off balance, and I couldn't dodge away as easily as I would have preferred. The sword barely clipped my shoulder, and it *hurt*. Not just the pain of silver, although that was considerable; there was also something almost like being hit with an electrical current, sharp pain and twitching muscles.

I bit at his sword hand, though, and drew blood. I backed away before he could strike again, testing the injured limb, and found that it could support my weight easily enough.

We were both looking at each other with a sort of respect, now. I was slowed and made even more clumsy by the damage to my shoulder, but his grip was weakened. It was hard to say which of us had come out on top in that first clash.

I was right that he would try to win fast, though. I'd barely had a chance to determine that my leg was still working before he moved toward me. I turned tail and ran for the small cluster of trees that

was the only real cover on the hill, wrapping myself in shadows as I went. Even injured and clumsy, four feet were better than two, and I outdistanced him easily enough.

Most of my mind was on analyzing that exchange of blows. I was pretty sure, from how it had gone, that I was right about this duke. He was fast, undeniably, faster than anyone had a right to be, but there was something *lacking*. It was hard to say quite what it was. Certainty, maybe, a confidence that what he did would work. He was missing the killer instinct that would have taken him from a skilled fighter to a terrifying one.

I made it to the trees, where my cloak of shadows would let me blend into the darkness, and turned to look back. I'd hoped that he would keep chasing me into the trees and I could ambush him, but there was no such luck. He seemed content to wait out in the open, and considering what he was, I had no confidence that I could outwait him. I could be patient when I had to, but eventually I would need to eat, or drink, or sleep. There was no guarantee that he would.

Then I noticed that he was still bleeding. I could smell it. That was a welcome surprise. I'd gotten so used to fighting things that could recover from almost any injury that I'd almost forgotten that you could hurt something and have it *stay* hurt.

That made my mind up for me. I moved out the other side of the trees, keeping my shadows tightly wrapped around myself, and started to circle around the hill. I knew better than to think my concealment would hold up against the direct scrutiny of any of the Sidhe, let alone one of their dukes, but with luck he would think that I was still in the trees. If he didn't actually *look* at me, I might have a chance.

Even with a bad leg, I could move pretty quickly as a wolf. I circled around, out of sight, and then started up over the hill. In less than a minute, I was lurking in the shadow of the house, looking down at him.

I'd gotten lucky again. His attention was still focused on the grove of trees, and he appeared quite willing to wait there 'til the end of days. He had his sword out, but it wasn't in a ready position, more just hanging by his side.

Now I focused on stealth, rather than speed. I wasn't *great* at it, but I'd learned to move pretty quietly over the years, and a little bit of magic woven through the air and shadows around my paws muffled the noise even more. Between that, my cloak, and the fact that his attention was focused elsewhere, I thought that I might be able to get within fifty feet of him before he realized that I had moved.

I'd overestimated my skill, or underestimated his alertness. I'd barely covered half the distance between us when he perked up and started to glance in my direction, alerted by some small noise or scent. Or hell, maybe he'd felt the magic I was working; that kind of thing was natural for the Sidhe, after all.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

I gave up on stealth entirely and just sprinted at him. He turned to face me and then visibly startled, flinching away. I couldn't really blame him for it; from his perspective, a vaguely wolf-shaped patch of darkness had just started running at him at the next best thing to fifty miles per hour.

He recovered almost immediately, but I was already pretty close to him by that point. He started to raise his sword, and I could smell some kind of magic, but I was already leaping for him. I hit his upraised arm and clung, dragging him off balance, biting at his hand. The silver stung my paws and mouth, but I accepted it as the cost of doing business and kept biting, tearing at his fingers with my teeth.

He was wearing armored gauntlets, but they were never intended to stand up to this kind of focused assault. It was only a few seconds before I'd done enough damage to his hand that he couldn't maintain his grip, and the sword fell to the ground.

I let go a moment later, picking up the sword in my mouth. Apparently even the *hilt* was made of some silver alloy, because that hurt too, burning my lips and tongue. I forced myself to ignore the pain and start running down the hill.

I'd barely taken three steps before the magic he'd been preparing hit me, wracking me with waves of pain. My muscles clenched and I tripped, bouncing head over heels down the hill. The muscle convulsions did serve one purpose, in that my jaws clamped down on the sword, preventing it from bouncing out or twisting on the way down. I even got lucky and didn't disembowel myself with the thing.

When I came to rest, I was at the bottom of the hill, at the very edge of the dueling ground. Literally; some of the mushrooms of the faerie ring were pressed outward where I was lying on them.

Not quite out of the circle, though. Not quite disqualified.

It took me a few seconds to stand, and when I did my movements were still jerky and uncoordinated. I quickly moved back from the edge, lest I accidentally fall and land outside the circle.

Then, while the Sidhe was still halfway up the hill, I jerked my head and let go of the sword. It wasn't a great toss, this not being something I'd practiced much, but the sword still flew a decent distance. It spun once in the air and then hit the ground, sinking in easily, so that it ended up sticking out of the dirt about fifteen feet outside the circle.

I shook my head, trying to clear the burning and numbness from my mouth, and then trotted up the hill a ways, grinning at the Sidhe. He was hesitating, and it wasn't hard to see why. That sword had clearly been his main weapon, and it was going to be hard for him to get it back. He could conceivably go to the edge of the circle and throw a rope or something for it without breaking the rules, but he'd need at least a minute to do it.

That left us at something of an impasse. He was missing his sword, and I was guessing he'd used most of the magic he was going to. He'd thrown some fairly big punches already, after all, and he

couldn't be that much of a specialist in combat magic or he wouldn't have *needed* a sword. He was still wearing that silver armor, though, which would slow me down considerably.

Neither of us was in a good position to hurt the other, then, and both of us were already injured. My mouth still hurt from carrying that sword, and I could smell the blood from his hand. All things considered, it was hard to say which of us was in the worse position.

Which, compared to where we'd started this fight, was a considerable step up for me. I was pretty sure he felt similarly, which was nice. Not so much because of the satisfaction I got from seeing his frustration, although it was considerable; no, I was more glad because it suggested that I was *right*.

He seemed less inclined to rush in now that he was disarmed, and I had no objection to keeping my distance for a minute. It would give the silver-inflicted burns on my mouth and paws some time to heal.

We circled each other for a minute or so, looking for weaknesses. I didn't see any beyond what I'd already noted, which was troubling. I might have improved my situation, but he was still basically dressed in a suit of silver. It was going to be hard for me to do any real damage to him while he was wearing that. He *knew* it, too, which meant I couldn't just scare him and hope he'd surrender. It would have to be a credible threat to get a reaction out of him.

Fortunately, there was more than one way to win this fight.

I kept circling until I was on the uphill side, then charged. I feinted low and he crouched, trying to slash at me before remembering that I'd taken his weapon. Then I jumped at his face.

He caught me, trying to force me to grapple. It was a good move for him; every second in contact with him would be burning me, while my own attacks would likely skid aside on his armor. Fortunately for me, his grip was weak where I'd bit his hand, and I was able to squirm out of it after just a couple seconds.

Then I set my hind feet against his chest, and *jumped*.

There are certain rules that even supernatural beings can't lightly ignore. Newton's third law of motion is one of them. I'd put a bunch of force into him by jumping off of him like that, and not even magic could just make that force go away.

The force on me was sufficient to let me clear almost ten feet before I hit the ground. A proportional force, when he was already off balance from trying to catch almost two hundred pounds of wolf, was more than the duke could withstand. He fell.

And then, as people wearing armor who get pushed down on a hill without expecting it tend to do, he rolled.

Given a little time, he probably would have been able to self-arrest. But it wasn't a very tall hill, and it *was* a fairly steep one. He rolled, and *kept* rolling until he reached the bottom.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

I watched for a moment, but there was no indication that he had forfeited. I would have expected Scáthach to show up and declare it if he did, and she made no such appearance. Evidently he was in the same position I'd been in, brushing against the mushrooms of the faerie ring without quite *crossing* them.

I growled a little at that. I hate it when a fight goes fairly.

It was tricky fetching something from my cloak without hands, but I'd designed it well. I was able to dig out a small crystal sphere with my teeth and lob it at him before he'd finished standing up again.

It was a terrible throw, wildly off-target. I reached out and put a tailwind behind it, adjusting the density of the air around it so that it would go where I wanted it to.

It still wasn't a great throw. It wouldn't hit him. But it *would* get close enough that he would be in the blast radius when it hit the ground.

He saw it coming, and I was sure he could feel the magic in it. He reacted on instinct, moving the only way he could to get away from it. He stepped across the line.

A moment later, the sphere hit the ground and burst with a flash of light and a high-pitched howl. Harmless, although he'd had no way to know that. And, in fairness, I *was* carrying lethal spells and I'd have used one of them without hesitating if I could have. The flashbang had just been the first thing I grabbed.

And a moment after that, Scáthach stepped up next to him. I wasn't sure where she stepped up *from*; she was just *there*, without any warning. Par for the course when it came to the fae, really.

"Duke," she said, loudly enough that I could hear her halfway up the hill. "By exiting the circle, you have shown your lack of commitment to your position. I find in the jarl's favor in your dispute. Return to your demesnes and await my displeasure."

He bowed to her and turned away. A portal appeared in front of him after around thirty seconds and he stepped through it—without, I noticed, having said a single word since he showed up. Scáthach wasn't shy about ruling her Court with an iron fist, it would seem.

And then she turned to face me. I sighed and trotted down the hill to learn how she'd turned my apparent victory into a win for her.

Chapter Fifteen

Scáthach might have been in a hurry to deal with her misbehaving subjects, but she was still Sidhe. I wasn't surprised that she didn't try to rush me as I changed again and then got dressed. I took it slow, minimizing the pain, but it was still a pretty awful experience. That kind of silver exposure *hurt*, and it hurt on an energetic level, making it harder to change or heal. It might be days before I was operating at my peak again.

"Okay," I said, pulling the last of the armor into place. "You asked me to either deal with them or give you an excuse to do so. From where I'm standing, I just did the second one."

"Indeed," she said, with a satisfied smile. "You did better than I anticipated, jarl. *Very* well. So much so that I will offer you a choice of reward."

"Choice," I said, with a sinking feeling. I'd known that she would find a way to screw me over, but that didn't make it any more fun. "We had a deal. I took care of your people, and you take care of my problems with the Conclave. That was the deal."

"Yes, and if you would like I will be quite pleased to keep that deal," she said, with a nasty smile. "Or, instead of speaking to the mages on your behalf, I will wake the kitsune."

Oh. Right. In the heat of the moment, fighting that duel, I'd almost forgotten that Aiko was unconscious. I glanced at her and confirmed that was still the case. She was lying on the ground, so still as to seem dead, with Legion standing guard on one side of her and Snowflake on the other. It could almost have been a charming picture, had it not been for Scáthach's implication.

"What happens if you don't wake her?" I asked.

Scáthach shrugged carelessly. Once again I was struck by how inhuman the gesture was, closer to a cat or an insect than a hominid. "Possibly you could find another way to rouse her. But I doubt you could do so easily or simply. This is the same potion that gave rise to your legends of the sleeping princess." I must have looked too excited by that, because Scáthach smiled again. "And no, jarl, you will not be able to wake her with a kiss. That sort of modification to the recipe is more my counterpart's domain than mine."

"Right," I muttered. "Of course."

"So, then," the Queen of Faerie purred. She was smiling, her eyes unsettlingly bright with an inhuman excitement. "What will you choose, oh jarl, my dear?"

"Damn you. You know what I'll choose."

"Of course," she said. "But do you?"

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"Yeah," I sighed. "Wake her up, then. And Scáthach?" I said, before she could move. "I'm sure you could find a way to screw me over here. Don't, okay? It would be the one step too far. You said this whole thing was about making me a useful tool. Pushing me on this topic is a great way to ruin that."

She regarded me coolly. I'd thought I might piss her off by saying that, but if so, the emotion was too remote or too alien to be visible. "Very well," she said. "You will find her in your home, alive and unharmed." Then she gestured, very slightly, and both she and Aiko vanished.

I stood there for a minute or so, staring at the spot where she'd been. I was tired, and burnt, and on the whole I was feeling rather sorry for myself.

Then the doppelganger, who was still sitting on the ground next to Snowflake, cleared her throat. "Um," she said. "What happens now?"

I looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, we're even," I said. "You tried to screw me over, I caught you before you could really get started. Nothing personal on either side, right?"

She nodded. "It's just business as far as I'm concerned. I'm fine with dropping it here. No debt or grudge to either side."

"Sounds good," I said. "Sorry for the rough treatment back there. I was kind of short on time, and I think you saw how serious the situation was."

She nodded again, more emphatically. "Yes," she said. She started to walk away, then paused. "Hey, you're all right, you know that?" She produced what looked like a normal business card from somewhere and dropped it on the ground. "You ever need some work done, call that number. I'll give you a discount."

"Damn," Aiko said. "You really beat a Sidhe duke in a fair fight?"

I shrugged, trying and failing to get comfortable on the broken chair. The vampires hadn't spent much time in our castle after we got away, but they'd done a number on it while they were there. I wasn't concerned; nothing really valuable was missing or broken, and it would get fixed eventually. "Fairish. I mean, everything I did was *legal*, but I don't know if I'd call it *fair*."

She laughed. "That is so awesome. As pissed as Scáthach was at him, it might not even come back to bite you in the ass."

"Yeah."

"I notice that you don't sound happy," she said after a moment. "What gives?"

I opened my mouth to say that it was nothing, then paused. "Do you ever feel like what you need is just out of reach?" I asked. "It's like you can see it, but when you try to grab it someone moves it away. I keep trying and trying to fix the problems, but it's always one step forward, two steps back."

"Is this about the problem with the Conclave?" she asked delicately.

I growled, though it was more frustrated than angry. "No," I said. "No, Scáthach was never going to let me win that. I see that now. At least this way I got something worthwhile out of it. No, this is more fundamental, I guess. It's like...even if I figured out a way to deal with the Conclave, it wouldn't get me anywhere. I'd win today, but a month or a year down the road it'd just come back to bite me."

"Yeah," she said. "I know that feeling."

"How do you cope with it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Mostly I got really drunk and shot people. It's easier to ignore when you do that."

"That advice sounds disturbingly tempting," I said after a moment.

She laughed. "That's what I'm here for. Now come on, stop thinking about all the depressing stuff for a while. You've got three days until the Conclave meets again. You can figure out what to do about it later."

I took her advice, and for a little while I managed to forget my frustrations with the world.

"Good morning," Moray said, opening the door. I'd remembered to uncover my face before knocking this time. "You didn't bring the kid."

"No need. She already signed up with someone." It might not be official yet, but it might as well be. Alexis was spending so much time talking to the Guards that I'd hardly seen her for days.

"Ah," Moray said, somehow conveying a wealth of information in that one syllable. "That's how it goes."

"Have you trained any apprentices?" I asked. I'd never thought of Moray in that context, but something in how he'd sounded made me curious.

"Not personally," he said, shrugging. "But I've helped with a few recruits, showing them the ropes." He paused. "One of them got her face eaten by werewolves. She bled out right in front of me. Never even made it through basic training."

"Oh," I said, feeling a little inadequate. "I'm sorry."

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He shrugged again. "It's the business," he said. "You should get upstairs. You don't want to be late. Seventh floor, same place as last time."

"Thanks," I said, going for the stairs. I made better time, without Moray and Alexis there.

Laurel must have been busy somewhere else, because the security station outside the auditorium was being staffed by a Watcher I didn't recognize, a tall man wearing a suit and an elaborate, feathery metal mask. I put my weapons in the bin and stepped through the scanner, after which he directed me to sit and wait for an escort. He didn't say anything else.

Not the most personable greeter. That was fine with me. I didn't want to chat at the moment anyway.

Maybe twenty minutes later, the auditorium door opened, revealing Ivanov and Neumann. "Sorry for the wait," Ivanov said. "They were setting up a trade agreement or something, and the guy just wouldn't take no for an answer."

"What happened to him?" I asked idly as we walked in. As before, the room was crowded, and the sheer magnitude and variety of power was staggering. I hadn't been paying enough attention to know whether the same people were attending or not.

"We ended up having to escort him out," Ivanov said. "Escorted very firmly, if you get my drift."

"Yeah," I said, sitting down. I made sure to sit in a different chair than the last time, partially for security reasons and mostly for my own peace of mind. Anything else would be creepy.

I was still antsy, though, on the very edge of my seat. I was pretty sure I knew what I was going to hear next, and I wasn't looking forward to it.

Which was kind of silly, really. They weren't actually deciding my guilt today, they were just deciding whether I was suspicious enough that they needed to. Even if they came down against me, it wasn't like they would imprison me until the actual trial.

At least I hoped they wouldn't. I'd only come for this because it would look bad if I didn't, and I didn't want to take the hit to my rep. I'd feel pretty stupid if I got killed as a result. I mean, there's walking into the lion's den, and then there's just being a moron.

"The Conclave addresses the next issue," Prophet said, maybe thirty seconds after I was in my chair. He was staring at me, and it was getting a little uncomfortable. I'd been on the receiving end of some pretty hard stares in the past, and even by my standards his grey eyes were intense. "This being the continuation of the initial hearing regarding the accusation of the jarl Winter Wolf-Born of the murder of the mage Zhang Qiang. Jarl, please stand."

As before, I stood up. "Present," I said.

"Noted. And do you continue to maintain your innocence of this charge?"

"I do," I said without hesitation. It wasn't like there was anything to gain by changing my tune now.

"Very well," Prophet said. He was smiling a little, although it didn't touch his eyes. "Arbiter, you requested a period for investigation and reflection before you made your statement. Have you satisfied your curiosity?"

"Regarding this topic, yes," Arbiter said. He was also staring at me, but it was a more pleasant expression than Prophet's. More neutral than friendly, but that was still a step up.

"And what have you found?" Prophet asked. I thought he sounded impatient with the way Arbiter was dragging this out, but I might have been imagining it.

"The arguments of his accusers have some merit," Arbiter said. "And the accusation itself is most serious. But upon reflection, I do not think that this Conclave would be served by further investigation."

"Then you vote to accept the jarl's plea of innocence?"

"Yes. That makes a majority, Prophet."

"Yes," he said sourly. "It does. Jarl Winter, this Conclave finds your plea of innocence convincing. You will not be investigated further in regards to the crime you have been accused of, unless and until compelling evidence comes to light which brings your claim into question."

I sort of stood there for a second, trying to process what I'd heard. I'd been ready for a lot of things today. I'd been prepared to recant my position and take the penalty. I'd been prepared to go home and make arrangements for living as a fugitive. If things went badly enough, I'd even been prepared to fight back and get my ass handed to me by a couple hundred mages.

Winning was...somewhat less anticipated.

"That concludes this trial," Prophet said after a moment, apparently taking my silence as an indication that I understood. "This Conclave will reconvene in a quarter-hour to consider the final item on the agenda."

I was still standing there, trying to adapt to a world in which I won without having to pay for it, when Arbiter approached me. As before, he seemed to glide across the stage, any movement hidden in the folds of his robe. "Guards," he said. "Your services are no longer required. I will escort the jarl out."

They wasted no time clearing out, although Ivanov did pause to shoot me a sympathetic look before he disappeared into the crowd. I followed Arbiter up the stairs, still feeling a little dazed. Once again, we were immediately enclosed inside a kinetic barrier powerful enough to stop sound waves from crossing it.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

I had to admit, that impressed me. I mean, it's one thing to do a barrier that strong. I can't, but it isn't all *that* impressive. But to do that, and move it as a single unit, while also walking *and* carrying on a conversation? That was something else. I could hardly imagine the mental discipline you would need to do something like that.

"So," Arbiter said, very casually. "I imagine you're wondering why that went the way it did."

"Yeah. After what you said last time, I wasn't expecting to get off easy."

He nodded. "I expected as much, and I felt that you deserved an explanation. Thus this conversation. There are several reasons why I voted as I did, jarl, as there were various reasons why the other members of the Conclave said what they did."

"What are they?" I asked, since he seemed to want prompting.

"The first is that, as I told you, my primary concern is stability and balancing the concerns of multiple parties. Your actions since the last time we spoke did a great deal to encourage stability within and between the Courts, which makes my job easier. That's the first reason, and if anyone asks I expect you to present it as the only one." Arbiter sounded calm and pleasant. I didn't let that fool me into thinking he wasn't serious. When somebody on that level tells you to do something, they don't *need* to be overtly threatening to make sure that you're listening.

"Okay," I said. "But what are the others?"

"The next is political," he said calmly, pushing the door of the auditorium open. The same Watcher as before handed me my bin of contraband and waved us through without question. "And," Arbiter continued, "it is why I expect that the rest of the Conclave will not cause me significant problems as a consequence. You see, jarl, Scáthach tried to use us as a tool to intimidate you into submission."

"Ah," I said, understanding what he was getting at. "And you don't like being used."

"Precisely," he said, nodding. "Part of my motivation today was to remind her that we aren't under her control. If she wants something from us, she can approach us on an equal footing to negotiate for it. She *can't* simply assume that she'll get it for the asking."

"Okay," I said. "That makes sense. So what's the third reason? You wouldn't have bothered telling me if it was just those two, not when I could have figured them out on my own."

He was silent for a long moment. "Correct," he said at last, as we started down the stairs. "Although I want to make it clear that the rest of what I have to say is a secret, of the sort where those who share it are liable to be not just killed, but *erased*. *Damnatio memoriae*, or as close as we can arrange in this era."

"Fun," I said dryly. "I've heard a few similar secrets in the past, I think."

"I wouldn't doubt it, but this one is different. This one is *ours*."

"The Conclave's?" I asked.

"Yes. And also humanity's. Tell me, jarl, how many rules do the Watchers enforce?"

I opened my mouth, then paused. "I don't know," I said. I'd always meant to look into that, but I'd never quite gotten around to it.

"Four," Arbiter said, sounding very, very serious. "Four very specific laws. You may not raise the dead, or experiment with the transition between life and death, or any intermediate states. You may not attempt to find the outer boundary of the Otherside. You may not experiment with the border between reality and the spirit world, or attempt to shift an object from one state to the other. You may not change the fundamental nature of a thing."

"Okay," I said after a moment. It didn't seem too important, since none of those were things I was *capable* of, but I supposed it was worth knowing. "What about not telling the world at large about magic?"

"That's not so much a rule as a guideline," Arbiter said dismissively. "And a relatively recent one, at that. No, what I want you to think about is *why* the Watchers would have such a specific set of rules."

I thought about it for a few seconds. "Presumably," I said slowly, "because something happened to make them think that those areas of study were dangerous."

Which, when I thought about it, was terrifying. I mean, the things a mage could do *without* breaking any of those rules could be horrifying and awful. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what was so bad that it made that look harmless.

"Exactly," Arbiter said, sounding pleased that I'd gotten it. "Four very specific events occurred. Now, and this is the part which we've gone to great lengths to keep from becoming public knowledge, the first Conclave had more than nine members. There were four others, whose roles haven't been preserved. Hunter, Healer, Namer, and Dreamer."

Four people. Four rules. It wasn't hard to figure out what Arbiter was getting at.

"Okay," I said. "Healer is obviously the one who tried to raise the dead. Dreams are related to the spiritual, so it would make sense that Dreamer was doing work related to that. The other two...." I shook my head. "I've got nothing."

"Hunter had a gift for space magic, an intimate connection to the idea of location, and a passion for exploring. Namer...." Arbiter frowned, and there was something very uncomfortable about his pause. "Namer," he said at last, speaking delicately, "was working in a field so esoteric and specific that even knowing it exists is a violation of the law. No one's entirely sure just what he was doing, but it involved the idea that if you were to change the basic nature of a thing, its apparent properties would change to match."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"So what went wrong?" He hesitated, and I snorted. "Come on, man. You can't tell me all these secrets and then shut up when it finally gets to the good part."

"Healer was experimenting on boundary states between life and death," he said. "Her experiments produced the first vampire. Dreamer was doing something similar in a very different field, trying to find the relationship between the idea of a thing and the thing itself. His work resulted in the disappearance of a great many people. The city of Tikal never recovered. Hunter was exploring the far reaches of the Otherside, trying to find its limits. We don't know what he found there, but the Sidhe Courts have been at war ever since."

"Wow," I said after a moment. "That's...wow. What about Namer?"

There was another long, delicate pause. "As I said, we aren't sure what he was doing," Arbiter said at last. "But at the end of it, three gods were dead, and two others had been born."

"Okay. This is...kind of more than I can process. You know that, right?"

"Yes, but I'm hoping that you grasp enough of it to understand what I'm saying. For example, I hope that at this point you understand why the Watchers work to prevent anyone else from experimenting with those fields of magic. The risks of a similar catastrophe happening again are simply too high. And hopefully you also see why anyone who courts such a disaster, even unintentionally, must be dealt with."

"Yeah," I said. "And Zhang was helping people get around the rules."

"Precisely," Arbiter said. "And that, jarl, is the true reason I didn't speak against you. People who enable that kind of risk-taking must be eliminated. That he was permitted to do so for so long is shameful. As far as I am concerned, your actions should be rewarded, not punished." He shrugged. "And besides, it's seldom a bad idea to be on good terms with a nascent demigod." We reached the bottom of the stairs, and he nodded to me. "Now that I've explained that, I have a meeting to get back to, and I believe there's someone waiting to speak with you. Good day, jarl."

Chapter Sixteen

After that odd and enigmatic little conversation, I wasn't remotely sure what I would see when I opened the door. Gods and monsters were equally plausible, and I wouldn't have been surprised at all to see the skinwalker or a horde of vampires or something equally unpleasant.

Instead, I found Moray sitting at a table, looking bemused and drinking tea. Sitting with him was a vaguely familiar woman who smelled like fox and spice. The scent was enough to jog my memory, and I realized she was Aiko's mother.

On the whole, I might have preferred the monsters.

"Winter jarl," she said to me, setting her tea on the table. It looked almost untouched. "I trust your meeting went well?"

"Yes," I said, eyeing her warily.

"Very good," she said. "I was hoping we might talk for a moment."

"I would be honored," I said. I was lying through my teeth, of course, but from what I'd heard of her she was the sort to appreciate formality whether it was honest or not. "Would you care to walk with me?" I wasn't sure what this conversation was going to be like, but I had a strong suspicion that I didn't want Moray there for it.

"Yes," she said, standing. "Let us walk."

I opened the door for her, which she seemed to appreciate, although the change in her expression was so subtle I'd never have noticed had I not been watching. "So," she said, as I let the door swing closed behind us. "I understand you've been spending a great deal of time with my daughter."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"I haven't," she said frankly. "There aren't many things I regret from my life, jarl. That's one of them."

"That you haven't spent much time with her?"

"No. That I did so poorly as a mother that she won't spend time with me." She sighed. "It can be very hard to have children."

"I wouldn't know, ma'am."

Her lips twitched into a smile, although it was so tiny and so brief that I wasn't sure whether I'd seen it at all. I was getting the impression that was the default for her expressions. "No, I don't suppose you would. Although that might change in the future."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"I think that would probably be unnecessarily cruel to the child, ma'am."

She definitely smiled at that. "More people should have such care. It's too easy to do your best for your children and realize too late that it would have been kinder to do nothing."

I cleared my throat. "Aiko makes it sound like you neglected her quite a bit, ma'am."

"Towards the end. Yes. I'd hoped to give her the life I dreamed of, but by that time I'd realized that she didn't want it."

"So you left her alone." I was trying not to sound accusatory, I really was, but I suspected I was failing.

She nodded. "It was too late by then for us to be reconciled, I think. Leaving her to herself seemed the next best thing."

I nodded slowly. "I suppose I can understand that, ma'am."

"Good. So tell me, jarl, do you love Aiko?"

"Yes, ma'am. Very much so."

"That's good," she said. "So when are you planning to marry her?"

I cleared my throat. "I expect you know your daughter better than I do, ma'am."

"Longer, certainly," she said dryly. "Better? That isn't so certain."

"Maybe," I agreed. "In any case, you have some idea what kind of person she is. Do you seriously think she'd want that kind of formal commitment?"

"Perhaps not," she admitted. "I only want what is best for my daughter. I may not have always shown it very well, but I only ever wanted her to be happy." She sighed, and it sounded like there was a hundred years of sadness pent up in that sigh. "Take care of my daughter, jarl," she said wearily, turning off down a side street. "I can't."

I watched her go, then kept walking. "Well," I said to myself. "That went better than I'd anticipated." I hadn't known quite what to expect from her, but from what Aiko had said I'd thought she would be quite a bit less pleasant than that.

Although, now that I thought about it, that was probably to be expected. I'd only heard Aiko's side of the story, after all, and it had been pretty clear that there was plenty of bad blood between them to occlude her vision.

Then, because it was clearly a day for conversations I'd rather not have, I said, "Loki, Loki, Loki. You busy?"

"Not at the moment," he said in my ear. "Although I do have an engagement later today. Why?"

I managed to keep my reaction to a small twitch, and glared at him as he stepped up beside me. "I have another question," I said.

"My," he said dryly. "You go more than a year without using any of the answers you paid for, and then you spend three in one week? Shocking. So what is it?"

"First off, I want to make a couple of statements. Statement one: After that mess last year, you left me a note mentioning apotheosis."

"Yep," he said cheerfully. "Not just making conversation, by the way. That really was my note. That's a freebie for you."

"Statement two," I said, ignoring him. "A couple minutes ago, Arbiter said something suggesting that I'm a nascent demigod."

"That sounds like something that old bastard would say," Loki agreed.

"Question: What the hell are you people getting at?"

The deity paused and looked at me. His eyes were deep blue, as they usually were in public, but for a moment I glimpsed fire inside. His smile, too, was a little *off*, just twisted enough to remind me of the scars around his mouth.

"I'm glad you took it to heart when I said you could ask less specific questions," he said. "*That* one is almost too tempting of an opportunity to pass up. But we did have a deal, so I won't. Although honestly, I was expecting something like this quite a bit sooner."

"I figured you were trolling me," I said. "Trying to get me to waste questions, when your note didn't actually mean anything. Which might still be the case, but if other people are going to take it seriously, I need to pay attention."

"A reasonable thought," he admitted. "But you should have learned by now that isn't really the way I operate. Now, on to your actual question."

"At heart," he said, taking on more of a lecturing tone, "the answer to your question hinges on the answer to another question, which is, what does it mean to be a god? Now, you could ask people that question and get a great many answers, but for the sake of brevity I'm only going to discuss the one which I consider to be important, which is that a god is someone who knows what's going on."

I blinked. "That's it?"

"Yes. If you understand how the world works, behind the scenes, then you can claim to be a god. If you understand *why* it works the way it does, then nobody's likely to argue with you." He grinned at me, the expression far too wide and toothy, and somehow even more twisted than his earlier smile. "With that in mind, let's take a look at what *you* know."

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

Oh, this should be good. I stopped walking and turned to face him. He took it in stride, stopping beside me. I noticed that people were giving us a wide berth without quite seeming to realize that's what they were doing. Loki's doing, most likely.

"First," he said, "and most important, you've had a glimpse of the world behind the scenes. You know that the neat, ordered reality you live in is just a mask on the face of chaos. You know that your reality was constructed, you have an idea of who constructed it, and if you're clever you have enough information that you could start working on *how* and *why*."

I frowned. I hadn't thought about it in quite that way, but I supposed he had a point. "Fair," I said.

He rolled his eyes, sending another wave of flame through them before they died back to blue. "Thank you for your approval. Continuing, you also have an idea of what kind of power people like me have. You've seen that power being used in earnest, and there aren't very many people who can say that. You know that time and space are both flexible concepts, subject to being manipulated and played with. And, on a more personal note, you know that life and death are arbitrarily defined states, and you've gone far enough into the shadows in between to know what they smell like."

"But I can't *use* any of that," I protested. "I might know some of the tricks you do, but that doesn't mean much if I can't actually *do* the trick."

"Ah," he said, sounding excited. "But you're thinking of divinity as an absolute—which is ironic, considering that most of the secrets I just mentioned are about recognizing that almost nothing is absolute. Figuring that out, seeing the things you've seen, that's only the first step on the path, which is why you're only a *nascent* demigod. Keep going, learn a few more secrets and start learning how to exploit a couple of them, and you'll be the real deal."

"And...that could actually happen?" I asked hesitantly. I'd never even *contemplated* that possibility.

"*Could* it happen?" He shrugged. "Sure. Anything *could* happen. *Will* it happen, now, that's a trickier question. Plenty of people have gotten started on that path, but very few have followed it all the way to the end. You're looking more promising than most, and definitely more than anyone has in recent years. It's plausible enough that people are going to be paying attention."

"Wonderful," I said sourly.

He laughed. "Relax," he said. "It's no worse than what you've already been dealing with. The only difference is that now you know why they're breathing down your neck. For now, I suggest you take some time to celebrate. You genuinely did win this time around, and I didn't even have to nudge things in your favor to make it happen. Enjoy it." He grinned at me, and bowed. "Congratulations, Winter."

I ended up taking Loki's advice, as insane as that was. I wanted to keep worrying, trying to wrap up loose ends, but there wasn't really much to be done. The skinwalker was still out running around, but I wasn't sure how I could track him down, let alone deal with him. I also didn't really think he was going to be causing problems for me; he was powerful, undeniably, but also an opportunist, more scavenger than predator. He wouldn't attack until I was vulnerable, and at the moment my position looked strong. The housecarls would adapt to their new situation more readily if I wasn't looming over them, and I was happy to let Katrin finish cleaning house among the vampires of the city on her own. Even Alexis needed more than anything else to be left alone, so she could choose where she was going from here without feeling like I was pressuring her.

So I ended up going to dinner with Aiko, partially to celebrate and mostly to unwind and get used to the idea that things had actually gone *right*. Pryce's wasn't an option, for obvious reasons, so we ended up going to the Italian restaurant where Anna had been the head chef for quite a few years. She was long gone, but the food was still very good.

It was getting fairly late by the time we left, and there was no one else around. I was full—or as close to it as I got these days, anyway—and happier than I'd been in weeks. I was feeling peaceful, and relaxed, and not terribly inclined to think about anything in particular. Thus, it was a bit of a surprise when Aiko casually said, "Oh, hey. I got something for you a while back."

I turned around, expecting to see something characteristically bizarre. A particularly exotic weapon, a knockoff toy with an amusingly bad design flaw, a piece of junk from an antique shop in the back streets of a bad neighborhood, something like that. Any of those would be an understandable gift from Aiko, and I wouldn't have been surprised at all to see something along those lines.

What I saw instead was Aiko holding a ring.

More to the point, she was holding a ring in a manner that made it clear it was more than just a bit of jewelry that she'd found and thought I might like. There was *significance* in the gesture. She was smiling, a broad, *I can't believe I'm doing this* sort of shit-eating grin, and her posture was both excited and nervous.

I stared. "You've gotta be kidding me," I said. I felt a little proud of how even and calm my voice was, all things considered.

She opened her mouth. I leaned forward a little, feeling such a strange and intense emotional cocktail that I couldn't even begin to sort it out.

And then a spotlight went on, pinning us in a circle of light bright enough that I winced and had to blink back tears. At first I thought it was all part of the plan, but a quick glance at Aiko's expression confirmed she was as surprised as I was.

"You have *got* to be freaking kidding me!" I shouted, turning towards the light. It was hard to see past the glare, but I was pretty sure I could make out the spotlight, mounted on what looked like an armored personnel carrier.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"This is the police. Put your hands in the air," a voice shouted, probably through a megaphone.  
"We have you surrounded. Put your hands in the air."

Goddammit. *How* do these things always happen at the *worst possible time*?

Chapter Seventeen

Okay. So things were...not good, on a variety of levels. Assuming they were here for me, specifically, and considering how they'd gone about it so far I thought that was a safe assumption, I had a very limited amount of time to think. They wouldn't wait long before jumping right to the excessive force stage of handling an uncooperative criminal.

I put my hands in the air, mostly just to keep them happy while I ran through the options in my head. Fighting was a bad idea. Even if I wanted to fight the cops, which I sorta didn't, it was a bad move. They'd had time to move people into position, and I believed them when they said I was surrounded. I was wearing armor, sure, but not a helmet, and I was guessing they'd brought the big guns. Anti-materiel rifles with armor-piercing rounds would probably do the job. Or, hell, they might have rocket launchers.

Running wasn't a whole lot better. If I tried to bolt, I was guessing the snipers would start shooting, and I didn't want to trust my luck against that. Not to mention the whole rocket launcher thing. It wouldn't matter if I was *invisible* if they had those.

Which, I supposed, only left...actually playing along and letting them arrest me.

I briefly reconsidered getting exploded instead, then sighed. "Run," I said to Aiko, keeping my hands in the air.

She opened her mouth, and I could tell she wasn't about to agree, so I cut her off. "*Run*," I said again, more forcefully. "We can't win this, and it'll be a lot easier if they only find one of us."

She obviously wasn't happy, but she was at least as capable of figuring out what this situation called for as I was. She bolted, veiling herself with magic as she went. It wasn't quite perfect invisibility, but in the dark, against normal humans, it should be more than enough.

I held my breath for a moment, waiting to see whether that would bring violent retaliation, but nothing happened. Good; I'd been pretty sure they were only really concerned with me, but there are times when *pretty sure* isn't nearly as comforting as you'd like it to be.

I stood there, keeping my hands high enough that nobody would be likely to think I was disobeying that instruction, and waited for them to figure out what to do. After maybe a minute of that, a group approached from the direction of the armored personnel carrier. They were wearing bulky body armor with SWAT printed on it, and carrying an awful lot of guns.

Funny. It had never occurred to me that Colorado Springs would have a SWAT team. It made sense—the city was large enough, after all—I'd just...never thought about it.

"What happened to the girl?" one of them asked brusquely. Their body language made it clear that he was in charge of the group, although he seemed ridiculously young to have such a position.

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And how crazy was that? Seriously, since when did I start thinking people looked *young*? Hell, most of the people I interacted with *looked* young, including the ones who'd seen a few millennia.

He was clearly expecting an answer, though, so I smiled. "What girl?" I asked innocently. "You must have been seeing things, officer. It's just me here."

He frowned. One of the others, an older guy with a spectacular mustache, piped up, "Sir, we could send a team after her."

"Think this one through," I said. I was pretty freaked out by this point, but I managed to keep my tone fairly casual. "You really want to risk letting me get away so that you can chase some girl you may or may not even have seen, at a distance, at night? Through a residential neighborhood? When you've got no real reason to think this hypothetical girl is guilty of anything at all?"

The leader's frown deepened, and he took a second to think before he responded. "Let her go," he said. "And somebody get cuffs on this guy."

Smart choice. He'd get flak for it later from the higher-ups, I was guessing, but it was the right decision. Between that and the obvious respect the others had for him, I was pretty sure he had some real leadership potential. He might not have been an Alpha, if he were a werewolf—he lacked the *presence* they had, the ability to walk into a room and have everyone turn to look without quite knowing why—but he would definitely be someone the rest of the pack looked up to.

They were surprisingly gentle about cuffing me. I'd been expecting them to rough me up at least a little in the process, but they just handcuffed my hands behind my back and herded me into an armored car. It almost made me wonder whether they were filming the whole thing, and they wanted it to look as good as possible for the news.

I got into the back of the car and then zoned out. Presumably someone was reading me my rights, or else whispering vague threats in my ear or something, but I wasn't all that interested.

I was *much* more interested in where we were going, which is why I focused most of my attention on my magic. There were no owls in the area, unfortunately, but plenty of foxes, cats, and raccoons out prowling the nighttime streets. Each one only got a fragmentary glimpse of my little procession, but by jumping from one to the next I was able to put together a pretty good image of what was going on.

The car I was in was just one out of an entire *convoy* of armored vehicles, moving in a formation that put my car slightly to one side of the center. Presumably that was so that anyone trying to break me out wouldn't be able to tell where I was without checking every vehicle.

Although you'd have to be insane to try something like that. There were probably thirty armed guards with the convoy, and a lot of them were carrying what looked suspiciously like military weapons. And that wasn't even *counting* the snipers. I noticed a few of them through the animals, mostly by scent or sound, but I was sure there were others.

I had to admit, I was almost flattered by the extremes they were going to. I could hardly even imagine the expenses involved with something like this—a dozen armored cars, including at least one that I was *sure* was military issue, thirty armed guards, snipers along the route...it was mind-boggling. And that wasn't taking into account the road closures which must have taken place.

After maybe twenty minutes of driving at a snail's pace through empty streets, the cars stopped outside of a police station. I returned my awareness to my own body just in time for one of the guards to open the door and nudge me.

I opened my eyes, blinked a couple of times, and looked around blearily. Pretending to have been asleep would be a convenient explanation for why I didn't seem to have been paying attention.

And besides. I just couldn't resist messing with their heads. They were just guys doing a job, sure, but that job was a hell of an inconvenient one for me. I wasn't going to kill them for it, but I wasn't above screwing with them a little. I figured making them think I was so relaxed and confident I could take a nap under those conditions was a decent way to start.

"Are we there?" I asked, yawning.

He frowned at me. "Yes. Get out of the car, please."

I did so, and we started moving towards the police station. Having my hands cuffed behind my back threw my balance off more than I would have expected; I almost fell on my face a couple of times before the guard grabbed my elbow to steady me.

Inside the station, they led me downstairs to a small, windowless concrete room. Two guys with shotguns stood by the door, and a third walked into the room; the others either waited outside or left. I was guessing the latter. They might think I was scary, but they were looking at it from a human perspective, and even the scariest human is going to have a hard time doing much when they're handcuffed and have two guys pointing shotguns at them from ten feet away.

The third policeman said, "Hands," in a tone that was so blandly noncommittal you just *knew* he was hiding something. I turned around so that he could get at the handcuffs. He unlocked them and pulled them off, then said, "Strip."

I complied, moving slowly enough that nobody could take it as a threat. I pulled my cloak off, making sure to keep it in the shape of a trench coat, and folded it neatly before setting it on the floor.

"Jesus," he said, interrupting me. "Is that *armor*?"

"Yeah. And?"

He shook his head, looking somewhat bemused. "Who the hell wears armor to a restaurant?"

"I have reason," I said dryly. "Or are you going to tell me you didn't have orders to shoot me if I so much as talked back? Even though I've never been convicted or even formally accused of anything?"

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A muscle in his jaw twitched, but he kept his composure pretty well. "You didn't even know we were going to be there."

I sighed, feeling very tired. "If you think the police are the only people who want to shoot me, you're wrong." I started undoing the various straps and buckles on the armor, making sure to keep my movements slow and steady. The guys with guns might not have been interested in participating in the conversation, but I was still very much aware of their presence.

The search that followed was predictable and thorough. I paid just enough attention to follow instructions, and left the rest of my mind in a cat outside. I was afraid that if I paid any more attention than that I'd do lose my patience and do something I would regret later.

The cat's mind helped with that. It was soothing to use my magic, calming. It reminded me that I wasn't helpless here. Plus there was a storm rolling in, and I've always loved the feeling of the wind in my fur. Even vicariously, it felt good enough to help offset the indignity of being strip searched in a tiny windowless room in the basement of a police station.

After what felt like an inordinate amount of time but was probably just a couple minutes, the guy doing the search finished, threw away the last pair of latex gloves, and left the room. That left me standing in the room with just the two guards, who'd exhibited no reaction the entire time. I almost wanted to make a smart comment just to see if I could get a rise out of them, but I resisted the impulse. It was a stupid one.

After a minute or two the third guy came back in, carrying a T-shirt and a pair of sweats. The shirt was a little too small and the pants comically overlarge, but they beat nothing and I couldn't deny a certain feeling of gratitude. I'd been imprisoned a few times before, with varying degrees of legitimacy, but this was the first time I'd been given clothing.

"Will I get my belongings back when I'm released?" I asked as I pulled the clothes on.

The talkative officer gave me an almost pitying look, but all he said was, "Yeah. I'll bag them and they'll be set aside. Follow me, please."

Out the door and down a hallway, we reached the cells. There weren't very many of them, and all of them were empty. I was very aware, as we walked, of the guys with shotguns following behind. They still hadn't said a word, either of them.

I had to wonder what the third guy had done to get this job. He was walking close enough to me that I could conceivably take him hostage, and he was in the line of fire of the other two. If I decided to start something, there wasn't a chance that he'd get out unscathed. He probably wouldn't get out at all.

We walked to the end of the hall, where the talkative guy stopped and unlocked the door of the last cell on the left. "In you go," he said, and I complied without argument. He closed the door, locked it, and checked to make sure that it wouldn't open. "Sit tight," he said. "It's after business hours right now, but we'll get you a lawyer in the morning."

I watched the three of them go. Most of the lights turned off after they left, leaving just the security lights in my cell and the hallway. It was more dim than really dark, but it was also definitely more dim than bright. Looking out through the bars—and it seemed almost charmingly quaint, that they'd put me in a cell with literal bars rather than just a room with a locked door—the hallway was gloomy, full of ominous shadows. This place wasn't a prison, per se, but it was still a place of confinement, and a place where bad things had happened. That history had seeped into the stones, tainting the energy of the area with a disturbing aura.

I did my best to ignore it, and laid down on the mattress instead. It had been a long day, and an eventful day, and somehow I didn't think tomorrow was going to be a whole lot better. I'd rather get some sleep before I had to deal with it.

I woke up early, but didn't move. I'd seen at least two cameras watching this cell, and there were likely more I didn't know about. Considering how seriously they were taking this, I had to assume they had people watching the feeds around the clock. That meant that as soon as I moved they would know I was conscious, and I'd rather take a few minutes to think before then.

The first thing I did was survey the area using my magic. It was just after dawn, early enough that the city hadn't really woken up yet, but even by those standards the neighborhood was quiet. Not empty, which meant it hadn't been evacuated or anything; just quiet, a little subdued. A handful of people walking dogs gave me a good opportunity to look around, familiarizing myself with the locale. Not terribly useful right now, but it might be later.

That done, I turned my thoughts to what I should do. Escape was possible, but difficult. I still had access to Tyrting, which meant that I could probably just cut myself an exit through the wall given a little time, or I could simply open a portal to the Otherside. Either of those would take time, though, and there were drawbacks. If a sword magically appeared and I started cutting a hole in the wall, I could pretty much count on there being guys with guns on the other side when I finished. If I tried to escape through the Otherside, I'd be taking a risk; prisons hadn't been high on my list of places to visit, so I didn't know any destination points that were thematically close to this one. A failed portal wasn't something I wanted to take a chance on.

Of course, I could also call Loki.

I quashed that thought immediately, lest he notice me *thinking* about him. It wasn't a good idea. It was very much a not good idea, in fact. Loki might seem friendly, but I hadn't let that blind me to the fact that he was *Loki*. He was the sort of god that other gods were scared of, and there were *reasons* for that. There would be a price if I got him involved, and I didn't think it would be as simple as trading in one of the answers I was owed. Not when he knew he had me over a barrel.

No, I decided. Escape wasn't really a viable option. It was possible, but every way I could see to do it entailed one kind of risk or another. I was better off to stay where I was and see how things

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unfolded. They'd mentioned a lawyer the other night, after all, and while I didn't think that would do me much good at this point, it was at least worth taking the time to check. They'd gotten obviously guilty people off in the past, after all.

Having made my decision, I sat up, yawning and trying to make it look like I'd just woken up. I wasn't sure how well I did at that—I've never been a great actor—but I didn't really care that much. Then I settled in to wait for things to happen.

It was, I had to admit, a singularly boring wait. My cell was small enough that I couldn't even really pace, and the only furniture was a badly rusted toilet and sink. The bed was just a mattress thrown on the floor, no sheets, no pillow, one threadbare blanket.

I had to wonder whether they'd stripped the room specifically for me. The lighting was crap, but I could see the other cells a little, and it looked like they had actual beds in them. Maybe this was some kind of psychological thing, trying to push me over the edge.

If so, it was more effective than I wanted to admit. I mean, I'm not suited to captivity in the first place. I don't do well with cages. But this...hell, even when I'd gone nuts and Conn had stuck me in the safe room for a few months, even *then* I'd at least had a window. This was the sort of thing that could drive a person out of their skull pretty quickly.

I ended up leaving half my attention there, just to make sure I wasn't caught by surprise if and when something did happen, and letting the rest drift. It was a bit of a risk—it would make me slower to react, and if someone was watching then sitting there staring into space wasn't exactly making me look saner—but less of one than anything else I could think of.

It felt like much longer, but from the sun I was pretty sure it was only half an hour before I heard the door open and then close. Still early, by business hours standards.

I returned my consciousness fully to my body and sat up straighter, waiting. A moment later a guy walked into view. He was tallish, heavysset but not really overweight. He was wearing a police uniform, and he smelled rather strongly of coffee and onions. His face was almost familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"Good morning, Mr. Wolf," he said.

"Morning. Hey, do I know you from somewhere? You seem familiar."

He seemed a little taken aback by the question, but he nodded. "I suppose you wouldn't remember," he said. "Just one more person you screwed over. I'm Albert Jackson, Colorado Springs Chief of Police."

"Oh," I said, nodding. I'd spoken with him once before, a few years earlier. Not surprising that I hadn't recognized him. "I'm not entirely sure what you're talking about, though. When did I screw you over?"

"The last time we talked, I took your deal," he said. "I took the werewolves seriously, I treated them with respect. Which was fine at the time, but once they told everyone it was a 'hoax,' and the public went back to thinking they were a myth?" He smiled. It wasn't a very pleasant smile. "It's not so good for your reputation, having everyone know that you fell for a hoax. I damn near lost my position."

I nodded again. "Fair enough," I said. "I honestly didn't have anything to do with that, though. Believe me, I was as surprised as you when they took it back. I wouldn't even have guessed that was possible."

"Maybe," he said. I couldn't tell whether he'd believed me or not. "Anyway, that isn't really significant to why you're here."

"Right," I agreed. "Speaking of, *why* here? I mean, sticking me in solitary in the basement of some random police station...it isn't quite what I was expecting, I guess."

"The entire building's been locked down. As of today, the only business being conducted here is keeping you where you are."

I blinked. "Seriously? Why?"

"Officially? It's for your own safety. It was felt that placing you with other prisoners would possibly escalate to violence."

"And unofficially?"

He smiled, a wry, crooked sort of smile. "Unofficially, a lot of people had to work very hard to catch you, and they very much don't want to have to do so again. It was felt that a controlled environment like this would make that easier." He shrugged. "And also the first reason. With what you're accused of, there's a very real chance that even other criminals wouldn't be willing to tolerate you. Nobody wants to go to all this work and then have you die before trial."

"What I'm accused of," I said, ignoring the bit about *other* criminals. "What might that be, exactly?"

"Blowing up a decent chunk of the city," he said promptly. "We put you in like normal, maybe your cellmate knew somebody that died in the blast. He gets upset, you get killed, we have to answer some awkward questions. This is better for everyone." He paused a beat, then casually asked, "So, did you do it?"

I hesitated, then sighed. "No," I said. "I didn't do it."

"You hesitated. Why's that?"

"I didn't do it," I repeated. "But I knew some people that I think might have been involved with that whole mess. I guess I feel like I should have seen it coming, turned them in to the police or something."

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"Interesting," he said, smiling again. This one was a more natural smile, although I was guessing it was still an act. "Where might these people be?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. Haven't heard from them since then. That's part of why I think they might have been involved."

He looked at me for a moment, then sighed. "I want to believe you," he said, and I almost thought he might be telling the truth. "But I can't just take your word for it. Put your hands through the bars, please."

"Going to handcuff me to the bars?" I asked, not moving. "That sounds a bit excessive, Chief. Can't lie down, can't go to the bathroom. I think that might even qualify as cruel and unusual punishment."

As answer, he produced what looked like a pair of bracelets. They were large and heavy, more like manacles than modern handcuffs, except that they weren't connected by a chain.

I looked at them for a moment, perplexed. Then I caught a familiar scent, and involuntarily snarled a little. The feeling was muted, so I was guessing it wasn't on the surface, but there was silver in those things. Quite a bit of it, for me to notice it that quickly at a distance.

"These are tracking bracelets," he said quietly. "They'll make sure we don't lose you."

I regarded him for a moment, and when I replied my voice was equally soft. "I think," I said, "that we both know that's not what those are for. Lie to the guards if you want, but I think I deserve to know the truth."

He sighed. "Rossi told us something about what you're capable of," he said, sounding very old and very tired. ""No details, but enough to get the point across. And he designed these as a countermeasure, before you killed him."

Wait.

Enrico had designed these things? For *me*, personally?

I'd known that he hadn't been entirely honest with me. I'd know that he'd seen me as a threat, that our friendship had largely been an excuse to keep an eye on me. But this...to design something like that, knowing firsthand how painful silver was to werewolves, *knowing* what long-term exposure could do, that was something else. This went beyond just lying to me. It was a betrayal, in so many ways.

Apparently Loki was telling the truth, way back when. I really *couldn't* trust Enrico.

Pity I hadn't believed that when he was still alive, and it might have done some good.

I slumped against the cell door, and stuck my arms through the bars.

Chapter Eighteen

Maybe half an hour later, a pair of guards came in. I was pretty sure one was the same guy who'd searched me; the other was new. Both of them were armed, although they had pistols and Tasers rather than military-grade hardware.

"Hi," I said. "What's up?"

"Your lawyer got here," the one I recognized said. "We're taking you to meet with him."

"Cool," I said, standing and walking over to the door. They let me out and then escorted me down the hallway, up the stairs, and through a heavy steel door. They made it clear that any sudden movements on my part would not be appreciated, and I was very much aware of their presence flanking me. At least they didn't feel a need to handcuff me for the walk.

Inside, I found myself in a small, sparse room. The only really notable features were a metal table bolted to the floor, a pair of battered wooden chairs at that table, and extremely obvious security cameras in the upper corners of the room. I'd expected there to be a mirror, with more cops watching from the other side, but apparently that had been phased out in favor of the cameras.

I sat in one of the chairs and the guards took up positions by the doors. Maybe a minute later, the door opened again and a guy in a suit walked in. He was maybe in his sixties, with a confident demeanor and steely gaze that suggested it would be wise not to underestimate him.

"Good morning," he said. "I apologize for not getting here sooner. I didn't hear about your arrest until this morning." From his tone, and the way he looked at the two guards while he said it, I gathered he was rather offended by that.

"No worries," I said easily. "I guess you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes," he said, looking at the guards. "Gentlemen, this is a confidential discussion with my client. I would appreciate it if you waited outside."

The talkative guy frowned. "This man is dangerous," he said. "He's supposed to be under armed guard."

"There's only one exit from this room. You can wait at the end of the hall."

"That would put you in danger," the cop insisted stubbornly.

"I'll take my chances. Oh, and turn off the cameras, too."

They complied, albeit reluctantly, and the guy in the suit sat down across from me and set a paper bag on the table. From the smell of it, the bag had some kind of meat in it, which reminded me rather intensely that I hadn't eaten since last night.

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"Good morning, Mr. Wolf," he said. "I brought you some breakfast, if you'd like."

"Thanks," I said, grabbing the bag without waiting to be told twice. "And call me Winter."

He smiled. "You're quite welcome. My name is Alan, by the way."

"You aren't quite how I pictured a public defender," I said, my mouth already full of sandwich. It was pretty bad, a cheap steak sandwich from a fast food restaurant, and at that moment it tasted like heaven.

He pulled a clipboard out of his briefcase and set it on the table before replying, "Oh, I'm not a public defender. I work for a criminal defense firm here in the city."

I paused. "Who hired you?" I found it a little hard to believe that an actual lawyer would have taken this case willingly.

"A pleasant young woman named Selene," he said. "I was actually planning to retire at the end of the month, but this was simply too interesting to pass up on." He smiled. "And also she paid cash."

"Ah," I said, relaxing a little. That explained it. Money could work wonders when it came to making people cooperative, not to mention that Selene was one of the more persuasive people I'd met. "That's good, then."

"That you have a personal lawyer, rather than a public defender?"

"And also that you're about to retire. I can't imagine representing me is the sort of thing that would be good for your career."

He sighed. "I take it you aren't optimistic about your chances, then."

I snorted. "With what I'm accused of? No, not really."

"Well, I suppose that's our cue to move on to business," he said dryly. "Did they tell you what you're charged with?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I might have been asleep for that part of the conversation."

"All right," he said, pulling a sheaf of papers out of his briefcase. "I'm going to just run down their list of charges, then. I want you to comment on whether they're accurate. Don't worry about whether they can prove it or not just yet; I just want your gut impression on whether the charges are true or not."

I glanced at the cameras. "You sure that's a good idea?" I asked. "They might be listening."

He smiled. "I doubt it. They're smart enough not to try and use evidence from a confidential discussion with your attorney."

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "You're the expert."

"Thank you. First up, premeditated murder of Catherine Lynch. Yes, no, maybe?"

I frowned. That was...something I hadn't thought about in quite a while, actually. It was almost funny; for a long time I'd felt incredibly guilty about it, but now there was just a sort of quiet regret.

I supposed I had worse things on my conscience, now.

Alan was expecting an answer, though, so I nodded. "Sort of," I said. "I didn't kill her, but I knew it was happening."

"Right," he said, making a note on the paper. "If we can show that someone else did it, we might be able to talk that one down to a conspiracy charge. The evidence is fairly thorough, so I don't know that we could get it dismissed entirely. Moving on, it looks like a charge of assault against a Jason Hoover."

"I don't know him."

The lawyer looked at the paper. "He's an inmate at a correctional facility," he said. "Looks like he filed a report shortly before his arrest claiming that you threatened to, and I quote, 'cut off his nose and feed it to a dog,' end quote."

"Oh," I said. "That guy. Yeah, that one's accurate. Does that count as assault? I thought you had to hit someone for that."

"You're thinking of battery," he said absently, writing another note in his file. "Assault can cover any plausible threat of violence. Okay, I think that one we can probably get dismissed. It's your word against his, and considering that he was convicted of hate crimes and complicity in numerous murder cases, his word isn't so strong. Next up, voluntary manslaughter of Preston Balstad."

"Who's that?"

"Apparently he tried to rob a restaurant you were eating in. You threw a rock at him and killed him. They're claiming it was unnecessary force that you knew to be in excess of what was needed to defend yourself."

"Right, I remember that now. Yeah, that one's accurate too."

He nodded. "Again, I think that one can probably be dismissed. There are multiple witnesses agreeing that he stated his intent to kill people based on their membership in a social group, which means we can spin it as a hate crime. Under the circumstances we can probably get them to dismiss that as reasonable force for self-defense purposes. Next, we have the false imprisonment and premeditated murder of Olivia Robbins."

"Guilty." There wasn't much more to say on that topic.

Alan seemed to agree with me, since he just nodded and made another note before flipping the page. "Continuing, we have...twenty-three counts of second degree murder, a few days later."

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I tried to figure out what he was talking about, and realized it must be when I took down Jon. He'd had a lot of human mercenaries with him, and while I'd tried not to kill them, I hadn't had that much choice.

"Guilty," I said. "For some of them. Not sure how many. How do they even know about this?"

He looked at the paper. "It looks like they have testimony from an undercover police officer," he said. "Someone named Enrico Rossi? Frankly, I doubt they'll even bother prosecuting this. All they have is testimony from one person who can't appear as a witness. No actual evidence."

I didn't care. This was...well, further evidence that the man I'd been friends with really was just there to take me down. Not very pleasant to hear.

"Next, we have one count of arson on the same day."

"Yeah," I said.

"Again, they don't have much evidence linking you to it. Next, the premeditated murder of the same officer, Enrico Rossi."

"That was a suicide," I said, unable to keep some of the anger from entering my voice. "I wouldn't have killed him."

"All right. It does look suspicious, however, in light of comments he made to his supervisors. Moving on, there's an obstruction of justice charge a short time later. Something about falsely reporting a hostage situation?"

"Yeah," I said. "Did it, didn't think anything would come of it." I frowned. "I didn't make the call, though. How do they know I had anything to do with that?"

He scanned the paper. "It doesn't specify," he said. "We can press them on that, if it comes to it. They'll probably drop the charge. Next, tampering with evidence in a murder trial."

"Yeah. I took it from storage. It was...yeah."

He nodded. "All right. Next, premeditated murder with extreme brutality of Erica Reilly."

"Didn't do it," I said.

"That might be difficult to demonstrate," Alan said mildly. "Considering that there are multiple reports suggesting that you claimed otherwise at the time."

I winced. In hindsight, getting on Pellegrini's good side seemed...less than worth it.

"Continuing," he said briskly. "We have twelve counts of second degree murder. The bodies were found in a house in northern Colorado Springs, dead from a wide variety of causes."

It took a moment to figure out what he was talking about. The only thing I could think of was the house full of rakshasas and their slaves, which de Sousa had wiped out. For once, I hadn't had anything to do with it. "I didn't do that one," I said.

Alan looked at me doubtfully. "This is the only one where they have DNA evidence to support it," he said gently. "The chances of you getting out of it are...very slim."

I shrugged. "That's fine. I'm just saying, I didn't do it. I honestly have no idea why my DNA would have been there."

He nodded. "Okay," he said. "Moving on, it looks like...thirty-six counts of extortion, over a period ranging from shortly after those murders up until the present."

"A protection racket," I explained, feeling almost grateful to hear one that I could clearly place. "Although I should point out that all of them volunteered."

"Right," he said, making another note. "And...it looks like that brings us up to the big one. Three counts of domestic terrorism, two around a year and a half ago and one last week."

I blinked. "That's all?" I asked. "I was expecting they'd hit me with, like, a thousand murder charges for that or something."

Alan sighed. "Mr. Wolf—Winter—I don't think you entirely grasp the magnitude of what you're dealing with. The minimum sentence for even one conviction of premeditated murder is life in prison. That's the *minimum* sentence. Considering the number of charges against you, I think there's a very real possibility of capital punishment. I would *strongly* recommend you take this seriously."

"Oh, I am," I assured him. "I just think it's funny. Did they just get tired of writing out murder charges or something? Oh," I added as an afterthought, "and also I didn't do that. The terrorism bit, I mean."

"I believe you. But considering the amount of evidence they have, and the fact that you've avoided arrest for so long, it's questionable whether anyone else will." He looked over the papers again, then folded them and put them back in his briefcase. "It looks like that's everything," he said. "Now, as your attorney, may I offer you some advice?"

I shrugged. "You're the expert. Why hire an expert you aren't going to listen to?"

He smiled. "You'd be surprised how many people do. Anyway, Winter, I would advise you to seriously consider plea bargaining. I'm confident that I can get you off of many of these charges, but the ones I might *not* be able to are among the more serious. If you take the plea bargain, you can probably get your sentence reduced to life imprisonment without parole. If it goes to a jury trial, there's a very good chance that you'll get the death penalty."

"No offense, but that sounds considerably more pleasant than life in prison."

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"If you're sure," he said. "It's your choice. Anyway, I'm going to consult with some of the partners at my firm and see if we can come up with another option. In the meantime, I *strongly* recommend you think about what I said."

Maybe half an hour later, I was lying on the mattress in my cell. There was still nobody around, although any illusion of privacy was ruined by the cameras. There was the constant feeling of being watched, as though there were someone looking over my shoulder.

Still, there was something *different* right then. I still felt like being watched, but all of a sudden there was also the feeling of *presence*, like I wasn't alone anymore.

It was a vague feeling, but I hadn't lived this long by ignoring vague feelings. I immediately froze and looked around the room, trying to find any slight anomalies.

It only took a couple seconds to figure out what it was. There was a presence in the air, something I couldn't see or hear, but which smelled like magic in the gentle tones of a morning breeze passing through the forest.

"Hello," I said, looking its general direction. I was tensed now, ready to move. Air spirits were generally harmless, but I'd rather not take chances under the circumstances. "Do you have something to tell me?"

The spirit's mind brushed gently against mine, conveying meaning and ideas without really shaping it into words. I got an image of Aiko—not a visual image, *per se*, more a summary description of who she was, her shape, her scent, the way her magic felt as it brushed against the air spirit. I felt frustration, regret, disgust. I got an impression of freedom, and then a sense of offering, of question.

I thought for a moment and then returned the idea of negation, rejection, refusal. I added feelings of caution, patience, and confidence, then topped it off with another sense of question, of request. This last was directed to the air spirit specifically, requesting that it return my reply to Aiko.

It hovered there for a moment longer, then vanished. It was hard to be sure whether it would do what I'd asked—air spirits are flighty, and almost mindless—but I suspected it would. Air spirits tend to do what Aiko asks them to.

If I got lucky, she might not decide to break me out anyway. At the moment, that seemed like a bad idea.

If I got even *luckier*, I wouldn't regret asking her not to.

Chapter Nineteen

The next several days passed in a blur. My routine was very simple. I woke up at dawn every morning, more out of habit than anything; with no windows I couldn't see the sun, and the lights in my cell never went off. I exercised for about an hour, at which point it was time for breakfast. "Breakfast," it turned out, was a sort of imitation egg that appeared to have been made from a powdered mix, served with white bread. To say that it tasted like shit would be an insult to shit.

After breakfast, I spent some time looking through the eyes of various animals, keeping myself abreast of what was going on in the area. At first I was limited to the streets around the police station, but it didn't take long for me to fix that. They had the place closed down to keep me in isolation, after all, and while there were always some guards on site, that still left large sections of the building basically empty. With a little bit of guidance from me, those areas were soon occupied by a pair of raccoons, an adolescent fox, and quite a number of rats. They left to get food on a regular basis—apparently prison food was too bad even for their standards—but they came back for the promise of easy shelter.

Checking up on conditions inside and outside the building kept me busy until lunch, which was a sandwich of the driest meat I'd ever seen pressed between more white bread, mushy peas, and powdered milk that had been reconstituted with considerably too much water. Once I'd choked that down, I didn't have much to do with myself, so I mostly paced until dinnertime.

Dinner, somehow, managed to be even less pleasant than the other meals. Apparently it consisted of whatever happened to be left over from the previous day mashed together, scraped into a pan, and baked until it had the approximate consistency of shoe leather. Vile did not *begin* to describe the result.

Once that was done with, I laid down on the mattress and tossed and turned until exhaustion was sufficient to overcome the effects of nausea and those goddamn lights which *never turned off*. I wouldn't have expected that to bother me nearly as much as it did. Finally I managed to drift off to a restless, fitful sleep.

Around six hours later, the cycle began again.

I kept meticulous track of the days, mostly just to keep myself grounded in the passage of time. Thus, I knew that it had been five days since Alan's visit when a pair of guards approached the cell again. Aside from the silent man who brought my meals three times a day and then returned later to take the tray, they were the first people I'd seen since that visit.

"Hi," I said, looking at them closely. I didn't think I'd seen either of them before, although I recognized both from my routine surveillance of the area. "What's up?"

"You have a visitor," one of them said. Her voice was rough, and even by comparison to the other guards she seemed unfriendly. "Let's go."

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Which was suspicious and weird as hell, but by this point, I was so glad to get out of that damn cell that I didn't care. I felt almost cheerful as I followed them back to the same interrogation room as before. This time they handcuffed my wrists to the table before leaving. I had enough room to lean back comfortably, but lifting my arms more than a few inches from the table was impossible.

Maybe five minutes later, just when a person might be wondering if they were being left there to rot, the door opened again and a youngish man walked in. Luckily one of my rats had been close enough to overhear most of the conversation between him and the chief of police outside, so I really wasn't concerned about the wait.

"Good morning, Mr. Wolf," he said, smiling. It was a charming smile, but there was something almost plastic about it. It very much gave the impression that he was smiling not out of any real feeling, but because he *knew* it was a charming smile and he wanted me to be charmed.

"Good morning," I said. "And please, call me Winter."

"All right, Winter," he said, sitting down opposite me. "My name's Mike."

"So what did you want to talk about?" I asked, smiling. My smile was probably less charming than his. I'm not really very good at charming smiles.

"I thought we could chat, maybe get to know you a little."

"Ah," I said. "So...you're not with my lawyer or you'd have said so off the bat, you're not hostile enough to be with the cops, you aren't smooth enough to be a real interrogator. I'd be inclined to guess district attorney or something like that...but no, they would have a more aggressive opening too. The first thing you mention is wanting to know more about me, which suggests your job is to provide information. So...I'm guessing you're a psychologist?"

He didn't say anything, but his smile slipped a little. I grinned. "Hey, I got it right," I said cheerfully.

There were times when it was really nice to hear conversations you aren't present for. The rat hadn't been able to hear every word they said, but it had been enough for me to make some educated guesses—which, in turn, let me do a really great Sherlock impression. Which might not be useful, but the expression on his face was *priceless*.

"Why would you think that I'm a psychologist?" he asked, trying to regain his composure.

I shrugged, the motion made somewhat awkward by the cuffs. "It makes sense if my lawyer's considering an insanity plea," I said. "Which might not be a bad idea, really."

"Why would that be a good idea?"

I snorted. "Have you *read* my file, doc?"

"Yes," he admitted. "It looks like you were diagnosed with depression, schizophrenia, and paranoid personality disorder. The psychologist at the time also made a note regarding the possibility of antisocial personality disorder, but since you were underage, it wasn't diagnosed."

"See?" I said, shrugging again. "If you've got a history like that, and you've got a list of charges like mine, 'not guilty by reason of insanity' starts to sound pretty tempting. Sure, it's a long shot, but what *isn't*?"

"Do you feel that you're insane, then?"

"I don't know. Define insanity."

"To be legally insane, you would have to either not know what you were doing, or not realize that what you were doing was wrong."

"Ah," I said. "And...how would I go about proving those?"

"We aren't talking about proof right now," he said. "I just want to know what *you* think."

"Okay," I said, grinning. "Starting with the first one, you right away run into problems with definitions again. Do I have to not know what I'm doing, or can I know what I'm doing but be *wrong*? Like, if I based my decision on information that seemed legit at the time, but turned out to be wildly inaccurate?"

"That would qualify," he said. "But only if the reason you thought that information was accurate had to do with your mental illness."

I thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah," I said. "In that case, I guess I do qualify. There have definitely been times when I thought someone was out to get me, but it turned out to be baseless. That's pretty typical for paranoids, right?"

"That's a common symptom," he agreed. "Would you mind giving me some examples?"

I hesitated. "It depends. This is all confidential, right? Off the record?"

"That's right," he confirmed. "Let's take a look at the first crime you're charged with, since your lawyer told me you aren't planning to fight that one. Apparently you murdered your girlfriend?"

"I told him," I said irritably. "I *didn't* kill her, I just knew that it was happening."

"It's okay," he said soothingly. "I'm not asking you to confess to anything. I just want to know whether, in your opinion, that was one of the situations we're talking about." I was a little surprised, but his voice actually did calm me down a little bit. Guy was good at his job, I had to give him that.

"Okay," I said. "Yeah, that's one of them. I thought she was out to get me—which she was, in a way, but in hindsight I don't think she could have done anything about it."

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"I see," he said. "And is that why you killed her?"

"I didn't kill her," I repeated. "And if you think repeating the question is going to change my answer, you're wrong." I paused and took a deep breath before continuing. "Anyway, yes, that's part of why I let it happen. She'd also upset a pretty major organization, and I knew that if I tried to protect her they'd just come after me, too. So I don't really think of it as letting her die, so much as choosing not to die with her."

"I see," he repeated. "And this organization, can you tell me a little more about them? Do you think they're still out to get you?"

"No," I said. "No, we're on pretty good terms. I think we are, anyway; they might be a little upset that I got myself arrested. They frown on that."

He considered me for a moment. "I hate to ask this," he said at last, and I got the impression that he might actually be telling the truth. "But are you tailoring your answers to fit the diagnosis?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "I mean, I know I'd probably say that either way, but I'm really not. Honestly, I just don't care enough to bother."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "If they find me guilty, they'll put me in a prison for the rest of my life. If they say I'm insane, they'll put me in an asylum for the rest of my life. It doesn't really make much of a difference. Either way, it's a cage. I don't like cages."

"But in an asylum, you could get treatment."

I snorted. "In my experience, psychiatry is a massive waste of time for everyone involved. No offense."

"I see," he said. "Would that also be why you stopped taking your medications several years ago?"

"Oh. Heh. I actually forgot about those. Yeah, I actually stopped quite a while before I dropped the prescription. It must have been almost twenty years now? Yeah."

"May I ask why?"

"Sure," I said. "They weren't doing any good. The antidepressants made me feel worse, and the antipsychotics just made me feel ill."

"I see," he said again. "Would you consider trying them again if I wrote a prescription for you? They've made great strides in the drug development world since you last tried them. I think you'll find that your experiences this time are much more positive than before."

I shrugged. "Sure, if you want. I wouldn't count on it."

"Okay," he said, standing. "I'll clear it with the police and we'll see what we can do. Thanks for your time, Winter."

"No problem," I said. "Oh, and Dr. Buckley?" He paused and turned back towards me. I grinned. "I just wanted to apologize," I said. "In case this whole thing reflects poorly on you, afterward."

I could see it when he realized that he'd never told me his last name. He shivered, just a little, and then turned and left, closing the door behind himself more forcefully than was strictly necessary.

I grinned and leaned back in my chair, waiting for the guards to come back and collect me. It can be *very* nice to overhear conversations without being present.

With that in mind, I relaxed and let myself drift. The rat I'd been using previously had moved on, but the fox was napping in the room upstairs. Its ears were plenty sharp enough to catch the conversation going on below it.

"He's definitely crazy," the psychologist was saying. "But it's a really odd sort of crazy. Like, he's very polite, friendly, pleasant—and still makes it clear he could kill you as easily as look at you."

"Aren't you people supposed to have fancy words for that sort of thing?" the police chief replied, sounding amused.

"Would you understand them if I did?" There was a brief pause. "Anyway, I'm going to have some antipsychotics sent in. Try putting them in his food or something, we'll see if they seem to help."

"Did he consent to that?"

"Yeah. But I don't know if he'd actually take them, if you just give him the pills."

I smiled, and didn't argue when the guards came in to escort me back to my cell.

Days passed, first at a crawl and then in a blur. I took to spending more and more time outside my body, drifting between other minds at will. Sometimes I spent hours as a passive observer in a single cat's mind, following the slow stalk of a rodent. Other times I flitted from one animal to the next, barely taking in a single glimpse before moving on, or else diffused myself across multiple animals, parsing the sensations and feelings I got from them into a single gestalt.

I continued to exercise on a regular basis, although I did so more or less on autopilot. I couldn't do very much, in any case; everything from the elbows down ached by now from the silver. I was strangely fatigued all the time, and my immune system was suppressed to such an extent that I caught a cold for the first time since I became a werewolf. On the whole, leaving my body was a welcome escape.

Sometimes I ate the food they gave me, but more often I didn't bother. Already terrible, it tasted even worse when compared to the flavors I was getting from other bodies. I tried to remember to eat at least once daily, but I often forgot to. At some point they started giving me better food, but by

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then it was too little, too late; they could have been serving my favorite meals fresh from a four-star restaurant and I probably wouldn't have eaten them with any more regularity.

Occasionally I had visitors. The lawyer—Alan, his name was—dropped by every few days to check on me. I managed to carry on a conversation, but I knew that I was coming across as listless and distractible. I managed to pay just enough attention to learn that he had indeed begun an insanity defense, and the first hearing date had been set.

Probably because of that, more psychologists and psychiatrists visited, as well. I wasn't sure whether the first one returned or not. I paid less attention in those conversations, letting myself drift more completely. Sometimes I replied when they asked me questions. Sometimes I didn't.

Occasionally, although not as often as I'd have guessed, people tried to interrogate me. On those occasions, I said nothing at all, and left just enough of my awareness in my body that I could tell what was going on. Sometimes they played the good cop. Sometimes they tried screaming in my face, or walking around behind me while someone else talked. None of them got a reaction.

On three occasions a cop hit me, twice in the abdomen and once in the face. Another time someone tried to waterboard me during my weekly shower. I didn't react to those, either; in comparison to some of what I'd been through, they just didn't make an impression. I didn't see any of those cops again, and from overheard conversations I gathered that they'd been harshly disciplined.

The strangest thing was that the hard part, for me, wasn't the bad food, the isolation, the occasional interrogation. It wasn't even the confinement.

No, the hard part was knowing that I could make it stop. Knowing that, at any given moment, I could say a word and it would all go away. Hell, I could probably *think* Loki's name hard enough and he would come.

But I didn't. I knew what the consequences would be. I knew what the price would be. If I made that choice, heads would roll.

I could handle it, I told myself. Normal people went through this all the time. I could handle it until my hearing.

Because, somewhere in that blur of time, I'd made a decision. I could wait until the hearing. I could do that. I could see how that went, what happened.

And after that? If they tried to put me back in a cage?

Heads were going to roll.

Chapter Twenty

An expensive black sedan parked on the street around two blocks away. There was a cat around the corner, a rat under the storm grate fifty feet in the other direction, and four pigeons overlooking the scene from various angles. As such, I had a surround view as a man opened the driver's door and got out.

After a few seconds of processing, I recognized it as Alan, my lawyer. A visit from him was worth paying attention to, and today he was wearing an even nicer suit than usual, so I thought I might take a closer look.

Scent and sound weren't so informative at the moment as vision, so I focused on one of the pigeons. A couple of blinks, mental more than physical, brought the scene into focus, and I watched as he walked briskly down the street. It was hard to read his expression through a pigeon's eyes—they'd never been my favorite animal to work with, although I'd been forced to practice with them quite a bit recently. But I thought he looked grim. Determined, although not necessarily in a good way.

After he'd walked around a block, there was a crow within sight, and I shifted to her mind with a feeling of gratitude. A quick glance was enough to confirm that I had been correct. His expression definitely had a stoniness to it that suggested today was more than just another status update.

He moved inside the building and I floated with him, moving into a rat this time. It was nested down in a supply closet that hadn't been opened since I took up residence here, and which was predictably trashed. I couldn't see, but I could hear him walk into the former police station.

"Good morning," one of the guards said. He was one of the friendlier ones, I thought. It had gotten hard to tell them apart. You'd think that spending so much time in their company would make them seem more like unique individuals, but strangely, the opposite was true. They turned into just cogs in the machine. "Big day, huh?"

"Very much so," Alan agreed. He sounded much like he'd looked—determined, but not hopeful.

Big day. It took me a second to figure out what that meant.

Once I did, the excitement was enough to break my concentration completely, and I slipped back into my own body. Big day. There were only so many reasons why Alan would be here for a special day.

Presumably, it was finally time for my hearing.

I wanted to stand up and pace, restless and jittery now that I was so close to getting out of this hellhole. I forced myself to remain on my mattress instead. I'd taken to spending most of my time there, over the past weeks, and it would be odd if I got up for no reason just when my lawyer arrived.

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I wasn't entirely sure why I bothered, given that whoever watched the camera feeds had certainly seen enough to figure out that I was a little *off*. If nothing else, the fit I'd thrown during the full moon was surely an indicator. The silver in those damned bracelets had prevented me from actually changing, but the resultant agony had left me writhing on the ground and moaning most of the night. They'd actually checked whether I was okay the next morning, and the doctor had been baffled when I appeared entirely healthy.

As disjointed as my sense of time had become recently, it wasn't surprising that the next few minutes seemed to take longer than entire days of waiting. It felt like hours passed before I heard footsteps coming down the hall, and figured I could stand up and go to the bars without arousing suspicion. Hell, it would probably seem weird if I *weren't* anxious, under the circumstances.

As expected, a pair of guards approached. For the first time, though, Alan had come with them rather than waiting for me upstairs. "Good morning, Winter," he said, nodding to me.

"Good morning, Alan. What's the occasion?"

"It's your hearing date," he said. "It's scheduled to start in about two hours."

"Two hours," I said. "Why didn't you tell me a little sooner than that?"

He looked at me almost pityingly. "I did," he said gently. "Yesterday. And the day before. And the week before that."

"Really?"

"Yes."

I blinked. Had I really missed that? Had I been so out of touch with my surroundings that I'd completely failed to notice him telling me something that crucial?

Thinking back on it, I found it disturbingly plausible. Even now, I had to resist the urge to let myself go. My body *ached*, I was still coughing from that cold I'd come down with weeks earlier, and recently when I bothered to eat I couldn't keep my hands steady. In comparison to that, spending time in almost *anyone's* body sounded pretty good.

I had to get this silver off. I *had* to.

"You're going to be traveling there separately," he was saying. I forced myself to pay attention; this might be important. "I'll meet you at the courthouse, and we'll go over some last-minute details. Please *try* not to do anything stupid until then."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks, Alan. I appreciate this."

"The money is how you thank me," he said dryly, and walked away, leaving me to the gentle mercies of my guards.

They let me out of the cell, and then one of them stood at a safe distance while the other put cuffs on my wrists and ankles. My hands were in front of me, at least; if they were behind me, considering how poor my coordination was at the moment, I wasn't sure whether I'd have been able to walk.

They marched me out the building in silence, at a pace that was just a bit faster than I could comfortably manage with my feet chained together. We were met at the door by another three guards, who fell into position around me for the ten steps it took to get to the street.

Unsurprisingly, they weren't transporting me with anyone else, so I got to sit in the back of one of the secure vans they used all by myself. Oh, there were four armed guards there with me, but I'd stopped really seeing them as people quite a while ago. They were more like furniture, or security cameras. Part of the background.

As usual, they weren't interested in making conversation, and I certainly had nothing to say to them. So I leaned back and let myself drift some more, passing the time without quite cognizing it. I noticed, somewhat distantly, that there weren't many animals out and about, and those that were weren't happy about it. Focusing a little more clearly, I realized that the weather had gone from somewhat ominous to seriously inclement.

The next thing I was aware of, someone was shaking me. I opened my eyes, blinking a couple of times to get used to seeing the world through only one set, and then looked at the guard. From the expression on his face, it wasn't the first time he'd shaken me. "Hey," I said, slurring a little. I wasn't sure whether it was from confusion regarding how my mouth was supposed to work or just fatigue. "What's up?"

"We're there," he snapped. "Get out of the van."

I did so, scooting to the edge and then hopping out. I landed awkwardly, and I recovered even more awkwardly, so that I ended up tripping over my own feet. I would have fallen on my face, had a particularly strong gust not hit me at just the right angle to push me back on balance.

One of the guards caught me by the elbow before I could overbalance again, steadying me against the wind. "This is crazy," he said, shouting to make himself heard over the howling wind. His voice was still all but drowned out. "The forecast was clear for today!"

Looking around, I had to admit he had a point. I generally enjoyed the wind, but even I would have to acknowledge it was vicious today, blowing people off their feet and turning dust and grit into a sandblaster. The clouds were so thick and dark it looked like dusk rather than midmorning. Lightning split the sky every second or two, providing more illumination than the sun, and the growl and rumble of thunder was incessant.

I found myself thinking of Scáthach talking about a storm on the horizon. Of Arbiter saying much the same thing.

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Sure, it was probably metaphorical. But it was still a little unnerving.

I shivered a little as the guards escorted me into the building.

We walked in through the service entrance, and they seemed to know exactly where they were going as they marched me down several hallways and up a flight of stairs. We ended up in a small room which resembled the interrogation room back at the police station a little more closely than I would have liked. Two guards took up positions by the door, while I joined Alan at the table.

"You made it," he said. "Good. I was starting to get worried."

"Bad weather," I said, looking out the window. It was small, and high on the wall, but still quite a bit better than I'd had in way too long. The storm didn't look like it was lightening up at all.

"Quite. Strange; the forecast said it should be nice today." He looked down at the stack of papers he was holding, then back up at me. "So, Winter, how much do you remember about what we're trying to do today?"

"Not much," I admitted. "I don't think I've really been present for a lot of our conversations, mentally."

"I noticed. Fortunately, you seem more lucid today. We're planning to challenge many of the charges they've brought against you on the basis of inadequate evidence and poor procedure. There are a handful that I don't think we can get dismissed on that basis; we're planning an insanity defense for those. Ideally I think we'll be able to dismiss many of the charges, and then take a plea bargain on the rest."

"Okay," I said. "And what are we bargaining for?"

"Life incarceration," he said immediately. "Realistically, that's the best you can hope for at this point. But with the plea deal, we can probably ensure that the sentence is to an asylum, or possibly a low-security prison."

"Okay," I said again. "And there's nothing you can do that won't end with me in a cage?"

He shrugged. "It's conceivably possible that you'd be found innocent in a jury trial. But I wouldn't bet on it, personally. The evidence for some of the charges is rather overwhelming, and you frankly aren't photogenic enough to pull it off anyway. Speaking of which, I was wondering whether you'd be willing to take some steps on that."

"What do you mean?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it and reached into his briefcase instead. A moment later, he handed me a small mirror, giving me my first really decent look at myself since I'd been arrested.

I looked like shit.

Always on the thin side, I looked emaciated. My cheeks were gaunt, and my prison jumpsuit hung off me like I was a scarecrow. My skin was too pale from not seeing the sun in almost a month. My eyes were sunken, and unsettlingly bright as a result. My hair was tangled and matted, and it was long enough to meld into a scraggly beard.

I could see what Alan meant. I looked like a dead man walking, if that man also happened to be strung out on crack.

"Shit," I said, setting the mirror back on the table. "Do you have a knife?" I gestured vaguely at my face, making it clear that I was talking about grooming rather than violence.

"Better," he said, smiling. He reached into his briefcase again and came up with a pair of scissors, a safety razor, and a can of shaving cream. "I'm no stylist, but I should be able to get you at least somewhat presentable."

"You do this often, then?"

"You'd be surprised," he said seriously. "Most people let their grooming go a little in prison." He paused. "Granted, this is a bit of an exceptional case."

Heads were going to roll.

I'd just spent the last three hours forcing myself to remain alert, focused, and responsive, while Alan, the prosecuting attorney, and the judge debated fine points of legalese. I'd been patient and polite while being repeatedly asked the same questions over and over again. I'd tolerated the whispers and murmurs of the crowd gathered, which was larger than I'd expected for a preliminary hearing.

And now that said hearing was over, there were a few thoughts going through my mind.

The first was that Alan had been right. Based on the attitudes of everyone involved, from the lawyers to the peanut gallery, my chance of going free was basically nonexistent. I was almost certainly looking at a life sentence in one institution or another.

The second was that the judge had refused to set bail, meaning that I was going straight back to that tiny cell under the police station.

The third was that the ache from the silver hadn't let up in the slightest. If anything, now that I was more conscious of what was going on, more tied to my body, it was worse. Over the past hours it had risen to a crescendo, and I almost couldn't hear myself think through the pain.

The fourth was that the storm outside had only intensified. Even in the bowels of the courthouse I could occasionally hear the wind howling outside, and the more intense rounds of thunder shook the building to its foundations.

All of which just lead back to my initial conclusion. Heads rolling.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"Winter," my lawyer said when I didn't get up. "Winter, it's time to go."

I turned to him. "Alan," I said, "thank you. You've been very pleasant and tolerant, even though I'm sure I haven't been the easiest client. You've done a lot for me, and I want to apologize."

"For what?"

I could have given any number of answers, but one of the things I'd figured out over the years was that the universe couldn't resist the opportunity for perfect timing. Or, at least, Loki couldn't, and at the moment that was good enough.

So rather than anything elaborate, I just said, "This."

A moment later, perfectly on cue, the massive double doors of the courtroom slammed open hard enough to hit the walls and bounce. I watched as the entire crowd turned, seemingly as a single unit, to watch what was happening.

There were no friendly faces in that crowd. I'd hoped that Aiko might at least come, but I supposed the hearing wasn't open to the general public.

Around three seconds after the door was open—just long enough that everyone had turned to look, but nobody had quite figure out what to do—Loki walked through. He was mostly human in appearance today, but well over six feet tall. He was grinning, and it was exactly the warped, twisted grin I associated with him.

"Lights are good," he said cheerfully, swaggering down the middle of the room like he owned the place. "And action's on its way. But we could use a few cameras, if anyone's carrying."

Several people in the crowd pulled out their phones, either on cue or because what they were seeing was too crazy *not* to get on video. Loki nodded approvingly and kept walking. "Very nice," he said. "You folks just earned some brownie points." He casually vaulted the barrier between the crowd and the people who were actually involved in the proceedings, and bowed to the judge. "Hello, Your Honor," he said. "I'd like to address the court."

"Bailiff," the judge said instantly. That appeared to be all the instruction necessary, as the bailiff immediately moved forward and grabbed Loki by the shoulder.

"I'm going to give you one warning," the deity said pleasantly. "Let go right now, or I will stop you."

"Come on, buddy," the bailiff sighed. "Let's get you out of here."

Loki's smile slipped, just a little, and in that moment I realized something important about him.

I'd always treated Loki with respect. I'd mouthed off to him occasionally, sure, and I'd made a point of not behaving like a sycophant around him. But I'd done so specifically because I knew that he'd be bored if I didn't, and I couldn't afford for him to be bored with me. Even before I'd realized who he

was, I'd had some idea of the power he wielded, and I'd always regarded him with respect and a healthy amount of fear as a result.

The bailiff, though? He genuinely thought Loki was just a random crazy person who'd wandered into the hearing somehow, and he was treating him appropriately.

And Loki was *pissed*.

There was no sign of pain, in what happened next. The bailiff didn't scream, or writhe in agony as he fell to the ground. He just...

Stopped. Completely, and very fatally.

The judge didn't have time to say anything before several guards lifted their weapons and started shooting. I ducked under the table I was sitting at, and several people in the audience screamed. Loki didn't react at all, though. The bullets didn't affect him. It was hard to say exactly what was going on; they weren't ricocheting off him, and they weren't making holes in him. It was more like they hit him and just *vanished*.

The guards stopped shooting and lowered their weapons, looking scared and confused. "Thank you for your courtesy," Loki said sarcastically. "The next person to try something like that gets turned into something."

One guard, braver or dumber than the rest, lifted his pistol again. Loki gestured slightly, and he hit the ground with a sort of *squishing* sound. At a glance it looked like parts of him had been turned inside out, exposing muscle and bone to the air. He flopped a couple of times and then went still.

"Excellent," Loki said. "Perhaps now we can continue without further interruption. Oh, and don't bother trying to call for help. I've taken the liberty of co-opting all outgoing communication for the time being. What happens here will be seen and heard by most of the world, so do try to remember that what you do now will be recorded for posterity."

I wasn't *totally* sure that last bit was directed at me, but I went ahead and got out from under the table anyway.

"What are you doing?" the judge asked. To her credit, she sounded completely composed, despite what had just happened.

"I'm making a public service announcement," Loki said, grinning. "Many of you know who I am," he continued, turning to face the cameras. "For the rest, just rest assured that I do have the authority to say what I'm saying. And what I'm saying is this. The experiment is over. The grand masquerade which has been the rule of the game for the past several centuries has run its course. Anything your various superiors have ever told you about preserving the innocence of the poor, ignorant little mortals is null and void. If they tell you otherwise, tell them to take it up with me."

"I don't understand," the judge said.

## Unclean Hands (Winter's Tale)

"Don't worry, dear. This message isn't meant for the likes of you. Now, where was I?" He grinned. "Ah, yes. As I was saying, the age of the dull and mundane is ended. The time of rationalism is passed. The gods have spoken, and we tell our children to let fall the reins, take off the muzzles, and let it all out."

"That's fine," I said. "But what about me?"

He turned and smiled at me. "I just told you that many of the rules no longer apply," he said. "So I recommend that you be yourself. Unless you *want* to spend the rest of your life in a cage." Then he turned and walked back out of the room, vaulting the barrier again on his way. He was whistling while he did, something catchy that I couldn't place.

"Fine," I sighed, standing. "Be that way."

A moment's concentration brought Tyrfing to my hand. A flick of my wrist sent the sheath spinning off under the prosecutor's table; another and the chain between my hands was broken. I went ahead and cut the ankle cuffs as well, then carefully slid the blade under the tracking bracelet.

"Winter?" Alan asked, his voice the careful, gentle tone you use around people on ledges. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not going back to a cage," I said absently, working the sword under the bracelet. I nicked myself, but it wasn't a big deal. One more scar wouldn't stand out on my left hand. Tyrfing slid through the bracelet like it was made of butter, and I switched to the other side, separating the bracelet into two semicircles.

Then I switched hands, and looked down with some dismay. I'd never been good left-handed, and between the scarring and the silver, I was even clumsier now. The idea of trying to cut the other bracelet off like that was...unsettling.

Then, unexpectedly, Alan spoke up. "Here," he said. "Let me hold that for you."

I eyed him for a moment, then shrugged and handed over the sword. I was half-expecting him to try and stab me with it, but he held it rock steady for me as I cut the other bracelet off.

"Thanks," I said, taking the sword back. "I really am sorry about all this."

"Don't be," he said. "Honestly, I was expecting something of the sort." He smiled wryly. "Although not this extreme, I admit. In any case, I know that this likely wasn't your fault. It's been a pleasure working with you."

"The pleasure is all mine," I assured him. "And I'll see that you get a nice bonus, as well."

"In that case, it's been a *very great* pleasure working with you."

I grinned, then walked out into the storm. Nobody tried to stop me.



Epilogue

It was oddly peaceful on the ramparts of our castle. The night air was cool, and I could feel the creatures of the forest going about their business, making preparations for the coming winter. Down in the castle Aiko and Alexis were doing something similar, laying in supplies and shoring up the defenses. I had been helping earlier, but I'd mostly just been getting in the way, so I'd wandered up here instead.

*It's funny,* Snowflake said, echoing my own thoughts. *You can't tell that anything's wrong from here.*

*I know,* I replied, reaching down and scratching her ears. She hadn't been more than a couple feet from me in the four days since I'd left police custody.

Not that I could blame her. I hadn't exactly been trying to get away from her, either.

Looking south, I almost fancied that I could see a lightness to the sky, a redness. It was probably my imagination, but not necessarily. News was hard to come by at the moment, but from what I'd heard Bucharest was burning.

A lot of the world was burning.

I wasn't entirely sure what I'd expected to happen after Loki's little speech, but it hadn't been remotely as bad as what actually did. An awful lot of people had been awfully repressed for the last thousand years or so, and now that the rules had been lifted they were making up for lost time with a vengeance. Packs of werewolves roamed the streets, vampires stalked the night, and faeries kidnapped children from their homes in broad daylight. The Guards were trying to maintain sanity, as were the Watchers and various local powers, but they couldn't be everywhere. Where there were gaps in the coverage, the fires spread.

Everything I'd heard suggested that things were *bad* out there, and getting worse.

The odd thing was that many of the problems could have been avoided. There were plenty of people out there who knew the rules, the logic by which these things worked. They could have told the uninformed to carry iron to ward off the fae, that werewolves weren't so bad as long as you stayed out of the way, that they should never invite a stranger—or even a familiar face, really—into their home. Simple rules, tips and tricks that could negate a lot of the minor threats people were confronted by. That, in turn, would leave the greater powers with more time to handle the *major* problems.

Humanity already had the advantage of numbers, and modern weapons, and they had quite a few allies in the supernatural world. With just a little bit of knowledge and organization, they could have kept things together.

But most people had been caught wholly by surprise, unprepared to deal with things they'd been taught were fictional. They were confused, they were scared, and the government wasn't doing all

that great a job of making them *less* confused and scared. A lot of people didn't know the old stories, and even those who did couldn't really say which parts were accurate. There were places where people had held together and maintained order, but by and large they hadn't. Unrest encouraged unrest, and in cities around the world there was rioting and chaos as a result.

But here, in one of the more inaccessible reaches of the Transylvanian mountains?

Things were peaceful here. Quiet. Calm. Outside, the creatures of the forest followed the same routines they'd followed for thousands of generations. Barring *extreme* changes in how the world worked, they would keep following those routines for thousands more.

It was, in an odd way, both reassuring and intimidating. To know that life would go on, that the current chaos was fundamentally transient, that was comforting. No matter how bad things got, something would be left to pick up and carry on.

But at the same time, there was something deeply unsettling about it. This was huge, probably the single biggest thing I'd ever *seen*, let alone had a part in. To know that it was, in the grand scheme of things, not terribly important or significant—that was terrifying. It was a reminder of just how small I was.

I sighed and went back inside. Soon, I knew, this illusion of peace would be shattered. Alexis was leaving in the morning, going back to live with her family in Oregon. Her membership in the Guards was all but certain by now, but she still needed a certain amount of combat training, and I wasn't equipped to give it to her. She was going to be taking lessons from Moray.

For my part...well, I still had a city to govern. And now, more than ever, I had to actually do the job I'd laid claim to. If I wasn't there to keep the peace in such troubled times, I might as well give up any pretense of being a jarl. And if *someone* wasn't there to maintain order, things might get very bad before they got better.

Inside, the work was almost finished. I did a bit of heavy lifting, moving various blocks and beams into position, and then we called it a night. Alexis went to her room to finish packing. Aiko and I went upstairs, where she kissed me with an intensity that spoke of desperation more than passion.

Neither of us had mentioned what she'd been about to say, when we were interrupted. It had taken days for me to return to a more-or-less normal state of mind, and once I did it had become clear what the state of the world was going to be. Talking about emotions, our relationship, the future—it all seemed ridiculous in the face of such upheaval, such uncertainty about what tomorrow would bring.

But for the moment, I could be satisfied with tonight.