

It took a certain amount of work to convince the Wild Hunt to let the cub and his friends go. Not as much as I expected it to. The Hunt was already predisposed to leave him be, out of respect. It was in their nature to respect a predator, and he had adequately shown himself to be a predator this night.

People had always had a tendency to describe me as a leader of the Wild Hunt, or even a ruler of it. It amused me how badly they misunderstood it, how thoroughly they failed to grasp the basic concept of the Wild Hunt. It wasn't something you could rule. You could lead only in the sense that the head of a spear leads the shaft. The Wild Hunt was made to be an entity unto itself, not to be subservient to the will of another.

It's always made perfect sense to me. Which itself made sense, I supposed. My nature had always had something in common with that of the Hunt. It likely helped that I'd had the chance to discuss the topic with its creator. Or perhaps progenitor would be the more accurate way to phrase it; no concept as sterile as *creation* could be truly applicable to the Wild Hunt. But he had given me an understanding of what he made, at the same time as I had learned many other things.

I looked around, and saw the hole in the world, waiting to be pushed into being. As always, I saw it in only one eye; the second had been taken long ago.

I pressed against the weakness in the world as I rode forward, opening the hole. It led to a Way, one of the paths the gods had carved through the face of reality, tying their creation together. Slower than a direct portal, but simpler to use, requiring less power, and a great deal safer.

I didn't look back to check whether the Wild Hunt was following as I entered the Way. It was a matter of confidence. Act as though no one could possibly question you, and no one will. Show weakness, show doubt, show even a moment's hesitation and the mask shatters, the illusion of control gone in a heartbeat.

The Way was a short one, crossing a short distance between worlds that had a great deal in common. Through my *other* eye, I could see the magics holding it together, woven into the backbone of the world, as immutable as reality itself. You could as easily turn back time as argue with that magic. You could more easily tear the fabric of reality itself than pull the two worlds apart with this holding them together.

To someone else, that might have been a comforting thought. Having seen what happened when someone actually *did*, I found it less so.

Back in the lands of the fae, I turned and looked at my Wild Hunt. I could see each of them, and I could see the power that tied them together and made them a *Hunt* rather than just a group of hunters. It was as indestructible as the Way, though for an entirely different reason, almost the polar opposite. The Wild Hunt was so amorphous, so ill-defined and unstructured, that it couldn't really be *damaged*. It took power from its lack of definition, rather than from *being* a definition.

"This night's hunt is ended," I said.

Towards the back, one of the Sidhe spoke up. "We have not hunted anything," she said.

I turned my head to look at her, and she flinched away. Most people did when they met my gaze, though it had nothing to their reaction when they truly saw my face. Even with the blindfold, even with the power I'd woven into the blindfold, they could still sense the void that lay behind.

One eye taken long ago, in punishment for a crime so abstract that nothing mortal could really comprehend it. One eye given, in exchange for a greater sight.

"This night's hunt is ended," I said again. This time there were no objections.

I had lost something tonight. Something intangible, almost indefinable, but something that any fae, or anyone who had ever felt the touch of the Wild Hunt, would understand. It wasn't precisely reputation, or honor, or prestige, or respect, although it incorporated elements of all of those things. You could touch the edges of it with the Roman concept of *auctoritas*, or the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, but neither one fully grasped the meaning.

What it meant in an immediate sense was that the next time I called the Wild Hunt, fewer hunters would come to my call. If I asked a favor, people would be more likely to make an excuse not to do it. If I gave advice, they would feel more free to ignore it.

In general, it meant that my words carried less weight.

On a larger scale, looking beyond the immediate consequence, it meant that the balance of power had shifted. It was a subtle thing, almost invisible to those not associated with the Wild Hunt already, but what had happened today would have consequences. Power had shifted away from me, in the great, intricate, infinitely complex game.

And on the greatest scale, it meant that the wheel had begun to turn. It was slow, quiet, so subtle that very few would have known it was happening at all, but I had a greater sight. I knew what this presaged, what it meant.

Fortune's wheel had treated me kindly for a very long time, but now it had begun to pull me down. Slowly but surely, I would be brought low, crushed, and forgotten, as so many had before me.

I felt no great emotion at the thought. There was no anger, no anxiety, no dread, no sense of betrayal. I could recognize logically that a person might feel this way, I could even conceptualize what it might be like to feel these things, but that was all. The feelings themselves weren't there.

It was not in my nature to feel anything. Mortals lived and died, and the world did not grieve their passing. Immortals came into being, were raised, and were cast down, and the world continued to turn.

One day even that would pass. The world itself would collapse, subsumed back into the chaos which had once given it birth. The end was already there, written into the structure of reality for those with the eyes to see. The world wound down to its ending, slowly but inexorably.

There was no emotion at the thought. There was no concern. It was not in my nature.

The distinction between a blessing and a curse has always been so very, very fine.