

Unclean Hands

Emrys Vaughn

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Clean Slate (Winter's Tale)

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Emrys Vaughn

Dedicating this book to my cousin, in exchange for services rendered. Questions are discouraged.

Chapter One

Walking up to the building, I was surprised at how much activity there was inside. There were maybe twenty people in the main room, and their voices blended into a low buzz, making it hard to follow the line of any one conversation. People moved from one group to another, carrying papers or tablets, distributing food. Everyone was working at a feverish pace, and from the exhausted postures I guessed that many hadn't taken a moment to rest for days.

All that stopped when I opened the door and walked in. People stopped what they were doing and turned to face the door, hands going to weapons.

I expected them to relax when they saw who it was, and in a sense they did. But almost half of those present saluted me, in one way or another, and several of the others followed suit a moment later.

Huh. That was new. I'd been the boss for quite a while, but that sort of open display of deference was unusual in the extreme. I wasn't quite sure what to attribute it to, either. Was it the result of the general climate making people uneasy, eager for leadership? Or was there something more personal going on?

Regardless, it wasn't even on the first page of my priorities, so I ignored them entirely as we walked across the room to the throne. The buzz of conversation resumed as people went back to their work.

Normally, on the rare occasions she even came, Aiko sat in her own throne next to mine. Today it wasn't there, a problem she solved by sitting in my lap and smirking at me almost before I'd sat down.

Usually I would have been concerned about my image. Today...well, even if that weren't *way* down my list of priorities and everyone else's, you'd have to be insane to think we looked cute and cuddly. There was way too much weaponry on display for that, especially once Snowflake curled up around my feet.

"Jarl," Selene said, appearing next to me about two seconds after I sat down. "I trust you're feeling well?"

"Yeah, sure," I lied absently, looking at the room. "What's with all of this?"

"Telephone service has been patchy the last few days, and other means of communication are, well." She shrugged. "Unreliable, I suppose would be the best way to phrase it. We've been coordinating everything through here, but it still involves a lot of people running back and forth."

"Damn," I said, watching the people running from one table to the next. The whole thing looked like barely-controlled madness, almost like watching an engine running a little faster than it could safely handle. "How much do we know about what's going on?"

"Our information is decent. Not great, but decent. I've been having people prioritize information gathering and scouting activities."

I grinned. It was good to know *something* had gone right recently. "Good. Give me the rundown."

Selene nodded and then waved to one of the runners, a skinny kid who looked like he couldn't be more than sixteen. "Get me Kyi, Tindr, and Brick. Then bring a table, a pitcher of tea, and a very large sandwich." She glanced at me critically and said, "Make that two sandwiches."

"Hey," I objected as the kid ran off. "I don't look *that* bad."

"Winter," Selene said dryly, "I have literally seen people in concentration camps that looked better than you."

"How...you know what, I don't think I want to know." I shook my head. "Okay, moving on. What's with the kid?"

She shrugged. "You've been attracting followers recently. This was the lowest-risk job I could find right now."

"Fair enough," I admitted reluctantly. I didn't like the idea of bringing a relative innocent into things, but I supposed that with how things were right now, working in a building full of violent lunatics was probably one of the safer places to be. At least here if someone attacked there was a full-time staff of people ready to *deal* with things.

And besides. Nobody was really an innocent anymore. I wasn't sure how things would shake out, but I was pretty confident that the supernatural wasn't going back into the closet.

Kyi appeared out of nowhere a moment later. Probably she'd been in the crowd somewhere, but if so I hadn't seen her. That was Kyi, generally. "Jarl," she said, nodding deeply to me. "Welcome home."

"Thanks. What's the situation?"

"Poor," she said bluntly. "I've been coordinating with our scouts, but information is sketchy. Let me set the maps out and I can bring you up to speed."

In short order, a large folding table was set up in front of the throne. On it was a topographic map of the city, which had been abused to such an extent that it was hard to imagine it ever being used for its intended purpose again. Large swaths of the city had been shaded in various colors, and the map bristled with pins. Notes had been scrawled in the margins or across sections of the map in at least three alphabets, and even the English parts were hard to read, between rushed handwriting, half-finished thoughts and crossed out words, and the occasional coffee stain.

Kyi, though, seemed perfectly confident as she pointed to a small green area near the southern edge of the map. "This is the zone we have under control," she said. "I've been scouting it regularly, but we haven't had an incursion in two days." She moved her finger slightly, indicating the larger area it was contained within. "We've been keeping the peace in this zone. But once you get farther from this building, things aren't as safe. We can't patrol the whole area, so sometimes we haven't been able to respond to an incident until several hours later."

I looked at it with some dismay. Even the larger area was...not that large, in comparison to the rest of the map. Less than ten percent of the city.

Considerably less.

"This," she said, indicating a fairly large semicircle to the west, "is Kikuchi's territory. He hasn't actually laid claim to it, but nobody's eager to upset him, either, so the intruders have mostly been staying well away from his mountain. There are still problems with looting and such, but it's not as bad as most places."

"Okay," I said. "I can work with that. What next?"

A smaller, pinkish area in the middle of town was next, apparently. It was irregularly shaped, closer to an inkblot than a geometric figure. "This is where most of the independents have holed up," Kyi said. "Nobody too powerful, but there are quite a few of them and they know what's going on. Generally people have been going for easier targets, so they've been left alone. Outside of our immediate vicinity, it's probably the safest place in the city."

I stared at it, comparing it to my image of the city. It was hard, since I generally work from memory rather than a map, but I was fairly confident. "This is centered around Pryce's," I said. "Almost perfectly."

She nodded. "They've been using it as a home base, apparently. Coordinating their efforts, the same way we're doing here."

"I'm guessing Pryce is staying neutral?"

"Extremely."

I took a deep breath, let it out, and nodded again. "Okay. That might be a problem."

Kyi nodded, then pointed to the blue circle covering most of the downtown area. "This," she said, "is where the police have been concentrating their efforts. They've more or less imposed martial law, but they're keeping the peace. There isn't much looting or rioting going on in that area."

"How are they doing at keeping the monsters out?"

She shrugged. "Not so bad. Not so good, either."

"Fair enough. Next?"

Her finger drifted south and east, coming to rest on a large, vaguely rectangular area at the edge of the map that was shaded dark green. "Military," she said. "And they have outposts here, here, here." She indicated more green areas, some large, most not.

"That would be Fort Carson," I said, pointing to the rectangular area. "Cheyenne Mountain over here, then Peterson Air Force Base, and the Air Force Academy up here. I'm not sure what the others are."

"Neither are we," Kyi said, shrugging. "I haven't made a priority of scouting their turf, and we don't have any real contacts with them. As far as we've been able to figure out, they basically pulled all of their people into their territory, sent the civilians away, and locked everything down as tight as they could."

"That's fine," I said. "Honestly, if they can just keep to themselves and make sure their space is safe, I'll be thrilled."

"Yes, jarl," she said. "So those are all the friendly zones—"

"—more or less friendly," Aiko interrupted. "I don't know about you, but I'm actually not on great terms with the police." She paused. "Oh wait, I do know about you."

"More or less friendly," Kyi agreed, ignoring everything else. "There's also a large area on the north side that seems to be controlled by Katrin."

Said area was shaded a dark red, and took up most of the northern part of the city. "Nobody's moving in on her during the daytime?" I asked, trailing my fingers over the map. That was a *lot* of territory.

"A couple people tried. The vampires tracked them down the next night." She shrugged. "Nobody's been in a hurry to try again."

I snorted. "Yeah, I bet. Are the people there safe?"

"As safe as cows," Kyi said with barely controlled disgust. "And for exactly the same reasons."

Right. *More or less friendly*, and Katrin didn't even count as that.

I couldn't afford to forget that. Especially not now.

I looked over the map one more time, noting the marked areas and especially the places between them. It sounded impressive when Kyi tallied all the zones that were under the control of one faction or another, but it was still less than half the area of the city. There were large chunks in between that were apparently unclaimed.

I didn't have to ask what was going on there. It was the same thing that was going on in every no man's land right now. Chaos.

"Okay," I said. "I think I've got a decent handle on the geography. Brick? What's your news?"

"I've got the best contact with the outside world right now," he said, stepping up from where he'd been waiting beside the table. "Although I'm guessing you already know most of what I have to say. What's happening here is about the same as what's going on around the world. There are a handful of places nobody's had the balls to attack yet, but by and large everywhere's seen at least a little action. And it's going to get worse."

"Why?" I asked. I'd already reached that conclusion, but I wanted to hear his reasoning for it.

"Because people will start taking it seriously," he said, shrugging. "What we're seeing now, it's the equivalent of joyriders. They see an opportunity to screw people over for kicks, so they're jumping on it. But here in a few days, a couple of weeks at the most, the big organizations are going to get in on the deal. And when they do, they'll be playing for keeps, not for laughs."

"Yeah," I said. "That was my thought, too. What are the Watchers doing about it?"

"Scrambling trying to keep up," he said dryly. "We knew something like this was in the pipeline—and by we I mean the higher-ups, not me personally—but we didn't expect it to be this soon, or this fast. Right now it's all about keeping things from going absolutely crazy and being ready for the next shoe to drop." He smiled thinly. "Which is why, as of yesterday, I've been officially assigned to you as a liaison."

"A liaison," I repeated. "Um...why do I need a liaison?"

Brick shrugged. "Ask the boss. If I had to guess, they know that you're a big name in this city, and they know a lot of people are going to see you as the cause for the insanity right now. So they want somebody on site to make sure you make things better instead of worse."

"Or take me out, if I don't." It wasn't a question. After intelligence gathering, that sort of covert removal was the main task of the Watchers.

"Or that," Brick agreed. "But I doubt it will come to that."

"Okay," I said, sighing. "Let me know if there are any new developments. In the meantime...Tindr? What's the financial status?"

"Not good," the jotun said, stepping forward and setting a binder on top of the map. He flipped it open to reveal line after line of meticulous, densely packed handwriting. He leafed through it until he found the page he wanted, then spun it to face me. "The financial system is as uncertain as everything else right now."

"Uncertain? Or in collapse?"

"Uncertain," he repeated firmly. "Nothing's really moving right now, good or bad. Now, after you were arrested, I liquidated some of your assets and transferred others into more stable

investments. As a result, most of your wealth should survive the transition. Some of the companies you were invested in will probably go bankrupt, as will some of the shell corporations and laundering fronts. On the whole, though, I think it will be fine."

"But?" I asked. "I'm sensing a 'but,' here."

He sighed and nodded. "But," he said, "many of the accounts are currently inaccessible. Trying to get a major international payment through the system right now is impossible. Between that and the fact that so much of your wealth is tied up in long-term assets and investments that would be difficult to offload right now, there's relatively little actual money available."

"How much?"

"At a guess?" He shrugged. "Less than a million immediately accessible. Given two or three days, between two and five million, probably closer to five."

Okay. So I had a city on the verge of implosion, my information was shoddy as hell, and I was supposed to somehow make it all better. And I had barely more than normal operating expenses to do so with.

Oh yeah, and if I didn't get it done in a couple of days, I probably wouldn't get it done at all. And if that happened, a whole lot of people would die, I would most definitely be on even more hit lists than I already was, and my allies would probably be a lot less interested in covering my ass than they were right now.

I might not have objected so much, if it hadn't felt so *normal*.

Maybe five minutes later, I was writing out a list while the frenetic work around me continued nonstop. Selene had gone back to coordinating their efforts and compiling the information that flowed in, while Tindr was working on liquidating assets and Kyi had taken a team out to do some reconnaissance.

"Whatcha writing?" Aiko asked. She was currently curled up against me, and seemed fairly happy. It struck me as slightly unfair that, apparently, even a person *wearing armor* was more comfortable to sit on than my throne.

"List of people I could ask for favors," I said. "I'm hoping I can think of someone who might be helpful without being too risky to deal with."

She snorted and shoved the last of her sandwich into her mouth. "Too risky?" she said, her voice slightly muffled. "For *you*?" I'd long since finished my own sandwich, and downed most of the pitcher of iced tea. It hadn't done much to dull my hunger.

I looked at my list for a minute, then circled one of the names. "There," I said. "What do you think of her?"

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Aiko looked at it, then nodded. "Not bad. She's on the ground and she's not totally dumb, so she'll know something. And she isn't *too* bad to deal with."

"You want to come with me, then?"

She shrugged. "Sure. Driving through town today might be interesting."

"With my luck?" I said gloomily. "No *might* about it."

She laughed and stood, and then we went to have a chat with Sergeant Frishberg.

Chapter Two

The roads were bad.

It was strange, the extent to which that idea had simply never occurred to me. In this country, you expected that the road system would work. The traffic might be heavy, there might be blockages or wrecks, or maybe even washouts, but in the end things would be fixed. There would be a way to get from A to B.

But now? That wasn't so much the case. Cars were abandoned on the side or in the middle of the road, their erstwhile owners nowhere in sight. Some of them looked to have been shredded by something with large claws, and others were burned-out husks, but plenty of the vehicles seemed intact. They were just...left, nobody having the time or inclination to deal with them.

In other places, the damage was more obvious. The support for a bridge had been turned to mud, leaving the whole thing to collapse; we had to drive three blocks to find a way around it, and even then it involved off-road driving and a liberal interpretation of traffic laws. Other than that, a number of traffic lights weren't working properly, and several roads were barricaded off for no apparent reason.

I wondered how much of it was intentional action, screwing things up for amusement or to serve a greater purpose, and how much of it was simply the consequence of the broader environment. With people scared, communications disrupted, and most governmental bodies in disarray, it was easy to see how things would begin to deteriorate. Minor problems, that normally wouldn't really *be* problems, started to accumulate. When a light malfunctioned, there was no crew to fix it. When a car wrecked, there was no one to tow it. The garbage trucks weren't making their rounds, and as a result it just started to pile up.

It was almost surreal, how rapidly things had started to fall apart. There were a thousand little tasks that had to be done on a regular basis to keep a city running, and with nobody to do them, it didn't take long to notice the cracks appearing in the facade.

Whatever the reason for the problems, we didn't see many people on the roads, and I couldn't blame them. We were driving a heavy armored truck, just one step short of a tank, and it was a good thing because not much else could have managed it.

Finally, after around three times longer than it should have taken, we made it downtown. Here, at least, things looked a little better. The streets were clear, and the buildings were intact. We passed people both walking and driving, and if they seemed scared and hurried, at least they weren't actually injured.

"Where to now?" Aiko asked, turning up the stereo. It was currently blasting what appeared to be a theremin version of Beethoven's Ninth at a volume more commonly associated with gangsta rap.

"Look for police, I guess," I said, shrugging. It seemed like an inefficient way to find somebody, but Frishberg wasn't answering her phone, and under the circumstances I wasn't sure what else to do.

It took maybe five minutes for us to find a pair of them, sitting in a cruiser out front of an apartment building. Aiko pulled over next to them and I got out, walked over to their car, and knocked on the driver's window.

I stood there for a couple seconds before he rolled the window down. "What do you want?" he asked suspiciously. His partner had her hand on her gun.

Not that I could blame them. I mean, even at the best of times, if a guy in armor gets out of a heavily armored truck and walks up to you, a certain amount of caution is pretty reasonable.

"I was hoping you could give me directions," I said, smiling. They wouldn't see it behind the helmet, but I was hoping that they would hear it in my voice. "We're looking for Sergeant Kendra Frishberg. Do you know where she is?"

The driver looked at his partner, then shrugged. "Couple blocks that way," he said. "Look for the barricades."

"Thanks," I said, going back to the truck. I could hear them muttering behind me as I got in. "Go a few blocks east and look for barricades," I said.

"Barricades? Oh, this should be good." Aiko was smiling, but I knew her well enough to see through it. She was concerned, even worried, although I didn't think it had anything to do with the barricades. It had more to do with how the police had responded to me, the suspicion there, the hostility.

I had to admit there was a fair point there. I'd never actually been found *innocent* of blowing up large chunks of the city, after all, and even if I had been I wasn't naive enough to think that would matter. Between that and the fact that the current insanity had kicked off during my court hearing, there was almost certainly some lingering animosity there.

Those two had been suspicious just looking at me, the armor and my attitude tipping them off that I wasn't just another scared civilian. What would happen if they actually figured out who I was? Hell, even *Frishberg* might not be willing to play along with me at this point.

I didn't want to think too much about what would happen then. I wasn't going back in a cage.

It had to be dealt with at some point, though, so we kept driving.

After another two or three minutes, we found what they'd been talking about. A section of street had been cordoned off with caution tape and parked vehicles. There were a handful of cops standing around, making sure nobody crossed it.

Their posture was anxious. They weren't scared, exactly—this wasn't the same as what the civilians were showing. No, this attitude gave the impression of being a response to a specific event, rather than the general climate of the city. There was something going on here, and while the cops might be doing something about, I didn't get the impression that they were confident it was working.

"Hi," I said, getting out and walking up to the cordon, Snowflake pacing along beside me. Aiko was locking the truck up behind us. "Can you give me directions to Sergeant Frishberg?"

"She's busy," one of the cops said. "We have a situation here."

I rolled my eyes. "Obviously," I said, ladling on the sarcasm pretty thickly. "Why did you think we were here? Look, she's going to want to talk to me. How about you tell me where I can find her?"

He frowned, and I could tell he didn't believe me, but he wasn't willing to call me on it, either. "Come on," he said. "I'll take you to her."

"Thanks," I said, smiling. We followed him to a small building on the corner. The ground floor was a cafe of some kind, while the second floor seemed to be apartments. A sizable group of cops were hanging out around the building, watching it like hawks. I saw a couple of SWAT vehicles, and from the weapons on display they weren't just for show.

I could smell blood from the building. That wasn't good; even with my senses, there would have to be a fair amount of blood to smell it from this far away.

Frishberg was standing a short distance from the group, talking on a cell phone. "Hi," I said, waving at her.

She turned, saw me, stared for a moment, and then hung up, cutting the guy on the other end off mid-tirade. "What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"Don't ask me," Aiko said. "I just drove him here."

"I was hoping to talk with you," I said, grinning. "Maybe catch up on how things have been. I haven't seen you for a while, after all."

She stared for a couple seconds longer, then turned to the cop who'd escorted me there. "Get back to your position," she told him. "And forget you ever saw this."

He frowned. But he went.

"Okay," Frishberg said, rounding on me. "First off, I had no idea they were planning that. They wouldn't even let me stop by after you were arrested, or I would have. Second, what the flying fuck made you think it was a good idea to come here? Are you out of your mind?"

"Probably," I said, shrugging. "But I was telling the truth earlier. I was hoping to talk, get an idea of what's going on. I'm sure you have info I don't right now."

She sighed, running her hand through her hair. It looked like a nervous gesture, but I was fairly confident it was an affectation. Frishberg was too good at lying to have a tell that obvious. "Look," she said. "As much as I'd like to, I don't have the time right now. Shit is going crazy right now, and since I'm the only one who's been dealing with this stuff for years, I'm having to keep an eye on everything myself."

"So let me clear your schedule a little," I said. "What's the crisis here?"

"Hostage situation," she said. "Some freak walked into the cafe, took most of the staff hostage. They're upstairs now, and he's threatening to kill them if we go inside. I was hoping to get a negotiator down here, but apparently that isn't going to happen." She glared at the cell phone.

"Cool," I said. "I'm fairly sure the hostages are already dead, but I can take care of the guy that did it. Give me ten minutes or so."

The front door was locked, a problem I dealt with easily enough. It was a wooden door, not intended to stand up to an assault, and I kicked it in without much difficulty.

Inside, things were not pretty. There were splatters of blood on the floor and the furniture, although not enough to account for what I'd been smelling, and several overturned chairs. The cooking equipment must have been turned off, because there was no smoke and nothing was on fire, but the air still smelled like burned food. I was hungry, but not even I would call it an appetizing aroma.

"Naughty, naughty," a voice called from above. "Coming in without an invitation, are we? You know what that means, don't you?" A moment later a woman screamed. It wasn't the sort of canned scream that you get in horror movies, or even a terrified running-away sort of scream. This was the kind of scream you hear from someone in too much pain to keep it all inside.

I was a little more familiar with that kind of thing than I wanted to be.

I glanced outside, afraid that the cops would come running when they heard the scream, but nobody did. Good; they were doing what they'd said, at least for the moment.

"I'm not with the police," I said, dragging one of the tables next to another. Aiko caught on instantly and grabbed a third table, pushing it into position.

"Oh no?" he said, laughing. "Then who are you with?"

"At the moment it's just me and some friends," I said, climbing up onto the tables. Aiko passed up a chair, which I positioned in the center of the improvised platform. "You can call me Shrike, by the way." I didn't exactly want to use my real name, not when there were a dozen or so cops within earshot. I was sure some of them knew who I was, but there's a huge difference between knowing something and being unable to provide plausible deniability about knowing it.

"Hello, Shrike," he said. "You can call me Keith. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Hello, Keith," I said. Something about the name was familiar, but I couldn't bring it to mind. "It sounds like you've been making things hard for the police recently." I stood on the chair and reached up experimentally. The ceiling was, just barely, within reach.

"But you've already said you aren't with the police," he said, in a tone of exaggerated confusion. "So how should it be your business?"

"You're causing trouble in my town," I said, calling Tyrfin. I cut a roughly square hole in the ceiling with a couple of strokes, pushing it aside when it fell, and then climbed through. "And that's always my business," I concluded, helping Aiko through. Snowflake vaulted up on her own, disdaining the platform I'd assembled.

We were standing in a small kitchen, with puke-green appliances that didn't look to have been updated since the seventies. The smell of blood was stronger here, and I could smell magic as well, a fae magic of moonless nights and the silence between heartbeats.

A moment later a figure stepped through the doorway, and the smell of magic intensified. He was male, but I hesitated to call him a man; his frame was too warped, his limbs too long, his skin too grey. He was the sort of fae that could pass for human with a light illusion or a heavy coat, but when you looked at him squarely the resemblance was slight. He moved with perfect confidence, though there was a heavy bandage wrapped around his eyes.

I stared at that bandage. It seemed *significant*, though I wasn't sure why. It was grey in color, almost the same grey as his skin, but something about the color suggested that it was the result of wear, rather than manufacturing.

"Come now, Shrike," he said, grinning. His teeth were just a shade too sharp, too long. "This apartment is accessible by exterior stairs, not through the business on the lower floor."

"That's why I came in the way I did," I said, watching him warily. He gave the impression of being someone who would know if I looked away, and capitalize on it. "Or are you going to tell me those stairs aren't trapped?"

His grin grew even wider, and he started to pace slowly around us. It felt strangely unnerving, frightening in a way I couldn't quite define, but that made me tense and start looking for the exits. It made me think of a rabbit hiding in the brush while the wolf circles ever closer. The rabbit *knows* that the safest thing is to stay put, but it wants so very much to run....

"Why should I tell you a thing like that, Shrike, even if it were true? But come, let us not forget our manners. These are your friends, I shall presume? And how are they called?" Keith's voice was light, casual, totally at odds with his predatory attitude.

"You can call me Cupcake," Aiko said, turning to keep Keith within her field of view. "And the dog goes by Spike."

"How intriguing," he murmured. "I thank you, Shrike, for making this day amusing. I had almost feared that I would be bored, but you have brought fresh interest to my work here."

I couldn't say why, but right then was when I realized why his name was familiar. "Keith," I said. "You wouldn't happen to be *Blind* Keith, would you?"

He stopped pacing and turned to face me, his smile gone. "And where would you have heard that name, Shrike?"

I had to swallow twice before I could speak, that same irrational fear making my throat tight and dry. "Erin mentioned you. She said that you were one of the best mercenaries in the Courts."

"Mercenary," he said distastefully. "I dislike that word, Shrike, for I am no mercenary, whose loyalties are bought and sold as cheaply as any other commodity."

"Perhaps not," I said. "But I think you have something in common with them, don't you? Even if it is just a certain set of shared acquaintances."

"Indeed," he murmured, resuming his slow stalk around us. "And yet I question your wisdom in pushing this topic. You are, I hope, aware that I can snuff out the lives of these human hostages with nothing more than a snap of my fingers?"

I shrugged as nonchalantly as I could, hoping that I wasn't condemning some poor cafe employee to death. "I'm aware," I said. "I just don't see how it's relevant to this conversation. This is about you and us, not them."

He regarded me for a moment, then raised his hand and snapped his fingers. Instantly, there was another scream of agony from elsewhere in the apartment, one that ended in a sort of gurgling moan.

Aiko looked like she was about to go running off, looking for the person that was screaming, so I caught her arm. "Nice try," I said to Keith. "But your hostages are either dead or silenced, or else they would have started begging for help the moment they heard us talking out here." I supposed it was also possible that they couldn't hear what was going on, but I doubted it. Blind Keith struck me as the kind of guy who would *want* his victims to hear what was going on out here.

"What do you call that, then?" he asked, obviously referring to the ongoing moaning sounds.

"A hunting adaptation," I replied immediately. "It's the scream in the night that makes you leave your shelter, it's the crying baby that draws you out of your safe place. It's a will-o'-the-wisp, something to lure you out into the dark until you're lost and alone and far from home."

He nodded slowly. "Someone," he murmured, "has been reading his faerie tales."

"Yes," I said. "I have. And one of the first things you learn about the fae is that they have rules. There are *always* rules, and I think I've figured out some of yours."

"Oh? Do tell."

"You're a hunter, Blind Keith," I said, turning so that I could watch him as he continued to pace around us. "A predator. You want us to run, so that you can chase us. You frighten us so that we will flee, you make us hear things so that we will go to check on them. How many sounds could you mimic? A great many, I suspect. You've been pushing us pretty hard, trying to scare us, but I notice you haven't *done* a single thing to us. Why not?"

The fear crescendoed, rising to a fever pitch. My legs quivered, my hands shook, and a low whine of fear escaped my throat. Snowflake was whining as well, while Aiko had gone pale as snow and started trembling in my grip. I thought I was about to piss myself or throw up or both, but luckily my body was too confused to manage either.

And then the fear began to subside, first fading and then vanishing entirely, and Blind Keith was laughing softly. "You've got spine," he said. "And to answer your question, it's more to do with choice than necessity. I respect those with the courage to stand against me."

"And yet," I said, "you're trespassing. I told the truth when I said that this was my city."

He smiled indulgently. "Don't think you can threaten me. You may know Erin, but you aren't on her level. You're barely more than a puppy, and I'm an old hunter indeed."

"I might be a puppy," I said, holding up Tyrfing, "but that doesn't make me a weakling. I was raised in the Khan's own pack, because no lesser wolf could tame me. I have seen the gods go to war. And my sword is called Tyrfing, and it has claimed the lives of creatures as old and mighty as you. That's three ways you owe me respect, Blind Keith, and none of them are small."

"Ah," he sighed, stretching the sound out, making it last longer than it should have, longer than human lungs could have managed. "So you're *that* wolf cub. I thought you'd be taller. No disrespect was intended, child; I was curious to see how the world is changing, and it seemed natural to come to the place where that change began."

"Understood," I said. "But you're still causing trouble for me, at a time when I have more than enough to deal with. I'd appreciate it if you would stop."

"I will leave," he agreed. "And I will converse with you, before I return to the territory you have claimed for your own. Give my regards to your grandfather, Shrike."

"What a mess," Frishberg said, watching them carry out the bodies on stretchers. Only one of the hostages had been killed, apparently, and that had happened well before I got there, which was why

I'd been smelling blood. But the others were traumatized, emotionally more than physically, and not remotely ready to handle a trip down a ladder on their own.

"Isn't it just," I said, also watching. "Everywhere, it sounds like."

"That's the funny thing," she said, glancing at me. "From what I hear, it *isn't* everywhere. In fact, it sounds like this is very much a localized thing."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Some places aren't doing so bad at all. Seattle, Phoenix, Chicago, San Francisco, the list goes on. Then you've got places like Portland, where they're literally snatching people off the streets. You know why that is?"

I shrugged. "Not most of them. But in Seattle, it's probably because there's somebody there that nobody wants to cross. It's easier and safer to go cause trouble somewhere else than to piss him off."

"Right," she said. "Someone like you, maybe?"

I snorted. "Thanks for the compliment, but Moray could eat me alive any time he wanted to." I hadn't forgotten what it was like to watch him fight. Water magic wasn't something that I'd thought of as having a whole lot of combat applications, but he made it work.

"Don't sell yourself short. We were trying to resolve that situation for almost three hours. You walk in, and five minutes later, bam, problem solved."

"Maybe," I said uncomfortably. "That's just a matter of knowing how to talk to him, though. It's nothing anybody else couldn't have done." I had an idea of where she was going with this, and I didn't like it, not even a little.

Nor was I disappointed. "Winter," she said, the first time she'd used my name today. "You owe me a favor."

"Yeah."

"I'm calling it in. Make this be one of the good places. Make sure this city gets through this okay."

"You don't know what you're asking for," I said, sounding almost as exhausted as I felt.

"Maybe not," she said. "But I'm asking."

Chapter Three

Driving away, I had the uncomfortable realization that, from Frishberg's perspective, I was basically indistinguishable from Loki. I had powers that she didn't really understand, and which she definitely didn't know the exact limits of. I had information that she didn't, and between the things I knew and the things I just didn't admit to not knowing, I probably seemed pretty well-informed to her.

And, much like Loki, I was about to give her exactly what she'd asked for, and do it in such a way that she came to regret ever even asking.

When she asked me to make sure the city came through the current crisis in one piece, I think she was expecting me to talk to people, and intimidate them into toeing the line. I'd mentioned that the reason other cities weren't having many problems was the reputation of certain citizens, after all, and she'd made it clear that she thought I was one of them.

And the problem with that was that she was wrong. These people had, in many cases, been repressing their urges for hundreds of years, and they'd just been given free rein to indulge themselves. I didn't have the kind of reputation it would take to convince them not to do so. *Nobody* had that kind of influence. Moray might be able to do something comparable, but only because he had a major and terrifying organization backing him up—and even then, I'd have been astonished if he didn't have to give people an object lesson to get the point across.

No, I didn't have the authority to just tell people not to cause trouble and make it stick. Normally I would have relied on the authorities to take care of most of the problems and dealt with the special cases myself, but at the moment the authorities were in disarray, moving at cross-purposes. The lack of coordination between the military and the police would have been ample evidence of that, even without the information Frishberg had given me. Supernatural affairs weren't much better settled; the gods had officially bowed out of things, and the other major organizations were struggling to get their feet under them and respond.

I was confident that they would have their act together relatively quickly—a matter of a couple weeks at the most, and probably more like days. But a lot could happen in a few days. If I wanted to keep things together here, I would have to act *now*, not several days from now.

All of which had led me to the conclusion that the only way I could keep a mixture of internal conflicts and external threats from tearing the city to pieces was to conquer it myself.

It would fit with Frishberg's request. Some of the citizens would die—maybe a lot of them. The social structures, the politics and the government, might never be the same. But the city, the streets and buildings, the history, the populace as a whole, would come through okay.

And if it worked, I would have a hell of a lot more power at the end of the process than the beginning. Right now, my claim to the city was one of political expediency, and in the aftermath of such

fundamental changes to the political structure of the world, even that might not be there. If I pulled this off, on the other hand, I would own the city in reality as well, at least until there was a civilian government to give it back to.

Not that that was why I was doing it. I didn't even want the power I already *had*. But from the outside, it would look an awful lot like I'd taken her request and turned it inside out, using it as an excuse to build my own power. And that was the kind of move that might actually get me the kind of respect that Frishberg thought I already had.

I wanted to cry as we drove back to the mansion, found myself smiling bitterly instead. Aiko had turned the stereo to a funeral doom playlist, which suited my mood rather nicely, and even with the debris on the road she managed to get that armored truck up to a speed that would have been excessive for most highways.

Twenty minutes later I was slouching in the heavy, thronelike chair in my upstairs study. The same three people as before were gathered on the other side of the desk—Selene to represent the social, financial, and political aspects, Kyi because she was in charge of the military and espionage branches of my organization, and Brick as a representative of other things. Aiko was sitting next to me, while Snowflake lay on the floor at my feet.

Downstairs, the bustling activity continued unabated, under the watchful eyes of the other housecarls. At my request, a stray cat had been pleased to come inside and doze on the throne, giving me a decent view of the room. Taken as a whole, and viewed absently in the back of my mind, it was almost hypnotic, the people moving in concert. An action was taken in one corner and the effects rippled out through the room, changing the rhythm slightly, more runners going to some tables, fewer to others. Viewed as a whole, it almost seemed like a single organism, rather than many.

"Okay," I said, pulling my attention back to what was in front of me, while leaving just enough in the cat that I would notice if something changed dramatically downstairs. "I need some specific numbers on logistics."

Brick cleared his throat. "Before you start," he said, "I have to go. The Watchers just called me in."

I eyed him. "I thought you were assigned as my liaison."

"This is different. There's an all hands on deck situation in Russia right now. They're calling *everybody* in. I shouldn't even have waited this long, but I thought it would go over better if I told you in person."

"All hands on deck," I repeated. "What the hell is bad enough to merit *that*?"

"There's a necromancer running around out there," he said, fidgeting nervously. "A *real* necromancer, not one of the poseurs that turn up now and then. He's outside Volgograd in one of the mass graves from World War Two, or he was the last I heard."

"Ah," I said. "And...this is bad?"

He gave me an unamused look. "The Watchers have a scale for how serious a situation is, from zero to twenty. Yesterday this was a seven. This morning it was at a nine. When they called me it was at thirteen and likely to climb."

"Okay," I said. "How bad is a thirteen?"

"A minor nuclear exchange only rates a ten."

I blinked. "You'd better get going, then," I said. "Do you guys want...I mean, is there anything I can do to help?" I knew that I was supposed to be focusing on my own problems, but if there was seriously a problem bad enough to make nuclear missiles look mild, that kinda outweighed my personal concerns.

"I don't know," he said. "Probably not. If we can't get things under control soon, they'll make a general call for *anyone* to come and help. If that happens, I imagine you'll be hearing from someone." He stood up. "Okay, I've got to get moving. Good luck."

"You too," I said, watching him go and trying not to worry. The Watchers were huge, well-informed, and dealing with this kind of thing was literally their job. Surely they would be able to take care of things. Surely.

"That was fun," Kyi said a moment later. "Where were we, again?"

"Right," I said. "In your opinion, how well would we be able to manage a major action right now?"

Kyi and Selene looked at each other, then Kyi looked at me. "What kind of scale are we talking about?" she asked. She didn't sound confident.

"Citywide. I'm aiming for control, more than for actually beating the other participants, but I don't know if I'll be able to get the one without the other."

She sighed, and I got the impression that she'd been afraid I was going to say something like that. "Not well," she admitted. "I mean, we could *try*, but I don't see it going well. At this point the only combat personnel we've got are the five housecarls, eight mages from the Inquisition, and you three. No matter how you slice it, that's just not enough bodies to maintain control over that much territory. We're having a hard enough time keeping a perimeter around this building."

"I see," I said. "So your main concern is that we don't have enough people?"

"At the moment? Yes."

"So if, hypothetically speaking, I was able to get more people on our side? What then?"

"If you're thinking of your usual freelancers, then no. Don't get me wrong, they're good, but what we need right now is numbers."

"Understood," I said, nodding. "Assume we're talking about more people than the usual. Enough to get decent coverage throughout the city."

She shrugged. "I'd have to know more about their combat capabilities to say what kind of results we'd get putting them up against the other players. For the logistics, that's more Selene's realm."

"Things are a little tight," the demoness said promptly. "Cell reception is spotty right now, as is Internet access. Landlines are inconsistent with outside numbers, but the infrastructure within the city is still in decent shape, so that's a fairly reliable way to communicate with dispersed forces. Our funding should be enough to pay any independent contractors for at least a short time, unless they charge *extremely* high rates. Supplies are not as good, but grocery stores are still open, so we should be able to stay on top of that."

"So what you two are telling me," I said quietly, "is that if I want to have any chance of pulling this off, I need to convince people to help out."

"Yes."

"How many?"

Kyi shrugged. "I'd like at least a hundred. We wouldn't be using them all at once, but you need people on the ground throughout the area, and you need enough people that you can manage a sizable force to deal with special situations without leaving the rest of your territory unguarded." She sighed. "Not that I've ever managed an operation like this. I kinda wish Sveinn were here."

"I do too," I said. "But you're the best we've got, so we're going to use your number."

I sat and thought about that for a while. I had to come up with a hundred people willing to do what I told them, and I had to do it fast. More than a hundred, probably; that was the goal for a final number, but odds were extremely good that I would lose some in the process. It was better to aim too high than too low, right now.

There were only a few ways I could think of to get that kind of force. I couldn't think of anyone who would give me that much help, not unless I were to pay more than I was remotely comfortable with. That meant that I would have to find my minions piecemeal, taking them where I could find them. And even then, it was likely to involve both risks and payments that I'd rather it didn't.

There was nothing to be done but to get it over with, though, so I took a minute to sort through the people I could ask, deciding which avenues were worth pursuing and which were just too dangerous, time-consuming, or unlikely to work to be worth bothering with. The others were patient while I did so, although Aiko had started playing a game on her phone while she waited.

"Okay," I said at last. "Kyi, you can get in touch with Skrímir, correct?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"Good. Tell him that, as my court is currently in the process of expanding rapidly, I find myself in need of skilled help. As such, I'm willing to consider any jötnar who want to sign up as my housecarls. I'll trust you to get the wording right."

She regarded me for a moment, her features blank behind the tattoos. "You send out an open call like that," she said, "on short notice, you're going to get a lot of respondents you'd rather not."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I know. I'm hoping that Skrímir will filter out some of the worst ones, and we can deal with the rest."

She shrugged. "If you say so."

"I do," I said firmly. "Also, I want you to go through whatever reports you're getting in, looking for signs of ghouls. If there are any in town, I want to know where they are. Don't take any action yet, just inform me. Clear?"

"Yes, my jarl. Is there anything else?"

"Not for you. Get to work." She left, and I turned my attention to Selene. "I need some paper and a pen."

Implements were found, and I started writing. "This is a list of people who might be willing to help," I said. "Along with the messages I want you to give them. If communications are that bad, it might be hard to get in touch with them. Get someone on it right away, and have them keep trying until something gets through."

"And the others?"

I smiled grimly. "The others aren't the sort of people you call on the phone," I said. I finished writing in silence, and then handed the list to her. It was a few pages long.

She scanned it. "Interesting list," she commented. "Quite a variety here."

"That's the point. If you hear from any of them before we get back, make sure you write down *exactly* what they say."

"And where will you be?"

I grinned. "We're going to go have a chat with Kikuchi."

Aiko groaned. "Seriously? Do you *have* to drag him into this?"

"He's already in this," I pointed out. "And he's a lot more likely to help me than any other local player."

Clean Slate (Winter's Tale)

"Fine," she grumbled. "But you can leave me here. I hate dealing with those birdbrains."

"Oh, come on," I said. "It'll be fun. We're going to make them give me military support. And that's *after* we drive through contested territory to get there."

"Ah," she said, grinning. "*That* kind of fun. Well, with an offer like that, how could I refuse?"

Snowflake was laughing as we walked out the door.

Chapter Four

We made it almost halfway to the portion of the city which Kyi had tentatively marked out as Kikuchi's turf before we ran into trouble. Specifically, we ran into an improvised barricade in the form of a couple of overturned cars in the middle of the road, with a few people standing behind it brandishing weapons. More people stepped out behind us, trying to trap us there.

They weren't serious or practiced fighters. If they were real thugs, they would have been casual, excited, indulging in shows of bravado. If they were professionals, they would have been calm and coordinated, everything precisely in order.

Instead, most of them looked scared, uncertain. More than just a couple had the drawn features, broken-down postures, and shaky coordination of addicts. Most of the weapons on display were less than impressive, either small-caliber pistols or knives that were meant for show more than use.

There was no way they were associated with one of the major players on the scene. A street gang, I was guessing, something too trivial to have been brought into Pellegrini's criminal empire, too localized to be a part of a national or global gang. They'd probably never really done anything before, but the current situation would bring all kinds of things out of the woodwork.

"You want to deal with these bozos?" Aiko asked, coasting to a halt. "Or should I just keep driving?"

It was tempting. It really was. None of them were displaying a weapon that could pose even a minor threat to the magically reinforced armor of the truck, and their barricade wouldn't slow us down much. This was the sort of vehicle that had been designed to be damn near impossible to pull a heist on, and that was *before* I got my hands on it.

Then I sighed. If they tried to stop me, they'd stop other people too, and the next guy might not have a military-grade armored truck. "We'd better deal with them," I said to Aiko, picking up my helmet and pulling it on. She nodded and grabbed her carbine from the backseat.

I didn't need magic to know that Snowflake was excited, even *thrilled* to have a chance to fight. She started squirming in my lap the moment we saw the hoodlums, and when I said that we were going to fight them she actually barked, something which was *very* rare. She was out the door before I even had it completely open, hitting the ground with an expression intermediate between a snarl and a smile on her lips. The rest of her face was hidden behind the helmet.

I followed at a more reserved pace, and took the time to close the door before walking over to join her a short distance from the vehicle. "Oi," I shouted, looking around. "Which of you bozos is in charge?"

There was a brief pause, during which Aiko walked up next to me, before one of the guys in front of us stepped forward. He was whiter than me, and looked like he spent *way* too much time at the gym. "I call the shots here," he shouted back.

"Then you're a freaking idiot. You see the armored car? You see these guns?" I brandished my shotgun casually by way of emphasis, causing several of them to flinch. "You think these things are toys?"

"We have guns too," he shouted. "And there are a lot of us, and only two of you." Snowflake snarled at that, and he laughed. "Three." I liked him a little more for that.

Aiko snorted. "You call those things guns? Please. And it doesn't really matter how many of you there are. I could take twenty of you morons before breakfast, and it wouldn't even be a challenge."

"I'll bet you could," one of the punks said, gesturing obscenely.

Silence instantly fell over the scene, a silence that was more than just the absence of noise. This was an *ominous* silence, the sort that came before things that weren't at all peaceful. Even the gang leader seemed to feel it, blanching and slapping the offending guy on the back of the head.

"Okay," I said cheerfully. I was smiling, a little, and if they could have seen that smile they probably would have been more afraid than they were. "You made a few mistakes, here. The first was trying to set up this kind of gig when you clearly aren't competent to run it. The only people coming through this part of town are going to be poorer than you, scarier than you, or both. Not good targets."

He started to say something, but I cut him off. "The second mistake," I said, with relentless cheer, "was trying to stop me. I mean, even you losers should have known that wasn't a good move. I don't know what made you think we were something you could handle, and frankly I don't care."

Beside me, Snowflake was almost shivering, swaying gently side to side, and growling low in her throat. Even I thought it was a little creepy to watch, and that was saying something.

"Even that," I said, lowering my voice and dropping the pleasant attitude, "*even that* you could have recovered from. You could have written that off as a stupid mistake, you could have made reparations and we all would have gone on with our lives. But then you made your third mistake, which was insulting my girlfriend. That, gentlemen, was not the sort of mistake you can recover from."

One of them pointed a .22 at me with shaking hands and pulled the trigger. They missed, not that it mattered much; a .22 round probably wouldn't penetrate the steel of my armor, never mind the Kevlar backing.

It was a decent starting gun, though, and all the signal Snowflake needed to bolt toward them, moving at a pace that even a well-trained husky would be hard-pressed to match. They tried to shoot her, but the vast majority missed, and those that hit her found that her armor was more than a match for their bullets.

A moment later, there was screaming, and the smell of blood. Aiko raised her carbine, and while I couldn't see her face, I was confident she was grinning.

I sighed, and turned to deal with the thugs behind us. I didn't bother calling Tyrfin. My sword was an ancient weapon, cursed to leave death and tragedy in its wake, designed for the killing of things that couldn't be killed in almost any other way. These guys were common street toughs. The application of the one to the other seemed...a little disproportionate.

Maybe five minutes later, we were driving down the road again. We'd left most of the punks alive behind us, although some would probably need to spend some time in the hospital. Either way, I was confident we'd scared them badly enough that they wouldn't be trying anything like this in the near future.

The guy that had sparked it all off with that obscene gesture was dead, having bled out after Snowflake bit his leg off. Honestly, I had a hard time caring. There was stupid, and then there was *terminally* stupid.

We didn't run into any more trouble on the way, and a few minutes later we parked at the base of the mountain. "Okay," Aiko said. "So how do we find them?"

"In my experience," I said, getting out of the car, "that's not really a problem. Once you're on the mountain, they'll find you."

Normally, the trail up the peak was fairly quiet. There were usually a few hikers, but most of them didn't make it very far. By the time you got up into the trees, the path was almost empty.

I was a little surprised that it was relatively busy today. It wasn't swarming, by any means, but there was a decent assortment of people, and most of those who were there were from the more extreme end of the spectrum, fit climbers carrying enough gear to last for days. I supposed that made sense; the current tensions would discourage recreational hikers, but to a certain type of person, the idea of getting well away from the city right now would be tempting. There were plenty of people who watched apocalypse movies and thought that the biggest problem was other people, not the disaster. Getting out into the woods on your own, or with a handful of trusted friends, might seem like a good way to avoid danger.

I could have told them not to bother. Werewolves were far from the only critters that liked to hunt the wilderness more than the city, and not remotely the least friendly.

It meant I had to change my plans a little, though, since the tengu weren't likely to approach me while there were others around. So once we were into the trees, and on the mountain proper, I left the beaten path, following game trails into the forest. It was a little harder going, between rough terrain, bushwhacking, and backtracking.

To my surprise, Aiko didn't even gripe about it. Apparently we'd finally found something so serious that she actually took it seriously. I hadn't thought that was possible.

It was maybe twenty minutes before I noticed a sort of fog around us, somewhere between mist and cloud, thick enough to cloud vision without quite obscuring it. That fit with my previous experiences with the tengu, so I kept walking, not worrying too much about where I was going. Directions were fairly meaningless in their realm anyway.

"So overblown," Aiko sighed, looking around at the fog. It was thickening now, and out of the corner of my eye I could see *things* at the edge of the path, flickers of movement among the trees that I couldn't resolve into a clear image. "The birdbrains just don't appreciate subtlety."

"Be nice," I said. "We're here to find allies, not piss them off even more."

She huffed, but nodded.

A hundred yards or so further on, we ran into a pair of tengu standing by the path. The bird-men's expressions were as inscrutable as always, but I thought I saw a certain tension in their posture. The guards on this path always kept their katana in ready positions, but today they did it like they *meant* it.

"I am Winter Wolf-Born, jarl of the city," I said. "Here to seek audience with Kikuchi Kazuhiro, dai-tengu."

One of them glanced at the other, then nodded. "Follow," it said, in a voice which resembled a crow's as much as a human, and which might have been the tiniest bit feminine. "The dai-tengu will see you."

The tengu led us further down the path, leaving its—her?—fellow to stand guard. A few minutes later we came to a small clearing, shrouded in fog so that the edges were just barely out of sight. The only feature was a smallish throne in the middle of the clearing, grown from a single, apparently still-living tree.

"Wait here," the tengu said. "You will be met."

Well, great. Because *that* wasn't ominous at all.

With that, we were left alone in the fog to wait for our audience. Aiko and I stood in silence, or sometimes paced. Snowflake tried to amuse herself making up dirty limericks, but I could tell her heart wasn't in it, and after a few minutes even she fell silent.

It was hard to say how long we stood there. Waiting, especially under circumstances like that, has a tendency to make the time drag. But at a guess, it was almost half an hour before another figure walked into the clearing from our left, a tengu wearing samurai-style armor and carrying a sword. "Jarl," he said, crossing briskly to the throne and sitting in it. "What business brings you here today?"

"Dai-tengu," I replied, nodding to him. "We've always gotten along rather well. I leave you alone for the most part, and you've been gracious enough to pretend that my position is as something more than just a figurehead. I appreciate your respect, and I hope I've treated you with comparable respect."

"Yes," he said, although to which statement wasn't clear.

"But Loki's broadcast, that changed things."

"It changed everything," he said. "Great and small."

I nodded. "Yes. Exactly. And that includes our relationship. I need to be more than a figurehead right now. I need to actually *have* the power I've been pretending to have all this time."

He cocked his head to the side curiously, the gesture driving home the corvid resemblance. "Are you attempting to assert dominance over me?" he asked. There was no bravado there, no hostility. He was just asking a question.

"Not at all," I answered. "I'm happy to maintain our current position. You rule the mountain, I rule the city; that's just fine with me. But I was thinking that we could make it more of a partnership. I was hoping that you might lend some material assistance now, during these troubled times for my city."

"And you would assist me in turn, I suppose?"

"If a situation arises that you require help with? Yes. I would deploy my resources to assist you in that case."

He nodded slowly. "It's an interesting offer you make," he said.

I swallowed. This was the iffy part; I really didn't know how Kikuchi would react to what I said next. We were on decent terms, but the dai-tengu had a proud streak to him, and between that and how damnably hard to read he was, the next part of the conversation was going to be dicey.

"With respect," I said, "it's not really an offer."

He regarded me for a moment, then sighed. "It's like that, is it?"

"Yeah," I said. "Begging pardon, but the situation in my world is very uncertain right now. In order for my city to be safe, I need for it to look unassailable. My position has to look so strong that nobody is even willing to try to attack it. And that means that anything, anything at all, that might be seen as weakness has to go."

He nodded again. "And having a powerful neutral party on your borders could be interpreted as such a sign of weakness."

"Exactly," I said. "Especially because, well." I spread my arms helplessly. "I'm a werewolf. We're *supposed* to be dominant, to be asshole control freaks who insist that everyone does what we say. That's the reputation, and whether I like it or not, I'm stuck with it. So if I have allies, that's fine, that's

just politics. And if I have enemies, that's fine too; it's inevitable that people in my position have enemies. But if there's somebody who doesn't fall in either group, and I don't tell them what to do, people will think it's because I *can't* tell them what to do."

"And if I don't agree to your proposal," he said, his croaking voice gone flat. "Then what follows?"

I swallowed again. "In that case," I said, "I suppose I would have to declare war on you. And I *really* don't want to do that."

"You do not think you could win such a war?" Again, there was no particular emotion in his voice. I couldn't tell whether he was mocking me, or he was surprised at my lack of confidence, or he was bored and mostly thinking of lunch. Any of them would have been plausible.

"Dai-tengu," I said, "I think I can say with confidence that both of us would lose such a war, regardless of who emerged the victor."

"You make an interesting argument," he said. "Allow me a few moments to ponder it."

I wanted to keep trying to convince him, but something told me that pushing now would just undermine my own cause. So we stood and waited. And waited. And waited.

Almost ten minutes had passed in total silence, and Snowflake was starting to get antsy, when he suddenly nodded. "Jarl," he said solemnly, "you have presented an excellent case, and we have often been allies in the past. I would be honored to make that relationship more formal. I will let it be known that we have an alliance, and I will send what forces I can to aid you. These are troubled times in my lands as well, however, and I must keep the bulk of my people here."

I bowed. "I understand completely, dai-tengu, and I thank you. As I said, if you need assistance, you have but to ask and I will provide what help I can. In the meantime, I expect we both have much to do, so unless you have further business I will depart."

He nodded, and gestured slightly, and the world went black.

When I opened my eyes again, I was leaning on the truck back in the parking lot. Aiko was sitting on the ground next to me, her head between her knees, and Snowflake was lying on the ground moaning. *Oof*, she said to me. *That was worse than a normal portal. How is that even possible?*

I scratched her ears sympathetically, then reached down to help Aiko to her feet. "Okay," I said. "You about ready to get moving again?"

"Depends," she said. "Where are we going?"

I frowned. "Back home, I guess, to start with. I've got an idea for what to do next, but I don't think you'll like it."

She asked me what I was thinking of. I told her, and she groaned. She didn't propose an alternative, though, so we went back to the mansion, there to take a nap and get ready for my *next* harebrained idea.

At that point, I'd dealt with most of the major factions. Kikuchi was on my side, and from his reaction to my offer, I thought he might actually *help* me, rather than just staying out of my way. The police, similarly, were a nonissue. Frishberg was currently, and very unofficially, one of the more important members of that group, and they were confining most of their efforts to a limited area; between the two, I wasn't terribly concerned about them. I might have to deal with them on a more permanent basis later, but right now it wasn't a priority.

The military presence was more concerning, but I was hoping that problem might solve itself. If I could keep things in town peaceful enough that they didn't need to step in, they should just stay in their enclaves and we could leave each other alone. I was *really* hoping that was the case, anyway, because if I had to take action against multiple units of the military, it would be tantamount to a declaration of war. That was unlikely to end well for me, no matter how it went in the short term.

That left three groups that needed to be addressed. The first was Katrin and her people. The second was Pellegrini's organized crime syndicate. The third was the independents, small-timers, and minor talents who made up the bulk of the local supernatural community, in numbers if not power.

The first two were, for various reasons, off the table right now. Katrin almost certainly wouldn't be as amenable to presenting a united front as Kikuchi had been, which meant that negotiations with her were likely to dissolve into violence. I didn't want that to start until after all my reinforcements had arrived, which was likely to take a few days. The situation with Pellegrini was similar, although in his case I was waiting for *results* rather than numbers. The crime boss had always struck me as the practical type, and I was confident he would be willing to side with me if it looked like the best option for him. But it would take more evidence than I had available yet to convince him that it *was* the smart move.

That left the independents, and I thought I'd be wise to get to them as soon as possible, before someone else did. On the surface, it didn't seem too hard. They had apparently settled into a territory of their own, at least to some extent, and even if they hadn't I'd have known where to go. Pryce's had been the geographic center of that community for a long time, and that wouldn't have changed for a little thing like the end of the world as we knew it.

Unfortunately, I was also banned from Pryce's. There were various ways I could get around that, most of which would upset people to one degree or another. That bar was one of the few things they had in common, and breaking the rules there would make a lot of them rather angry. Pryce's was neutral ground, and Pryce himself was a notoriously neutral party. As a result, when he actually *did* take a side, it meant something. If he spoke against me, it would sway a great many people who were otherwise on the fence.

All of which meant that the situation was volatile. Approach it wrong, and I could kiss any chance of getting the independents on my side goodbye. That wouldn't be the end of the world, but it *would* make things harder going forward.

So I was feeling understandably nervous as I left the mansion.

It was late afternoon when I reached Pryce's. I'd napped a little longer than I'd intended, but not much, and I'd made up the time traveling by Otherside portal rather than car. There were practical reasons for that, as well; it wasn't too likely that someone would see my vehicle and recognize it as mine, but it wasn't impossible.

I felt almost naked as I walked the last block or two to the bar, mostly because, by my standards, I might as well have *been* naked. I wasn't wearing armor. I wasn't even wearing my cloak. I couldn't; this whole plan depended on me not being recognized.

When you wear scary-looking armor, and you wear a black cloak, that's what people see. Show up again in a Hawaiian shirt and tacky sunglasses, and they probably won't realize it's the same person. For much the same reason, Aiko and Snowflake were staying behind for this trip; they were both too instantly recognizable, by too many people.

Entering the bar, I found that it was fairly quiet, as I'd hoped. This time of day was always slow, and while there were more people than usual today, it still wasn't crowded. A couple of people were playing chess, and Rachel was standing by one of the billiards tables. Mac had apparently taken over the other to use as an infirmary. People were lined up, waiting to get injuries tended to. Most of them were minor—a sprain, a bruise, a cut. Others weren't. It was a little strange, for Pryce's to smell like blood.

I was a little concerned that Mac would look up and see me, because she would *definitely* know who it was, and probably not be inclined to keep my secret. We'd never been on the best of terms. She seemed entirely focused on her work, though, and I slipped by without being noticed.

I sat at the end of the bar, well away from any of the other customers, and waited. Pryce had been glaring at me since I walked in—I'd known there was no point even *trying* to keep him from recognizing me—but he seemed willing to take his time about getting to me.

Eventually he walked up, and glared at me from a closer range instead. "Told you," he said, his voice very quiet, but so deep that it was as much felt as heard. "Don't come back."

I nodded. "Give me a chance to talk first?" I asked, keeping my voice equally quiet. This wasn't a conversation I wanted overheard.

Pryce didn't say anything, but he also didn't beat the shit out of me, so I kept going. "I know you told me to stay out," I said. "And normally I would. But things are crazy out there, Pryce. People are getting killed. I'm trying to do something about it, but I can't handle this on my own."

He grunted. "And?"

"And I'd heard that the community was organizing," I said. "Mobilizing, maybe. People getting together and working to protect themselves. And if that's true, you know about it. Maybe they're customers, maybe they're not, but either way you know about it."

He nodded, once, and waited.

"I need those people on my side, Pryce," I said. "They're smart, they're tough, they've got some talents that can be damn hard to deal with, and they know the area like nobody else. I need them."

"I'm neutral."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Nobody's neutral. Not this time. Things are falling apart, and that affects *everyone*. Look, I'm not trying to recruit you for my army or anything like that. I don't even want you to try and convince them to help me. I just need to know who to talk to."

He grunted and walked away, grabbing a bottle off the shelf on his way to a group of guys further down the bar. It was an "I'm thinking" sort of grunt, rather than a "get out right now" grunt, so I sat back and waited.

A few minutes later, after taking care of his other customers, Pryce walked back over to me. He set a steak sandwich and a glass of iced tea in front of me, saying, "On the house." Then he reached into a pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. I unfolded it and found three names written on it in surprisingly delicate copperplate script. I didn't recognize any of the names.

"Thanks, Pryce," I said, folding it again and putting it in my pocket.

He opened his mouth, then shrugged and grunted instead, before walking away. I wasn't sure whether that meant I was welcome here again or not.

Either way, there was food in front of me now, and I was *starving*. That was a situation that I knew how to deal with, and I did.

Chapter Five

I looked at the list I was holding, and then looked back at Kyi. "You're kidding me," I said. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

"Not at all, jarl," the housecarl said solemnly. She couldn't quite keep the smirk off her face, though.

"There are already *eighteen* people applying as housecarls?" I asked incredulously. "It hasn't even been a day! How are there that many people who are that desperate?"

"Word travels fast," she said dryly. "And I think you overestimate how desperate people would have to be. That was a valid assumption the last time around. These days, not so much."

"Why not?"

"You've gotta remember, when you started nobody was quite sure what to expect. You were the first jarl to claim territory in this world, and there were people who thought you'd get slaughtered just for that. Then there were people who looked at your history and figured you'd run away within a month. Plus Loki had his claws in you, and most of the people he takes an interest in burn out fast." She shrugged. "Now you've been here a while and you're still going strong. People respect you, you're owed favors by people in high places, and you're saying you want to expand."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you're a rising star right now," she said. "There are plenty of people who want to get in now, while your court's still small and they think they have a chance to get into your inner circle. It's still a risky move, but it's a hell of a lot better than it looked a few years ago."

I sighed. "Fine," I said. "Do you know any of these people?"

She hesitated. "I'm familiar with a couple," she said, reluctantly. "But I don't think they're people you'd want on your team. They're the unreliable type."

"Great," I said instantly, handing her the sheet. "Cross their names off the list."

She hesitated again before taking it. "Seriously? You don't want to know anything else about them?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "If you think they're bad candidates, that's all I need to know. If I didn't trust your judgment, I wouldn't have put you in charge of things to begin with."

"All right," she said dubiously, grabbing a pen off the desk.

While she was working on that, I took a moment to check up on things in the throne room. Aiko had gone back to Transylvania, claiming that she wanted to check in on the defenses and make sure things were still okay, but Snowflake was unwilling to be parted from me. She was downstairs right now, dozing by the fire, which gave me an easy way to see what was going on down there.

Things were quiet, compared to earlier in the day. There were no runners going back and forth, and only a couple of people who weren't a part of my core organization. It wasn't hard to see why; the sun was going down, and there's a basic human instinct that says you want to be in a safe place come nightfall.

There are good reasons for that, even beyond the fact that most big predators are more active at night. The mood, the vibe, the *energy* of the world changes when the sun goes down. It lends itself to magics that, while not precisely *evil*, are secretive, deceptive, and dangerous. Vampires aren't remotely the only things that prefer the darkness to the light of day, and while some are quite pleasant, there are others that are very much not.

On a night like this, it was entirely rational for a civilian to want to be safe behind locked doors before sundown.

But that still left quite a few people in the throne room. Tindr stood at one table, quietly gathering up various papers and sorting them into piles. Another, larger table was covered in food and drink. There were around half a dozen people sitting there, strangers or part-time help, most of them in their late teens or early twenties. Presumably they didn't have homes to get to, or else they thought they were safer here. Kris and Matthew sat in the corner, sipping beers and talking about whatever shapeshifters talked about.

"Here," Kyi said, pulling my attention back upstairs. "The rest of them are strangers to me."

"Cool," I said, taking the list. Scanning it, I saw that five of the names had been neatly crossed out, leaving thirteen. "Where are the rest of them?"

"They should be at Utgard by now," she said.

"Great," I said, setting the piece of paper on the desk. "Get Kjaran and your gear and meet me downstairs. We're going to go fetch them."

She blinked. "Now?"

"Yeah. I want to be back here before night falls for real, and that means we have to leave pronto."

Around half an hour later, I was sitting in my throne, a group of more-or-less unhappy jötnar standing in front of me. For many of them this was their first time out of Jotunheim, and the portal had

been correspondingly hard on them. Between that and the fish-out-of-water experience of being in another world for the first time, I wasn't surprised that they weren't terribly happy.

Kyi stood by my right hand, and the other housecarls were arrayed behind me. Selene had gone upstairs, and beds had been found for the other guests. This was jotun business, and it would have been deeply inappropriate for me to invite any of my other minions to watch.

"All right," I said, glancing at the list of names. "Let's begin with Herjolfr the Fearless."

One of them stepped forward. A scarred man whose human guise was only a little taller than me, he had an axe strapped to his back and a knife on one hip. He was one of the few who hadn't been particularly affected by the portal. "Jarl," he said, nodding to me.

"Herjolfr. What would you bring to my court?"

"I am a skald, jarl," he said. "I would write poems in your honor, so that all might come to know your glory. And I am also a fighter, so that I might have a share in making that glory all the greater."

"And why would someone with such skills choose to serve me?"

He grinned broadly. "You are a great hero in the making, jarl, and all who have eyes to see know it. Where else could I find so mighty a jarl as you, who are blessed by the wolf and his father alike? You are fated to perform great deeds, and I will write epics of them, so that we might both be famed long after our bones are dust."

I wanted to turn him down out of hand. I'd never wanted to be famous, and the idea of someone writing poetry about me was a little nauseating.

But...well, I *was* trying to build a reputation, wasn't I? I mean, there were reasons for it, but at the end of the day, the fact remained that my goal right now *was* to become famous. Or infamous, I supposed, but to the jötnar the terms were practically synonymous.

I glanced at Kyi, who nodded; she thought he was on the level about what he wanted and what his talents were. I hadn't gotten any vibes off the guy to suggest otherwise, so I looked back at him and nodded. "Very well, Herjolfr," I said. "I shall accept you as a housecarl, so long as you serve loyally."

He knelt and bowed his head. "Jarl, I shall serve you and yours, as best as I am able, until such time as you shall see fit to release me from my oath. This I swear." Then he stood and walked back to the group, standing a little aside from the others.

The next three were simple fighters, without any particular skills to recommend them. I needed fighters at the moment, though, so I took all three of them. The first two, both of whom were male, were called Ragnar the Unlucky and Skallagrim Leifson, respectively. The third, a female called Thraslaug Uggasdóttir, seemed more eager to prove herself, very nearly getting into a brawl when Ragnar snickered at her name.

It took a couple minutes to sort that out, and by the end of it I was starting to get a headache. "Okay," I said. "Next up, Signý the Black."

There was a brief pause, then another female stepped forward. As her name suggested, her hair was very dark, although her features were otherwise quite plain. "Jarl," she said, nodding to me. Her voice was similarly quiet and unassuming.

I considered her for a moment. Her build was slender, almost frail-looking, and she wore a simple black cloak, quite unlike the leather or armor of the other jötnar. She wasn't carrying weapons, either, beyond a short dagger and a staff. "Signý," I said. "What skills do you offer me?"

"I am knowledgeable in the arts of seithr," she said. "I specialize in curses, but I know the warding and prophetic spells as well."

I blinked. "I see." Seithr was a very old magical tradition, dating back at least to the Viking Age. I didn't know much about it beyond that it was old, mysterious, and associated with death and bloodshed. "What do these curses do, precisely?"

She shrugged, the motion graceful and just a little *odd*, in a way I couldn't quite place. "Harm, by one means or another. Sickness, madness, misfortune. Death, even, although that curse is less certain than some. It takes power to work another's death, and power demands sacrifice."

I nodded slowly. "And the wards?"

"I am not as skilled with those," she cautioned me. "But I know how to invoke the spirits, and runes of defense and warding. It is enough for simple tasks, if not the greater protections."

"And why would someone with that kind of power offer it to me?"

"Power demands sacrifice," she said again. "And for all my talents, a man with a sword can kill me as surely as any other. Often have I been forced to turn my arts to ends that I find *distasteful*, under the threat of those who would make use of me. Skrímir says that you will not do so, and that if I serve in your house you will defend me from those who would." She shrugged again. "Skrímir's word is good enough for me."

Well, that was ominous. If I took her in, then I might be letting myself in for trouble later on, when it came time to follow through on that promise of defense. People could be quite insistent about that sort of thing. On the other hand, though, Signý was apparently quite skilled at a type of magic I'd never even seen practiced before. What kinds of things could she do that I had no other way to accomplish? Maybe even more important, what could she *teach* me?

And then there was another consideration. I knew something of what it was like to be forced into doing things you'd rather not. Considering her specialty, and her inflection when she'd called her acts distasteful, I was confident I didn't want to ask what she'd been made to do.

"Very well," I said, somewhat reluctantly. "Serve me loyally, and I shall protect you as best as I am able."

She smiled and knelt.

The next two jötnar ended up leaving. The first openly acknowledged that, having met me and seen something of my operation, he really didn't want to be my housecarl after all. He was quite polite and pleasant about it, and when I told him that was fine, he left without a word.

The next was eager to sign up, but there was something about his attitude that I didn't like. I wasn't sure quite what it was, but I got the distinct impression that I'd regret it if I took him on. He was a troublemaker, the sort who couldn't see a line without needing to *push* it, to test the boundary. Give him an inch, and he'd take a yard; deny him that inch, and he'd work to undermine you, poisoning every interaction with him until he got his way.

I didn't want to deal with that kind of thing, and a glance at Kyi confirmed that her opinion of him was similar.

When I told that guy to leave, it didn't go quite so pleasantly. He went into a tantrum, screaming in Old Norse and waving his hands in the air, although he was smart enough not to actually get violent. The other jötnar were backing away from him warily, though, and it was easy to see that things were just going to escalate.

Then Vigdis quite calmly walked up and punched him in the abdomen, hard. He grunted in pain and doubled over, at which point her knee caught him in the nose with enough force that I could hear it break from where I was sitting. He fell, hard, and lay there moaning. She grabbed him by the nape of the neck, picking him up easily with one arm, and carried him through the room before literally tossing him out the door like a bag of garbage.

Then she walked back to her position behind me, all without saying a word. She was grinning widely, though.

It was probably a bit hypocritical of me to refuse him while I kept someone like Vigdis. From where I was sitting, though, there was a very important difference between the two. Vigdis was a psychopath, but she was *my* psychopath.

"I apologize for the interruption," I said calmly into the shocked silence. "Next is Gisli Björnson."

He looked at Vigdis, looked at the blood on the floor from the last guy's broken nose, and swallowed hard. "I'll leave, if you allow it, jarl."

I nodded, and he all but sprinted for the door. Behind me, I could almost *feel* Vigdis's grin getting wider at his reaction.

With five new housecarls accepted and three applicants gone, the crowd was thinning out considerably. I looked back at the list for a moment before saying, "Snorri Helgason."

The next jotun stepped forward, stammering something in Norse. The only word I picked out clearly was "jarl," which I heard enough that I could recognize it whether I wanted to or not.

I paused before I said anything. Jötnar generally looked young; like most supernatural critters, they don't age appreciably. But you can look young, and then you can look *young*, and this guy was the second one. He was tall, but thin and gangly, like a half-grown puppy, and he carried his sword like he wasn't at all accustomed to it.

"Kyi," I said, quietly enough that I didn't think anyone else would hear it. "How old is he?"

She eyed him for a moment, then shrugged. "I'd guess about thirteen, fourteen."

"Tell him I can't take him. I don't think he knows enough English for me to."

"You *have* to take him," she hissed at me, very quietly but with surprising force.

"He's a *kid*," I said, in much the same tone.

"He came when you called."

"Yes," I said patiently. "But he's still a kid. I'm not putting a kid in the line of fire. That's just messed up."

"You're not listening," she said. "He came when you called. If you tell him no, what do you think happens the *next* time someone wants housecarls? He'll be there again, except that they won't care if he's a kid. And they'll send him out to get killed rather than bother training him until he can hold his own."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Because she was *right*, damn her. It felt wrong on every level to basically hire a child soldier, but she was right that it was the best I could do to actually help the kid.

"Fine," I said. "Tell him he's in, then."

She did so, the Norse phrases rolling off her tongue with a smoothness I could only envy. I'd tried to learn it, a couple of times, but I'm not good with languages, and Old Norse is *not* an easy language.

Snorri seemed shocked at first, then he grinned so widely I was afraid he was going to hurt himself. He knelt down and swore himself to my service, looking so happy that you'd think it was his birthday and Christmas all rolled into one.

After that I took all of the other four. What did it matter, when I'd already done *that*?

Chapter Six

Waking up was not a lot of fun. I was lying on the floor of the throne room, Snowflake sprawled out beside me. Even beside the stress you always feel waking up somewhere strange, I was also stiff.

Sleeping in armor sucks. It *really* sucks. But I hadn't been sure what to expect during the night. Katrin was smart, which meant she'd probably figured out the same things I had about how the next few days would impact the rest of how this situation unfolded. She was also ruthless, which meant that it would be very much in line with her character to launch a preemptive assault.

She *hadn't*, of course, which left me feeling rather silly, but if she had I would have been grateful for the little bit of extra warning that sleeping right inside the door might offer. I would have stayed up all night if I could, but I knew it was impractical. I couldn't function without sleep indefinitely, and when it caught up to me it would be worse than if I hadn't put it off. Smarter to get what rest I could now, since it didn't seem likely that things would get less crazy going forward.

Still. I was glad that Katrin had left me alone another night.

Once I'd gotten up, and worked some of the stiffness out of my muscles, I went upstairs, moving quietly so as not to wake anyone. The sky was just barely getting light, and I doubted that anyone else would be up.

The second floor of the house was the domain of my housecarls. There were bedrooms, bathrooms, a small kitchen—not the most extravagant of living quarters, but enough to get by. With the sudden influx of new faces—I'd tripled my ranks, last night—they'd been scrambling to sort everything out. Some of the rooms were sleeping three or four, and Thraslaug had taken one look at the accommodations before opting to sleep on the kitchen floor instead.

Which was probably still better than the humans got. Kris shared one of the second-floor rooms with Brick, and Matthew had simply shifted to his wolf form and curled up on the floor not too far from Snowflake and I, but the newbies weren't so lucky. They were sleeping on cots down in the safe room.

I shuddered a little just thinking of that. I supposed it *was* the most defended place available, and they weren't likely to be bothered by it, but still. I'd spent more than enough time in a safe room. Even my recent stint in police custody hadn't been as bad as that, not even with the silver I'd been forced to wear.

Upstairs, I made my way to Kyi's room, where I picked my way past the three new housecarls on the floor to stand next to the bed. "Get up," I said quietly, jostling her shoulder a little.

"It's too early to be awake," she said instantly, not opening her eyes. Probably she'd been awake since I opened the door; Kyi was not the type to sleep deeply.

"Too bad," I said pitilessly. "There's work to do. Wake Selene, get your files and meet me upstairs."

Maybe ten minutes later, I was sitting in my study trying to plot out my work for the day. It was harder than I'd expected; there were too many balls in the air, too many sides to this conflict for me to keep track of them all, and at the end of the day I just wasn't that good at coordinating other people's efforts.

Which kinda made my current career plan a spectacularly bad choice, but whatever.

"Okay," I said. "Kyi, I'm assuming you're going to want to check out the new talent, see what we've got?"

"Yep," she said, sounding rather more cheerful now that she'd downed half a cup of what smelled like hellishly strong coffee. I was a little surprised at that; most nonhuman metabolisms are too *other* for stimulants to have the same effects they did on humans. Hell, even *werewolves* don't get a rush from caffeine. Apparently jötnar didn't have that problem, though, because all of my housecarls were practically addicted to the stuff.

"Good," I said. "Selene, I have some information I want you to follow up on, soonest." I handed her a scrap of paper with the three names Pryce had given me written on it.

She glanced at it and then tucked it into her pocket. "Do you have a starting place?"

"They'll be local. Definitely active within the local community, probably focusing on the independents and the periphery. I'd recommend talking to Luna, maybe Frishberg or Pellegrini's people."

"Got it," she said, nodding. "I also have a report on the people you asked me to contact for you. I would have given it to you last night, but you got rather involved in the housecarl topic."

"Right," I said, nodding. So many balls in the air right now. I was already getting a headache and I'd been up, what, fifteen minutes? "Tell me what we know."

"Jackal and her team are in, although she wanted me to emphasize that they're in a strictly scouting role. The Khan doesn't have the resources available to help directly, but he said he'll be providing quiet political support. The Wyoming pack isn't officially backing you, but some of their people who know the area will be ready to come in later today."

"The others haven't replied?"

"Not yet," she said, shrugging "But considering who some of them are, that might not be terribly surprising. It might even be a good thing."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. Kyi, did you get a location on the ghouls I asked about?"

She started a little, not yet awake enough to really follow the conversation when she had nothing to add, and then nodded. "Found something," she said. "Some oddities not far east of here. Can't be sure whether it's ghouls or something else, if it's anything."

"Okay. I'll check that out, see if I can find them. Selene, focus on those names. Try and get a meeting set up if you can. Kyi, check out the new housecarls and increase the patrols you've been running."

They both nodded and left, moving briskly. I followed a few moments later, although my movements were anything but brisk. I was tired, and I was unsure of what to do, and I was a hell of a lot more scared than I wanted to admit. But I was moving.

I would have liked to have Aiko along for the next bit, but she was still in Transylvania. I knew better than to think she'd be awake this early. Or late. Whatever. It was a pain in the ass trying to think about where we were in the day across multiple time zones.

Anyway, she probably wouldn't be back in Colorado for at least a couple hours, and I wanted to get this taken care of as soon as possible. So Snowflake and I went out and got in the armored truck, and we started driving east.

I was a little startled, and more than a little unnerved, by how much *easier* it was than the last time I'd gone looking for ghouls. Then, I'd had to slowly walk around, triangulating in on their location by subtle cues I picked up from various animals' senses.

Now I just drove, and went wherever felt right, without necessarily thinking about *why*. If I thought about it I might know that the dog a block to the left was sleeping peacefully, and that to my right an early-morning hawk had banked in a circle around a quarter-mile area for no apparent reason. But by and large I didn't think about it, just let it accumulate in the back of my mind as a gut-level impression of what was going on and followed that.

I had to wonder, and not for the first time, whether my time in police custody had broken me, on a level. Whether so much time spent dissociated from my own body and drifting had *changed* me, done something to the tether that held me together. It felt like there was a part of me that was *always* drifting now, constantly sifting the sensory data available from my magic and drawing a gestalt view of the world around me.

Which was useful, undeniably. But at the same time a little worrying, or more than a little.

I didn't have the time to worry about it, though. In less than ten minutes I pulled over to the side of the road, confident that I'd reached my destination. It had the same characteristics as the last place I'd found ghouls, the same general feeling to it. There weren't many animals around, and the ones that were present were scared. They could smell decaying meat, and so could I, although I was smelling it in a slightly different way. The energy here, the magic, stank of rotting flesh. I couldn't pin down a single

source; it was more like the ghouls had been here so long that their aura had seeped into the walls and the streets, coloring everything that happened here. This was a place where every cut would get infected, where people would hurry home at night while looking over their shoulders and not knowing why.

I didn't blame the ghouls for it. This was nothing they chose, just...a consequence of what they were.

I got out of the truck, Snowflake right beside me, and locked it. Then I just leaned against the door, waiting. I didn't need to go looking beyond what I'd already done. They'd find me soon enough, now that I was in their territory.

Sure enough, it probably wasn't ten minutes before someone walked up to me, moving with a rolling gait that hinted at the inhuman limbs underneath the mask. "You aren't wanted here," he said to me, with just enough of a growl to his voice to raise Snowflake's hackles. "Leave."

I regarded him evenly. "I'm here to talk to Jibril," I said.

The ghoul didn't exactly lose the hostile attitude, but as I'd hoped, dropping their leader's name had been enough to make him back down a little. "What if Jibril doesn't want to talk to you?" he asked after considering what I'd said for a few seconds.

I smiled behind the helmet. "Then I'll leave, no harm done. But I think he'll want to talk. Tell him Winter Wolf is here about a job offer."

He frowned, the expression emphasizing the too-long lines of his face, then nodded and walked away.

I stood and scratched Snowflake's ears for the next few minutes. This wasn't the time to push my luck. So we waited peacefully for our answer.

Finally, maybe fifteen minutes later, another ghoul approached. I recognized this one as Jibril; his disguise was better than the flunky's, letting less of the beast inside show through. It wasn't quite as good as usual, though; I could see that his features were a little bit *off*, and there was a touch of crimson around his mouth. I'd caught him during breakfast, then. Good; the interruption would put him on the defensive, giving me the advantage in this conversation.

Of course, it might have worked a little better if seeing a little bit of blood on his face hadn't been enough to remind me that I hadn't eaten yet, with a rather uncomfortable intensity. Logically I knew I probably wouldn't care for his meal—ghouls are known for preferring their meat well-aged, to the point that most species wouldn't eat it for money—but that didn't matter to the more instinctive part of me.

"Jarl," he said, eyeing me warily and keeping a safe distance. "What do you want?"

"A while ago, I made you an offer," I said. "Something about giving you work if you wanted it."

He nodded. "I remember."

"Well, I'm asking if you want it," I said. "Because I really need a hand at the moment."

He snorted. "You're doing all right from where I'm standing."

"Sure, but you're not looking at it in the long term. I can deal with problems as they come up, but that's not a long-term solution. I need to be able to *prevent* the problems from coming up, and that means I need people to tell me when there's something brewing, and to keep other problems in check while I deal with them."

"Okay," he said. "I can see that. But then again, why should I care? I like you all right, Wolf, but business is business, and I've got to look out for my own people first, yes? So tell me. We're doing all right here. Things are *good* right now, everyone has bigger fish to fry than us. Why should I risk all that to help you?"

"Loki's broadcast changed everything," I said, not answering his question right away. "It changed the way the world works, you know? And we're still trying to settle things, we're still trying to decide what the new world is going to look like going forward. That's why your people are doing so well. You're scavengers at heart, and right now you're essentially feeding on the corpse of the old world. You follow me?"

"Yes," he said cautiously, clearly unsure where I was going with this. "I follow."

"Good. Now, there are two problems with this. First off, any kind of opportunity attracts people ready to take advantage. You aren't the only scavengers to see an opportunity here, we both know that. You were just the first ones on the ground. Second, this is an opportunity with a short lifespan. It won't be long before things are settled, one way or another, and when they are the first thing the people on top will do is go after the little guy."

He shrugged. "That's the way of things. We're ghouls; we're used to it."

"*No*," I said, leaning forward a little. "That *was* the way of things. But like I said, we're in a brand new world. We, right now, get to decide what that world is going to look like. I'm offering you a chance to be a part of that. A chance to be a part of the system, instead of the outsider that scavenges for scraps, and gets chased off when the major players take an interest."

He tried to look casual, but the gleam in his eyes gave him away. I had him hooked now.

"I can't offer you anything outside this city," I continued, lowering my voice. "I can't promise that you'll get what you want, or that you'll be on the inside forever. I don't have the power. But what I can do is tell you that this is a genuine offer. You help put me on top in this town, and I'll do what I can to make sure that your interests aren't ignored when it comes time to establish the new system."

I fell silent, letting him work through what I'd said. It was a long, tense silence.

Clean Slate (Winter's Tale)

Finally he let out a sigh, and the tension drained from the air. "Damn you anyway, Wolf," he said, sounding as tired as I felt. "You're going to get us killed chasing a dream, and you haven't even promised us anything. But you know this is the one offer we can't ignore."

"You'll help, then?"

"Yes. We'll help."

Chapter Seven

"Good news," I said. "I just hired an army of ghouls. They'll be there around noon to talk about integrating them into our plans."

There was a moment of shocked silence from the other end of the phone before Selene laughed. "You really never fail to surprise, do you, jarl?"

"I try," I said lightly. "Now please tell me you've got something on those names I gave you."

"I've got something," she said, any trace of humor suddenly gone. "It looks like there are actually three factions among the independents right now. You're meeting one of them for breakfast in half an hour."

She rattled off an address, and I almost groaned. I could get there in half an hour—maybe, if the roads weren't in *too* bad of shape—but not with much time to spare.

"Okay," I said, putting the truck in gear. "Tell me about these factions. Broad strokes, right now."

"The main thing they disagree upon is how to respond to the unrest. One side feels that it's dangerous and they should just be trying to survive it. The other two are of the opinion that it's an opportunity, a chance to change the basic rules of the game while everything is in flux. One of them wants to see mages and magical creatures rise to social and political dominance. The last one is more concerned with internal affairs, trying to shake up the traditional power structure and give the independent actors a bigger say in how the system works."

I did groan at that. I *so* didn't need to be dealing with that kind of political maneuvering right now. I mean, I'd rather not deal with it at all, but for it to be going on at the same time as all the other crap I had to deal with seemed...more than slightly unfair.

"Which one am I meeting with?"

"The third," she said, sounding entirely too cheerful. "They want to talk you into supporting their cause, I think."

"That's insane," I said, more-or-less automatically. "I'm about as closely tied to the traditional power structure as a guy can get. They'd have to be crazy to pick me as a recruit."

"They're trying to overthrow the current balance of power," she said dryly. "One that was put in place by deities, and is currently supported by most of the major players in the world. It's safe to say they aren't the sharpest tools in the metaphorical shed. Now, I'm still trying to set up meetings with the other two, and a new set of scouting reports just came in that Kyi's too busy to look at, so unless you mind I'll leave you to it."

"No, that's fine."

"Great!" the demoness said brightly. "Have fun!"

I hung up and dropped the phone back into the console next to me. "I'm pretty sure she's crazy," I said to no one in particular. "Like, *really* crazy, not just a little bit."

Snowflake snorted. *Of course she is. She works for you. What sane person would take that job?*

"Good point. So how do you see this going?"

Probably not violent, she said thoughtfully. *They sound like the idealistic type, which means they aren't likely to throw the first stone. Although I'd wager they've got a few more ruthless people in the mix. The sort who'll do what they think's necessary, whether or not the rest of the group agrees.*

"Probably," I agreed. "Honestly, I'm inclined to say they're the biggest threat of the three. Any normal person would be hunkering down right now, and I can at least understand the ones who are making a play to put themselves on top. Idealists are...a little harder to work with."

I didn't mention Katie and Mike, or the monster they had summoned in the name of justice. I didn't have to; I knew we were both thinking of it. They had been idealists, too, and if we got very, very lucky the world might someday recover from the results.

Hopefully this one won't go that badly, Snowflake said, several long moments later. *There can't be very many people who know how to fuck things up that badly, right?*

No, I said thoughtfully. *But then again, we never really learned how those two figured it out, either.*

The conversation died out after that, leaving me to dwell on that thought as I drove. It wasn't an especially comforting one.

The restaurant where the meeting was scheduled was a chain, a few steps above fast food, located just inside the rough boundaries of the independents' territory. I'd never been there before, but it wasn't hard to find; there weren't all that many places with a busy parking lot at seven in the morning.

You think they're going to let me in? Snowflake asked idly as I locked things up.

A week ago, I'd have said not a chance. But now? I shrugged. *Who knows?*

The host met us at the door, looking distinctly nervous. I couldn't really blame him for that; we were both still wearing full armor, and that's the kind of thing that would scare damn near anyone.

"We have a reservation," I said. "Party name of Ironside."

He nodded, although the wary look didn't go away. "Your party is already here," he said. "Follow me."

They didn't have a private room, apparently, but he led me to a secluded corner of the room that was the next best thing. There were already half a dozen people sitting at the table there, an even mix of men and women, most of whom looked awfully young and not terribly sure of themselves.

Looking at them, I was reminded of the night I'd first met the Inquisition, with an almost violent intensity. They'd started out with the same idealistic naïveté as these kids, although it hadn't taken long for them to get the same weary, bitter look as most of the mages I knew. Very few people, in my experience, managed to maintain normal relationships once they'd come into their power. You either fought the darkness or embraced it, and either way it was hard not to feel a certain separation from the world after a while.

These people hadn't made it there yet, I thought. But they would.

"You're Winter Wolf, then?" the one in the center of the group said. He was a thin, balding guy, who was tan in a way that suggested long hours spent exposed to the weather, rather than time on a beach or in a salon. He didn't have the broken-down look that Katie had gotten near the end, but there was still a toughness about him that the rest of the group lacked.

"That's me," I said. "And you must be Ironside." He nodded, and I snorted. "Okay," I said. "So...what is it with you guys and the ridiculous names?"

"You're one to talk," he said dryly.

"Granted, but at least I was *born* with it."

"I wouldn't be so quick to criticize on that basis. There actually are people named Ironside, you know."

"Fair," I admitted. "And honestly, you aren't even the one I'm complaining about. One of the people I'm supposed to meet later is called *Shadow*, for crying out loud. I see that and I'm just like, really? This isn't a freaking comic book."

He nodded slowly. "You're part of the old school," he said. "The line of thinking that says that you want everything you do to be associated with you, so that it all feeds into your reputation as a person."

"And you don't think so?"

He considered that for a long moment. "Let's just say," he said slowly, "that while comic books are ridiculous, they occasionally stumble across a relevant point. Some of us still have people outside this world. Friends, family, loved ones. And I think we both know you're not above threatening them if that's what it takes to get your way. So we'll be sticking with aliases for the time being."

"Low blow," I said. "And a fair point. Now that that's settled, you mind if I sit down?"

"Not at all," he said.

"Cool. So would you mind telling me, you know, what the bloody hell you people are getting at with all this?" I grabbed one of the chairs and spun it around before sitting, resting my arms across the back.

Ironside looked at me oddly. I got the impression that I wasn't playing into his expectations at all, which was exactly why I'd done it the way I had. I thought I had a better chance of getting the information I wanted if I kept them off balance.

"Simple," he said, recovering his composure more quickly than I'd expected. "For a long time, we've been kept down. The magical world is stuck in the feudal era, when the rest of the world left that nonsense behind ages ago. We want to take this opportunity to demand some basic human rights."

"It's a nice thought," I admitted. "But there's a problem. When the feudal system was overturned in Europe, it happened because the lower classes had the power and the leverage to make it happen. And that's just not the case here. When it comes to the supernatural world, the people keeping you down actually *are* bigger and more powerful than you are."

"That's what they want us to think," he said, leaning forward a little. There was genuine passion in his voice. "*Think*, Mr. Wolf. How much of what you're saying is true, and how much of it is just the rhetoric you've been taught to believe? We have the numbers, we know how the system works, and for maybe the first time in history we have the ability to communicate and organize on a *global* scale. The old system, the whole 'feudal lord' approach, it's not the only way things can work anymore. We *do* have the power."

"I have seen what happens to people that defy the gods," I said flatly. "If Loki wanted to, he could kill everyone in this city without even trying. And he's just one god, out of dozens."

There was a moment of silence after that, and several of the magelings looked at each other. "Granted," Ironside said, trying to recover his momentum and partially succeeding. "But wasn't it a god that told us that the rules don't matter anymore? They aren't imposing the system on us anymore."

"True," I said. "But really, it applies on every level. The people on any given level of the system got there by stepping on the people under them. Now that they've got there, they've sacrificed, they've *paid* for every inch they took. They aren't going to just let that go. Now, I think I've got a pretty good idea of what you're fighting for, here. You want to hear what I think?"

"Why not," Ironside said.

"I think," I said, slowly and carefully, "that what you're trying to do is admirable. I might even want to help you. But I also think that, by and large, people aren't as nice as you. And generally speaking, the only language those people really understand is power. So if you want respect, if you want people to listen, you have to *make* them listen. You have to be an asshole, have to be maybe even a little bit evil, because if you aren't they'll walk all over you."

"That sounds like an ugly world to live in," he said quietly. The rest of them had gone still, and some of them were looking at me with barely-disguised fear. "We're trying to make a better one."

"I respect that," I said honestly. "But there are half a million people in this city. And right now, there are no rules protecting them. The only thing standing between them and all the horrible things that want to happen to them is me. I don't want this job. Never did. But I've got it, and...and there's no one to do it if I fail, you know? There's no second line of defense, nobody willing to take over if I walk away. Everything I do right now, every single goddamn thing, there's half a million lives maybe riding on it."

"That sounds like an awful responsibility."

"It is," I agreed. "It really, really is. But I'm telling you this for a reason. I like what you guys are trying to do. I respect you for it. But at the end of the day, I have to balance that against everything else that's at stake. If you want to help me, if you want to help keep the peace until things are stable and we can work towards your democratic system, I'd be thrilled. If you want to stay out of the way, that's fine too. But if you try to undermine me, if you do anything to prevent me from keeping all those nasty things away, I won't hesitate to shut you down."

He regarded me for a moment. "I find it hard to believe that you'd try to hurt people you know are trying to do the right thing."

I smiled a little behind the mask, very much a predatory smile rather than a friendly one. "Remember what I said about being a little evil? Not a hypothetical. I'd hate to kill you, but I've killed people I liked more. I'd appreciate it if you could keep things from going that far this time around." I stood up, producing a business card from my cloak and dropping it on the table. "In case you need to get in touch," I explained.

Then I walked away, Snowflake pacing at my side. Behind me the table burst into whispers.

Stop driving and get some food, Snowflake told me.

"Nah," I said. "I don't actually need to eat anymore, remember? It can wait until I've dealt with the next faction."

Bullshit, she said firmly. You're starving. I can feel it.

I'm always hungry, I replied. Going a little longer won't kill me.

You're losing your focus, she countered. Or are you going to tell me you didn't just spend fifteen seconds staring at that woman because she's barely awake and you know she'd be easy prey?

I had, but I didn't want to admit that to her. That was made easier a moment later when she stepped from the passenger's seat over onto my lap, blocking my view and forcing me to coast to a stop.

Fortunately there was no one behind me, although we were driving on a fairly major road and it was late enough in the morning that there should have been at least some traffic.

"Fine," I said, laughing a little. "We'll stop and get some food. Just get out of the way long enough for me to get there."

We ended up going to the drive-through of a fast food restaurant, probably scaring the wits out of the person at the window. I devoured half a dozen burgers, which didn't really *satisfy* my hunger, but at least dulled the edge a little, and washed them down with a ridiculously large cup of soda. Caffeine didn't have much of an effect on me, but I could still get a sugar rush, and at the moment I wanted whatever I could get.

Snowflake got a couple of burgers as well, but barely touched them, watching me instead. She was still picking at them when I drove away from the restaurant.

I could feel that she was worried, and I knew *why* she was worried, but there wasn't a lot I could do about it. She was right, after all. For me to put off eating like that, for me to treat it as a chore rather than something to look forward to, was beyond unusual.

But what could I say? I was, on a fundamental level, not the same person I'd been before. Loki had changed me, and my time in prison had exacerbated it. I didn't *need* to eat, not really, and no matter how much I *did* eat, the hunger was barely reduced at all. Even the meal I'd just eaten was less a fix, and more a reminder of how overwhelmingly insufficient food seemed these days.

I got more satisfaction, physically as well as mentally, from *Snowflake's* meal than my own. And that was worrying, on a variety of levels.

I tried to put that worry out of mind, with moderate success. It helped that it wasn't long before we reached the home base of the next name on my list.

Chapter Eight

This one wasn't a formal meeting at a neutral location. In fact, the person I was here to meet didn't know I was coming at all.

There was a very good reason for that. Selene hadn't been able to dig up much on the leadership of any of the independent factions—apparently they'd all been content to keep their activities quiet until recently.

But Shadow was the spokeswoman for the camp that felt that people with magic were *better* than normal humans, that they deserved to be in charge. They were a group that was defined by a serious and extreme agenda, and apparently they were willing to use violence to advance it, even while the world was going to pieces around them.

The funny thing was that, on some level, I understood where they were coming from. When you can stop bullets, or bench press a small car, or blow things up with your mind, it can be hard not to look at a plain old human being and think of them as lesser. People on the fringes of the supernatural got used to being marginalized, from both the connected players and normal society. It wasn't hard to see why Shadow had been able to attract followers under the platform of "It's *our* turn now."

And just from that, I could be fairly confident that Shadow wasn't the kind of person who would respond to diplomacy and negotiation. Someone who thought of personal power as the appropriate basis for societal power, who wanted to move up in the world and instantly looked to move someone else *down*, had a very different outlook on life than the idealists I'd met with earlier.

I intended to convey my message in terms that she could understand.

So rather than a restaurant or a park, we pulled up in front of an apartment building. It was nice enough, as such things went, a fairly small building with lots of windows. There was a guy at the front desk just inside the door who looked like he wanted to stop me. I just smiled at him and kept right on walking.

People don't usually stop you if you look like you know what you're doing, and this guy was no exception. Even though I was wearing a hooded grey-black coat, and accompanied by a ridiculously scary-looking husky. Snowflake wasn't wearing armor, and mine was covered by the cloak, but it was still not the sort of ensemble that you should probably let walk into your apartment complex unchallenged.

Then again, maybe he was calling the police behind us. It might not matter—I imagined they were too busy to respond to every suspicious person call. Either way, it was probably best to work fast.

I hadn't been able to get Shadow's residence narrowed down any further than this building, so I was going to have to find her apartment the old-fashioned way. I started on the ground floor, walking slowly down the hallway and looking for anything out of place.

I found plenty of things. The cat in 103 was in heat, and pissed off that she couldn't do anything to relieve the tension. From 107 I caught the scent of raw beef, and lots of it. That had nothing on 112, where I smelled blood and camphor, and heard a low moaning coming from inside. I almost went into that apartment, until I realized that they had a pet dog and got a look at things through his eyes.

Then I realized what the residents were up to, blushed, and kept walking. I considered myself fairly open-minded on the subject—Aiko has a rather bizarre imagination, after all, and my pain tolerance and healing rate were both off the charts. It would have been somewhat odd if we *hadn't* played around a little. Watching other people going at it, though, that was a different story.

I didn't run into anything else *quite* that exciting as I finished surveying the ground floor, but there were plenty of other oddities. It was amazing, really, all the things that happened behind closed doors. This was a pretty normal apartment building, pretty bland, and after a casual examination of the place I still had a ridiculous amount of blackmail material.

I finished looking around and moved up, doing the same thing on the next floor. It was a good thing that it was a smallish apartment complex; I couldn't have done this in a really big place. But there were less than two dozen apartments per floor, and I only needed about thirty seconds to clear each one. It didn't take too long.

Finally, when I was midway through the third floor, I caught what I was looking for. Apartment 309 smelled of magic, the sharp disinfectant tone of humanity cut with a shot of darkness. There was something odd about that smell, something I hadn't encountered before. It was quiet and dusty, but there was something about the scent that was deliberate, the result of action rather than chance.

To put it in simpler terms, there was the darkness you got when you couldn't see, and the darkness you got when you closed your eyes. This was the second one, and I didn't know what that meant.

There was nowhere to go but forward, though, so I walked up and knocked on the door. I had to knock a couple more times before I heard rustling cloth inside, and then it was almost another minute before footsteps approached the door.

I hated not knowing what was going on. There were no pets in this apartment, so I had nothing to go on but what I could hear from outside to guess what was happening.

Finally, just when I was contemplating picking the lock and going in, the door opened a few inches before being caught by the chain. The woman on the other side was short and thin, with brown eyes and dyed-black hair that was rather disheveled. She was wearing a black robe and a black mask that covered everything but her eyes.

"Hi," I said dryly. "You must be Shadow."

"Who are you?" she asked suspiciously.

"Winter Wolf. Can I come in, please? I'm afraid one of your neighbors will see us."

She frowned at me suspiciously. But apparently she couldn't think of a good way to tell me no, because a few seconds later she reached up and unhooked the door chain.

I went in, taking a look around the place as I did. It was a nice apartment, not terribly large, but nice. The furniture wasn't ridiculously expensive, but it hadn't been purchased at a garage sale or IKEA, either. There were a few bookshelves, with a whole lot of books stacked on them, mostly paperback fiction.

I took a seat on a leather couch that had seen its fair share of use. Snowflake sat next to me and rested her head on my thigh, where I could scratch her ears while Shadow locked up.

A few moments later she came back and sat on the other couch, which was at right angles to the one I was on. That gave both of us a decent view of the other, while also putting the coffee table between us.

"Would you care for some tea?" she asked after a few moments. It sounded like she wasn't sure what else to say, so she fell back on that by default.

"Please," I said. "Also, no offense, but I've gotta ask. What's with the robe and mask?"

"I was asleep," she said. "The robe was the simplest thing to throw on. As for the other...well, look at it from my perspective. If you got woken up by a strange mage knocking on your door, would you really want to answer it without some kind of protection?" She smiled wryly. "Obviously not, given what *you're* wearing."

"The armor serves a practical purpose," I said defensively. "It makes sure that if someone tries to shoot me, it won't work."

"The mask is another kind of protection," she said quietly. "Although not one that will do me much good here, I guess." She stood up. "Let me get that tea."

It took a few minutes for the water to boil, which I mostly spent scratching Snowflake's ears and trying to reconcile this homey apartment and being offered tea with a power-hungry faction of mages.

When Shadow returned, she'd ditched the mask and traded in the robe for a black T-shirt and jeans. Without the mask her face was a little pale and visibly freckled. Her hair was still mussed, but now it was *artfully* mussed, the sort that happened on purpose for stylistic reasons.

She set two cups on the table, followed by a jar of honey, a small pitcher of cream, and a teapot. She made no move towards either cup, letting me choose. Courtesy in the supernatural world, particularly between those who weren't quite enemies but certainly weren't friends, had a lot to do with minimizing the possibility for assassination.

Not that I was safe. There were all kinds of ways to get around the standard precautions, after all. She could have just taken a preemptive antidote and then slipped the poison into the teapot, for example. But it limited the danger, and the fact that she'd done things this way said a lot.

"Thank you for the hospitality," I said, taking one of the cups and pouring tea into it. It was something of a loaded phrase; the rules of hospitality were taken very seriously by the vast majority of supernatural beings. Do something to violate them, and you could expect very little welcome once word got out.

"Of course," she said, taking the other cup. "Would you like some honey?"

"No, thank you. I don't care for sweet tea."

She shrugged, spooning some into her cup. "Suit yourself."

I settled back into the couch, taking my helmet off and setting it next to Snowflake. It would be hard to drink while wearing it, and removing it would send another message, a less hostile one. "Okay," I said. "No offense, but you're really not what I was expecting."

She raised one eyebrow, blowing on her tea to cool it. "Really?" she said. "And what were you expecting?"

"I'm not sure. Something a little less pleasant, I suppose. I mean, you're the ringleader of the most aggressive, power-hungry faction of independents in town right now. No offense."

"Is that how you think of us?"

"Your central tenet is that people who don't have magic should be subservient to those who do," I said dryly. "It's kinda hard to interpret it any other way."

She was quiet for a few seconds, then abruptly asked, "How many dogs are there within a block of us right now?"

"Nineteen," I said instantly, then paused.

It was the strangest feeling. I hadn't thought about that beforehand. Oh, I'd been *aware* of the animals nearby, but I hadn't stopped to count them or anything. And yet, the instant she asked, I knew the answer, and there was no doubt in my mind that I was right.

"And cats? How many of them?"

"Twenty-four. I'm sorry, is this relevant?"

She shrugged and took another sip of tea. "How hard would it have been for anyone else to answer that?" she asked idly. "I mean, a 'normal' person, a plain old standard-issue human being, would have to work for it. They could go door to door and ask people, but that wouldn't account for strays. Or they could do research on the demographics of the area and compare it to standard values, and maybe

get in the right general area. Either way it would take a lot of work and the answer you get would have a certain margin of error. I ask you and I get an answer right now, no delay, no uncertainty. Just boom, there's your number."

"So?"

"So you of all people should agree with me," she said, setting her cup down. "When I say we're better than they are, it isn't racism or classism or whatever ism you want to call it. It's a statement of fact, plain and simple. You've got access to information on a level they can only dream of. I can walk into their house right in front of them, pick up their treasured belongings, and walk back out, and they won't do a thing to stop me."

"Can," I asked quietly, "or have?"

She smiled a little. "This apartment doesn't pay for itself."

I nodded. "So what you're saying is that might makes right. We have the power, so we should use it. Is that about right?"

"I guess so, yeah. Although it's really not any different from what you're doing, is it? I mean, I'm not going to pretend I know everything you do, but you're taking power, right? Taking control?"

"That's different," I said, although I didn't sound convincing, even to myself. "I'm doing it to help people."

"Sure," she said. "I get that. That's why a lot of the people with me are speaking up now, when they haven't before. The old rules, the old protections, they don't apply anymore. That means that we're the only ones who have the knowledge and the power to keep people safe. But we can't do that while we're too attached to the way things have always been to move forward."

"You know," I said quietly, sipping just a tiny bit of my tea, "there are a lot of people that would say that you're wrong. That the ones who have that kind of power should be answerable to the people, not the other way around."

She snorted. "Yeah, right. Since when has that ever happened? Don't get me wrong, it's a nice idea, but the real world doesn't work that way. The people in power always rig the game in their favor. I'm just not in denial about it." She grinned. "Besides, if you really believed that, wouldn't you be doing things aboveboard instead of just taking power by yourself?"

I winced. Shadow had scored a very palpable hit, there. "I get what you're saying," I said. "But there are a couple of things you're overlooking. First, your estimates of relative power are whacked. There are like a hundred of them for every one of you, even if you convince all of the mages and minor talents to side with you, and they've got things a hell of a lot nastier than torches and pitchforks these days. Second, this is a temporary situation. Anarchy is a nice concept and all, but there's too much pressure from above for it to last long. The major players want things stable and orderly."

"And you don't think that we could make things stable?"

"No," I said. "Not in the long term. Have you ever read *Leviathan*?"

"No."

"It's an old philosophy book by Thomas Hobbes," I said. "The way he looks at it, the natural state of things is a lot like what you're describing. It's all about personal power, who's the strongest, that kind of thing. But if you want a stable society, you need a unified government backed by something more than who has the biggest stick, you know? If the system is based on personal power and strength, then there will always be someone who thinks he's the baddest guy around. Things will never really be stable."

"That's a fair point," she said. "But I don't think it's the only way to run things. Think about it. How much of what you're saying here is based on reality, and how much of it is just what you've been taught to believe? Right, wrong, good, bad, they're all just rules that the people in charge made up to stay in charge, and keep the masses down. Well now it's *our* turn, and we don't have to listen to any rules but the ones we choose."

I was still trying to think of how to respond to that, or how to convince her that what she was doing really wasn't a very good idea, when there was a sudden *boom* outside.

Most people probably would have been confused then, or wondering what was happening. I wasn't. I'd heard explosions before, and I knew one when I heard it. This had been louder than some, but not ridiculously, which meant that my ears were ringing but my balance wasn't thrown off.

It only took a couple of seconds for me to be on my feet, Tyrfing in one hand, pulling my helmet back on with the other. Snowflake rose beside me, a snarl bubbling up in her throat, lips pulled back to show metal teeth.

Shadow was apparently no amateur herself, though. By the time I was ready to go, she was on her feet and looking out the window. A moment later there was another explosion, and this time I could see the red glow from outside. Somebody was starting fires out there.

"Unbelievable," she said, letting the curtain fall. "That's Newton. He's one of my inner circle."

"Not anymore, apparently," I said dryly. "That's the trouble with preaching the übermensch philosophy. Sometimes people take you seriously."

"I'm not surprised he wasn't loyal to me," she snapped. "I'm surprised he was stupid enough to turn on me like this. He of all people should know better." She turned to me. "Winter, I'm sorry, but we have to put this conversation on hold. You want to give me a hand with this, it might be good for both of us. Newton is...he's not someone that you could have this debate with, let's just put it that way."

I pursed my lips and nodded. "Fine," I said. "But you'll owe me."

All right, Snowflake said, sounding a little more excited than was comfortable. And here I thought today would be boring.

Chapter Nine

"Okay," I said, moving towards the door. I didn't like the idea of being trapped in the confined space of the hallway during a fight, but it beat the vulnerability of standing by the window while people blasted at me. "What kind of threat are we talking about?"

"Newton is a sorcerer with a knack for force spells," Shadow replied, darting through the kitchen to what was presumably her bedroom. "He's a clumsy brute, not the type for fine control, but nasty in a fight. Get in the way of a full-power hit from him and you're looking at broken bones or ruptured organs."

"Wonderful," I muttered. Then, louder, "Is there anyone with him?"

"I didn't see anyone," she called back. "But I'm guessing he'll have brought his close friends. That means a wizard who focuses on fire magic and a witch that likes to manipulate people. Maybe also a shapeshifter."

"Freaking *wonderful*." That ruled out my first impulse, which had been to jump out the window and charge them, hoping to take them by surprise. If they had two serious ranged attackers, that made that plan basically just suicide by another name. I'd been on the receiving end of serious fire magic before, and while I sincerely hoped these bozos didn't have anything like that kind of power, it was still ugly.

A moment later Shadow returned. She'd put the mask back on, and I noticed that she was carrying a knife as well. No gun, and no magical foci that I could detect. She was either very good or very overconfident; from what I'd seen thus far it could go either way. "You about ready to go?" she asked, grinning behind the mask.

"Yeah," I said. "Let's do this."

In the hallway, people were milling around, unsure what to do. A handful were making their way to the emergency exits; the rest seemed to have come to the quite reasonable conclusion that the emergency was *outside* the building, and going closer to it wouldn't help their odds much. Snowflake and I pushed our way through. We didn't have to push very hard; most of them took one look at us and decided of their own accord that not being close to us was a very good idea.

I took the stairs three at a time, jostling the handful of people in the stairwell. A couple of them might have fallen down; I wasn't sure. I couldn't take the time to care. I had to get outside soonest.

Ground floor, moving through the lobby. I could feel Snowflake, her shoulder bumping my hip every few steps, hunger and anticipation burning in the back of my mind. There were a handful of people in my way, but they didn't slow me down. The guy behind the desk turned to stare at me as I passed. He was on the phone, probably with the cops.

Outside, the parking lot was almost empty. The sky was overcast and the sun was barely up, leaving things dim. Most of the light in the lot came from a trio of burning cars, casting deep, flickering shadows. The air stank of gasoline and burning rubber and melting plastics.

I stopped just outside the door, slinking to the right and sticking to the shadows. It was just me and Snowflake, against three mages, any of whom might have been a match for us. That meant we had to fight smart, not hard.

Of course, that would have been considerably easier if I'd known where they *were*. They'd done a decent job of making that hard, although it was probably unintentional. The bright, flickering light made it hard to see anything lurking in the shadows, the stench from the burning cars made tracking them by scent impossible, and the fires made the air so turbulent that trying to track their motion that way was a waste of time.

I had to do something, though, so I moved out into the lot. There were maybe a two dozen cars, with lots of open asphalt between them. I stuck close to the vehicles, staying in their shadows and moving low to the ground. I could have done more to conceal myself—summon a cloud of fog, for example, or thicken the shadows around myself—but my strongest asset at the moment was that they had no way of knowing anyone was here to fight them.

I stopped and waited near the right-side edge of the lot, listening for anything that might tell me where my prey were.

Nothing. If they were making any noise, it was covered by the crackling of the fires.

And then there was another explosion from the other side of the lot, loud enough that it hurt, the force enough to send me staggering to the side. A moment later I looked around, and saw a fourth car burning.

I grinned and started making my way in that direction. I had to move across a fairly broad expanse of open ground to do so, but that was the way it was. I stayed low and scurried across as quickly as I could; between that and my cloak, it was unlikely that I would be noticed. Snowflake was still moving with me, but she was about twenty feet to my left, where we couldn't both be hit by a single attack.

Unless it was a *really* big one, I supposed, but if these guys could hit that hard, we had bigger problems.

I moved closer, watching for movement. And then I saw it, a figure around twenty feet from the latest automobile victim, moving away from the burning car.

I hesitated for a moment. It was awfully suspicious to be that close to the explosion when I hadn't seen any other people in the lot up to that point. But it wasn't *proof*, not really. I didn't *know* that this person had anything to do with it. They might be totally innocent.

They might be. But it didn't seem likely. And I would only get one chance to take them by surprise. I had to make it count.

I hadn't really been planning on a battle today, but it would have been foolish not to expect *some* kind of trouble, and I was carrying a decent arsenal. Knives, guns, garrotes, a variety of stored spells—I had enough kit to deal with a reasonable range of threats.

Sometimes, though, the simplest answer is the right one. Almost the instant I saw the figure, I drew a grenade from its place in my cloak, pulled the pin, and tossed it at the figure, all in a single motion. I bolted away from the car I was hiding behind a moment later, not waiting to see what happened.

A couple of seconds later, there was a *boom* that made the previous explosions sound pretty insignificant. I was a good forty feet away and taking cover behind another car, and that was the only thing that saved me. I'd used these grenades a fair amount, and I knew I was inside the shrapnel radius. Armor wouldn't do jack shit to protect me, either.

In the wake of the grenade, my ears were ringing. My healing rate would ensure that they recovered quickly, but for the moment I was functionally deaf. The guy I'd thrown the grenade at might have been lying on the ground screaming at the top of his lungs, and I wouldn't have been able to hear it at all.

Or they might be sneaking up behind me with a shotgun.

For a few seconds everything was still, as everyone involved tried to figure out where everyone else was and what was going on.

Then the car I'd been hiding behind when I threw the grenade suddenly flipped over, as swiftly and easily as a child flipping a toy car. It hit the ground with a scream of tortured metal and shattering glass that I could hear even over the ringing in my ears.

He's still standing, Snowflake said a moment later. Looks like he threw the grenade far enough away that he only had to worry about the shrapnel, and he managed to stop it. I'm about thirty feet behind him, and he hasn't noticed me yet.

Don't attack, I sent back instantly. He'll swat you out of the air before you get close.

She didn't say anything else, but I didn't get the impression that she was going to do something stupid right away.

A moment later another car flipped over, a little closer to me. Newton's work, I presumed, and a little intimidating. I knew he specialized in big, flashy force magic, but that kind of display was still impressive.

I had to do something to change the game. If I kept hiding like this, eventually he would get around to the car I was hiding behind. I was tough, but I didn't think I'd fare well if a freaking car got flipped over onto me.

So I did something that might have been a little foolhardy. I stepped out into the open space beside the car.

"Hi," I said, loudly enough to be sure that he heard me.

There was a pause, then he stepped into view, about fifty feet in front of me. He was standing in the light of one of the burning cars, giving me my first good look at him. He was a little short, and wearing the same style of mask as....

Damn, lost my train of thought—a valuable reminder that they had a witch with them, although I doubted I was in danger on that front. I was hard to affect with mental magic. Anyway, Newton was wearing a black mask that covered his whole face, making it hard to say much more about his appearance. In any case, I was more concerned with the cloud of small objects floating around him. I saw bits of cars, chunks of asphalt, spare change even a few bits of shrapnel that had probably come from my own grenade.

Most of the force magic I'd seen had focused on pure kinetic energy, the sort of magic that only sort of interacted with the rest of the world. Newton seemed to prefer telekinesis, actually moving objects rather than just blasting things with force. It was an unusual approach in my experience, but potentially just as deadly—as evidenced by the whole "flipping cars" bit earlier.

"Hi," he said. "You got a problem with me?"

"You started blowing things up while I was in the middle of a meeting," I said, tensing my legs to jump aside if he attacked. "So yeah?"

There's another one approaching from your left, Snowflake said.

I glanced that way, trying to keep it from being obvious, and saw that another mage was indeed coming closer. This one was female, judging by her body shape, but wearing the same sort of mask as Newton. Her magic smelled sharp, biting, and hot; the fire mage, most likely.

Not good. Their two serious attackers were both in play now, and they had the advantage of position on me. If they both attacked I'd be hard pressed to avoid both threats.

"So you threw a grenade at me?" Newton said, sounding amused. "Hypocrite much?"

"All the time," I sighed. "But in this case I think it's justified. You're causing trouble, and it's kind of my job to deal with that in this city."

"Is that so?" he asked.

Then, with no warning at all, a dozen projectiles flew from the cloud around him at me, moving fast enough that they would hit more like bullets than baseballs. I managed to dodge in time to avoid being hit, but they hit the ground hard enough to shatter the pavement. If one of those things hit me, I thought it very likely that it would punch right through my armor.

He sent another wave at me, and this time I had to roll to the side to avoid being pulverized. I managed to come to my feet as I did, but almost immediately had to dive back the way I'd come when I came too close to a car and he flipped it over, trying to crush me.

To the side, I saw that the woman had her arms raised in front of her, and a ring of pale blue fire was forming between them. It was taking a while to form, but I could smell that there was a *lot* of power bound up in that spell.

Well, that wasn't good. I wasn't especially worried about Newton's toys, but that fire spell was another story. Wizards had a reputation for being able to gather and control ridiculous amounts of magic. It took a while for them to do so, which normally meant that they weren't really all that threatening in a fight—but at the moment I was too busy dodging to take her out quickly.

Then, before she could finish, a blur of white fur and metal teeth streaked past from my right, moving almost too swiftly to see. Snowflake leapt at the wizard, jumping *through* the fire, and hit her in the chest. The fire scorched her fur, adding a new and unpleasant scent to the mess already in the air, but the wizard fell hard on her back, and the fire dissipated into a gentle wave of heat.

Newton threw another wave of shrapnel at me, but this time I wasn't content to just stand there and take it. I ran forward, ducking under the attack. He could stop anything I threw at him, which meant that grenades and most of the stored spells I was carrying were a waste of time. Tyrfing could probably cut through whatever defense he used, though, if I got close enough to use it.

His next attack was a wider cone, less focused but also a lot harder to avoid. I couldn't dodge them all without completely sacrificing my position and momentum, so I sidestepped the worst of it and took a handful of quarters to the chest and thigh. As I'd expected, they were small enough and fast enough to penetrate the armor easily, slipping through the seams and punching into my flesh.

I was getting close now, though, and Newton was falling back, looking scared. Another masked man had appeared behind and to the side of him, presumably the witch. I almost grabbed a stored spell to throw at him as I ran, but I was distracted by a yelp from behind me and the sudden surge of pain I felt through my bond with Snowflake. I felt a rush of concern at that, with the part of my mind that could process emotion right now—she'd lost her eye under similar circumstances, and I remembered that pain with a visceral intensity that made it hard to put out of my mind.

The rest of me was still running forward. Tyrfing was in my hand and unsheathed, though I didn't clearly remember calling it. Newton launched something larger at me this time, the mirror from a car door. I slid to the side on my next step, just a little, and batted it away with Tyrfing. I wasn't trying to oppose his force—I wasn't remotely strong enough for that—just redirecting it a little, knocking the

mirror to the side so that it missed me by a couple of inches. I had a strong suspicion that he was about to whip it at me from behind, but I couldn't take the time to worry about that now. I was within reach.

I slashed at him overhand, the kind of strike that starts at the shoulder and ends around the opposite hip, but he stumbled backward and the blade fell short. I didn't slow down, taking a step forward and bringing Tyrfing back around at about his knee level.

He reached out with power, trying to tear the weapon out of my hand, but Tyrfing could slice through magic as easily as material objects, and it was hard for him to get a grip on the sword. He could slow my attack, but not stop it. He moved a chunk of asphalt into position to block the strike, but Tyrfing sliced through it and kept going.

His attempts did some good, I had to give him that. The blade was moving slower when it hit his shin than I'd wanted, and as a result it only cut to the bone rather than chopping the limb off completely. Blood still started pouring out of it almost instantly, and he fell.

I grinned. He wasn't going to be walking on that leg any time soon, never mind running away. I stepped closer, raising the sword for the finishing blow.

And then I suddenly realized that my *real* target was still standing. My gaze snapped to the witch and I snarled, suddenly remembering how much I hated it when people screwed with my head. This bastard used that kind of magic, and if I gave him half a chance he'd use it on *me*. The peculiar mix of anger, bloodlust and excitement that I always felt when I was using Tyrfing sharpened suddenly, focusing on the witch, and I was grinning as I ran at him.

Suddenly I pitched sideways, pain screaming through me. My left leg didn't want to work properly, and I tripped the next time I tried to step, hitting the ground and rolling.

It wasn't until I smelled roasting flesh that I remembered the wizard. Sloppy of me, but there was just so *much* to keep track of that she'd fallen through the cracks. And anyway, taking out the witch was a much higher priority. I looked back at him and forced myself to my feet, snarling through the pain.

And, thus, I was in a perfect position to see a *fourth* masked figure materialize behind him. It was the oddest thing; the second I saw her, I realized that I'd watched the whole time as she calmly walked up behind him, knife in hand. I just hadn't recognized it or paid attention to it.

Suddenly I understood *exactly* what Shadow's particular talent was.

She swung at his throat the second she became visible, but somehow he managed to dodge in time, and she caught his shoulder instead. He cried out in pain, and the magic clouding my mind broke, letting me focus on other things.

For example, I could focus on the fact that the fiery wizard was still active behind me, and she'd made a pretty decent attempt at cooking me. Given the chance, and with me standing still, I thought she'd probably do better next time.

I spun around, and sure enough she was around fifty feet straight behind me, with more fire gathered around her hands. I instantly pulled another grenade out and chucked it at her, not even bothering to pull the pin first.

She reacted just as fast, instinctively blasting it with fire. Those grenades were designed to be stable, but this went well beyond what it had been intended to handle. It went off.

I hit the deck in time to avoid most of the shrapnel, and I'd been far enough away to avoid the worst of the actual explosion. I picked up some more bruises, but nothing serious. She looked unharmed, but she'd also lost the spell she was planning to immolate me with. Overall, it was a wash.

The wizard looked at me, then at Shadow, who had just withdrawn her knife from the witch's shoulder. Behind the wizard, I could see that Snowflake was picking herself up. She was a little singed, and she was still a little dazed from whatever had taken her out of the fight to begin with, but she didn't seem harmed.

Outflanked, with Newton down for the count and bleeding from several bite wounds, the wizard apparently felt that her position wasn't as good as it had been a few minutes earlier. She bolted, torching another pair of cars behind her to cover her escape. The witch did similarly, taking another slash from Shadow as he did so. I turned to check on Newton but the force mage was already putting distance between us. I'd been right that he couldn't run, but apparently that didn't stop him from levitating a chunk of asphalt and using it to carry himself.

I debated chasing one of them, but decided against it. I thought we'd come out on top in that encounter, generally, but I was still injured. Better to let them go, deal with Shadow, and catch up to the rest of the gang later.

"Okay," I said, sheathing Tyrfin. "That was fun."

"You aren't going to ask what I was doing?" Shadow asked lightly. I noticed that she *didn't* sheathe her knife.

"Nah," I said. "I'm pretty sure I already know. Your magic makes people not notice you, right? You aren't invisible, they can see you just fine, but there's a block that keeps them from consciously recognizing or remembering you. I figure you turned that on the second I was out of your apartment and followed me out, waiting for a chance to take out one of us without being killed by the counterattack. That about right?"

She glowered at me. "About."

I grinned. "Cool. Nice trick, by the way. So do you want to continue that conversation we were having? I could go for some breakfast."

"What's stopping me from just disappearing and walking off?"

I grinned a little wider, a little more manic. She would hear it in my voice, even if she couldn't see my face. "I am," I said. "You can hide from me. We both know it. But if you do that now, right after I bailed you out of that mess, I'd think it was rude. And we both know that you can't keep your concealment up indefinitely. If I bring everything I've got to bear on you, you won't last long."

"Are you threatening me?" she asked. "I just want to know where we stand."

"Nah. I don't need to threaten you. The way I see it, your crew just declared mutiny with style, and you haven't exactly made a lot of friends with your lifestyle. Your former associates are going to want your head, and the other factions aren't going to be terribly supportive in your time of need. Like it or not, Shadow, I'm the only game in town right now."

She glowered at me, then sighed and pulled the mask off. "Fine," she said. "Let's get some breakfast."

Chapter Ten

Naturally, when Newton and his crew had been trashing cars, my nice armored truck had been one of the casualties. They hadn't been able to total it the way they had the other vehicles, but it had still been damaged badly enough that it would need serious repairs before it was drivable again.

I was more than a little peeved at that. That truck had been *expensive*. Sure, I had money to burn right now, but there was a large part of me that couldn't help but freak out a little. I was guessing it would cost at least a hundred grand to fix the thing, and for most of my life that had been more money than I saw in a year. A *lot* more money.

I didn't want to ask Shadow for a ride—that was *not* the right message to send—so I called Selene and told her to arrange something. She said it would be there within a few minutes, although there was a smugness to her tone that worried me a little.

After that we were left to sort of stand around awkwardly while we waited. "So," Shadow said at last. "Why did you set yourself up as the protector of the city, anyway?"

I was pretty sure she was just talking to fill the silence, but that didn't mean I couldn't use the opportunity. "Obligation," I said, shrugging. "I needed the infighting to stop for a little while so I could do something, and the only way I could think of to make that happen was to take charge myself. And then I couldn't come up with a way out of it afterward."

She snorted. "Sure you can. Drop everything and move to the Bahamas. You're rich enough for it, from what I hear."

I smiled sadly. I'd considered a plan very much like that one, once. I wondered how it might have gone, how things might have been different if I'd actually done it.

"It wouldn't work," I said to Shadow. "There are people you can't hide from. If I tried to back out now, there would be several of them after me."

"Ah," she said, nodding sagely. "That's why I stick to the small scale. I make enough to get by, and don't piss off anyone who could really be a problem."

I snorted. "Shadow, you're preaching that normal people should be subservient to mages."

"Sure," she said reasonably. "But that's the way things are going anyway. Think about it. You talked about how the masses have guns and bombs and stuff, but we have all that too. I knew a guy who had control over metal and an enchanted rifle. Best shot you've ever seen. We've got the edge on them, same as we always have. The only difference is that we aren't being held back by the rules anymore."

I frowned. I wanted to argue with her, but I was having a hard time coming up with *how*. I disagreed with her conclusions, but it was hard to see how to challenge them without some reference to ethics or tradition, both of which she clearly didn't respect.

Why does she care? Snowflake asked suddenly. *If she's all that selfish, what's it matter to her?*

It was a good question, and I repeated it.

Shadow just shrugged. "We spend our whole lives playing by the rules," she said. "Do this, don't do that, think this, don't think that, all because there's a constant threat of retribution if you break the rules. Well, I'm tired of following the rules, and I'm tired of pretending to be something I'm not. We have the power, we have the opportunity, and I for one think it's about time we *take* that opportunity."

The conversation lapsed back into an uncomfortable silence after that. Fortunately, it was only about another minute or two before a black stretch limousine pulled into the lot. For a second or two I hoped that it might be a coincidence. Then I saw Kjaran in the driver's seat, and sighed. "Come on," I said to Shadow. "There's our ride."

As we approached, someone got out of the backseat and bowed, holding the door open. It took me a second to recognize him as one of my new housecarls, a guy called Nóttolfr. He was on the slender side for a jotun, but in a very different way from, say, Tindr. Tindr was slender because he didn't work out enough to put on much bulk. Nóttolfr was slender because he worked out a *lot*, and he favored quickness over raw strength.

I wanted to ask what the hell was going on, but it wouldn't have sent the right image, and Nóttolfr was too new to know the answer anyway. So I got in the limo like I did it every day. I went with the rear-facing seat because, hey, why not?

There was another new housecarl already waiting in the car, a jotun named Brandulfr. He and Nóttolfr had about as little in common as two jötnar could, superficially. Brandulfr the Pale lived up to his byname, with hair and eyes that looked almost white; Nóttolfr had very dark hair, and dark blue eyes. Nóttolfr was slender and wiry; Brandulfr was broad and heavily muscled, built like the proverbial brick shithouse. He gave the impression that if you ran into him with a small car, the car would come out the loser.

They did have one thing in common, though. Neither one looked remotely friendly. I almost felt sorry for Shadow, sitting between the two of them in the other seat. Brandulfr was openly carrying a semiautomatic pistol, and Nóttolfr started sharpening a knife as we drove. Kjaran didn't ask where we were going, of course, but presumably Selene had told him what I wanted.

"So," I said, trying not to laugh at the whole thing. I felt a parody of the classic movie gangster, right down to having Snowflake sitting next to me rather than a fluffy white cat. "It seems to me I did you a considerable favor back there."

Shadow shrugged, a little uncomfortably. "I could have gotten away."

"Maybe so," I said. "But not without losing face. And I couldn't help but notice that your friends back there were doing big, flashy magic—flipping things over, blowing things up. The sort of attack that can hit someone whether you know they're there or not." This last was an attempt to warn my housecarls of what to expect if things went sour. I wasn't sure whether any of them would notice, given that two were brand new and the third was Kjaran, but I had to try.

Then again, I wasn't entirely sure whether they even had to worry about it. Shadow's disappearing trick worked by affecting the mind of the observer, making them incapable of noticing or remembering her even though she was standing in plain sight. It was notoriously difficult to use that kind of mental magic on nonhumans; you have to have a connection with someone to do that, and their minds tend to be alien enough that making that connection is tricky.

"That's true," she said reluctantly. "What do you think is a fair payment?"

"Let's get breakfast first," I said. "After that, I'd like some information."

Shadow wasn't very happy with that answer, and I couldn't blame her. When someone doesn't give you a clear answer to a question like that, it's never a good thing. But sitting in my limo, flanked by my minions, she wasn't exactly in a position to argue with me.

We completed the ride in silence.

I wasn't sure how Kjaran knew where to go, but he made his way unerringly to my old favorite breakfast place. It was a smallish restaurant, close enough to the western edge of the city to fall within Kikuchi's area of the map. Normally it would have been crazy busy there at eight-thirty in the morning, but today there was no difficulty finding a place for a limousine in the lot. There were a handful of bikes, some pickups, a couple of vans and sedans, but nothing like the kind of business they usually had.

I hadn't been there for a couple of years, but I still recognized most of the staff. They recognized me, too; if I hadn't guessed that already, I certainly would have known by the way the waitress hesitated before approaching our table. I'd taken my helmet off in the car, and even if I hadn't they'd have recognized Snowflake.

I'd been well liked here before the whole trial thing, though, and with the way that whole fiasco ended I didn't think anyone was quite sure how to take it. Between the two, I figured I should probably be fine so long as I didn't cause trouble or overstay my welcome.

"Okay," I said, once food had been ordered. I ordered for Kjaran; he had fairly straightforward tastes, and it was much simpler than trying to explain why he didn't talk. My other housecarls were at a separate table; I didn't necessarily want them to hear this conversation. "So how many people are there in this gang of yours?"

"About fifty who are solidly on our side," Shadow said, shrugging. "Maybe a hundred others who are considering it."

I stared. "That many?"

She smiled a little. "We aren't just talking about the big players here. I know a girl whose only power is that she can tell whether something's magnetic. That's seriously the *only* thing she can do with magic. She still believes in what we're doing, absolutely."

I shook my head. "I just don't get it. Even if you get what you want, that girl's still going to be at the bottom of the pecking order. It'll just be different people pushing her around. How can she seriously think she's going to be better off under the society you're trying to establish?"

"It isn't about that," Shadow said quietly. "We've spent our whole lives on the outside. We live in a culture that says we don't exist. Even for the people without much power, this is a huge part of their lives, and they've been told that it isn't real, it doesn't matter. If you talk about it, if people even *think* you talk about it, you get put on pills, or thrown in the psych ward or something. Well, this is our chance to *prove* we exist, and make sure they remember." She shook her head. "It isn't about setting themselves on top, for these people. It's about making sure people can't just sweep us under the rug anymore."

I sat back, stunned. She sounded so *impassioned* about it that, for a second, I almost started nodding along. The ideas didn't sound crazy when she phrased them like that. *She* didn't sound crazy. She sounded rational, reasonable, intelligent. She started talking and she made her beliefs sound like they made sense.

When she talked, it was hard to remember what she was *saying*.

I wanted to write it off as some sort of magical manipulation, but I couldn't. I didn't think she was powerful enough to affect me that way, or smooth enough to do so without being noticed. This was...just the result of someone who really *believed* what she was saying. This was the kind of speech that started riots, not because people weren't in control of themselves or their emotions, but because they *were*.

How long had that anger been building up, under the surface? Hundreds of years, probably. Ever since the wise women and cunning men started to be ridiculed instead of respected. Whole lifetimes of being persecuted and condemned by human society, when they bothered to acknowledge your existence at all, and all the while the people who knew better and had real power pushed them to the fringes, used them, and never recognized them as equals.

And now, after all this time, they had carte blanche to act out however they wanted. For the first time in their lives, there was no one waiting to step in and smack them down if they got out of hand.

Bloody hell. No wonder Shadow had a hundred and fifty people following her.

Luckily our food came before I had to respond to that. I forced myself to eat slowly, cutting my steak into bite-sized pieces, but I still scraped the last bit of egg off my plate before anyone else had eaten a quarter of their food.

I sat and waited quietly for them to finish, trying to figure out what to do. I had to change my approach if I wanted to get anywhere. I'd been assuming that Shadow was in it for herself, just using the other independents to increase her own power, and that clearly wasn't the case. If she didn't genuinely believe what she'd just said, she was the best actor I'd ever seen, and I'd seen some good ones.

"Okay," I said, once she was done. "You don't like the old way of doing things, and you don't like the rules. I get that. A few years ago, I'd probably have been first in line to sign up."

"But?" she asked. "I'm hearing a 'but' here."

I nodded. "But sometimes rules are there for a reason. They keep things sane, they make sure everyone is approaching things on the same level. It's like the Cold War, right? If I have nukes, and you have nukes, we need *some* kind of rules or things are going to go to shit."

"And you think magic is the equivalent of nuclear weapons?" she asked skeptically.

"I've seen Loki," I said quietly. "I've seen what he can do when he gets upset. Nukes are *small change* by comparison."

"That's a deity. It's...not quite the same, you know?"

"Sure," I said. "But even on a smaller scale, we're capable of some pretty scary things. Look at what happened this morning. Those guys did probably a few million in damages in less than ten minutes, between the cars they totaled, the parking lot, the buildings. And that was from a pair of small-scale, half-trained mages, no offense."

"Okay," she said. "Granted. I'm still not seeing a lot of reason to care."

I sighed. "Fair enough," I said. "I was really hoping to avoid this, but if that's how it is, let me put this in terms I'm sure you can understand. I'm going to be keeping the peace in this town until things have steadied out again. After that, I'll gladly help you with your cause, because I think you're right. People really do need to incorporate mages into society and start making use of their talents. That's the only way they're going to survive now that nonhumans basically have an open season on them."

"You're making a lot of promises," she said. "But it's easy to promise something when you won't have to keep that promise for a long time."

"I keep my word," I said, momentarily thankful that it was Kjaran sitting with us. One of my other housecarls might have stabbed her for that. "That's one of the rules I was talking about. We keep our word, because that way everyone knows they're on the level and they can make deals without getting screwed. If you aren't willing to play by that rule, you might as well walk out right now."

She didn't look happy, but she nodded.

"Good," I said. "Like I was saying, I'm keeping the peace. The way I see it, you basically have three options. One, you help me out. We do our best to help each other, we both come out in one piece, and we're in good shape to work on your goals afterward. Two, you stay out of my way. I'll do my job, you don't cause trouble, and when it's over I'll still help you, because I really do think you have the right general idea. Three, you try to fight me, or you try to make radical changes while the world burns down around you. If you do that, you're a problem I need to solve, and that won't go well for you."

"Or four," she said. "We fight you, and we win."

I smiled sadly. "Shadow, that isn't going to happen. You've got a lot of people, but most of them aren't fighters. I'm guessing two-thirds of the people backing you haven't ever been in a fight to the death. And even if you kill me, what then? There are a lot of people with power invested in me, and I guarantee you that you can't take them in a fight. You aren't even a speedbump to them. Not to mention that you aren't strong enough to hold the city against everyone who'd be interested in taking it over."

She hesitated, then nodded. "Fine," she said. "Let's say I believe you."

"That sounds good. So what's it going to be, Shadow? You going to help me, or am I on my own here?"

"Let me talk to my people," she said, sounding quite tired for so early in the day. "After what happened earlier, I don't know how it'll go. Hell, they might try to kill me on sight. But if they're okay with it, I'm willing to help you."

Chapter Eleven

"Holy shit," Aiko said. "Did you seriously buy a limousine?"

"I'm not sure yet," I said, stepping inside. I left the door hanging; it wouldn't be appropriate for me to hold it for my housecarls. "How was your morning?"

She shrugged. "I've had worse. Yours?"

"There are three factions of independents in the city," I said, grinning. "One of them's probably going to stay out of my way, and the other is tentatively backing me up. I also recruited a bunch of ghouls."

"My," she said dryly. "Sounds like you've been busy. And you even got things done without me around to help." She shook her head. "What's the world coming to?"

I snorted and kept walking. It was late enough now that people were waking up and moving around. There were maybe half a dozen people in the throne room, moving tables around and setting out reams of files, and I could smell food cooking upstairs. Noises from both the bedrooms upstairs and the safe room below suggested that more people were waking up and getting ready to start the day.

It felt rather bizarre to be walking through my own headquarters and realize that it felt like a *home*. People were talking, laughing quietly, drinking coffee as they discussed the work ahead and got ready to get to it. Even more bizarre was that I was oddly separate from the whole thing. This was my place, and yet very much *not*, like I was an outsider in my own home base. I walked through the crowd, such as it was, and people nodded respectfully or said good morning, but then they went right back to what they were doing. Nobody tried to draw me into a conversation, or make casual small talk the way they did with each other.

Which, I supposed, made sense. From where these people were standing, having me around was a lot like having a Special Forces soldier who'd killed enough people to fill a stadium on your flag football team. Sure, you appreciated what he brought to the table. You were glad he was on your team. You were *sure as hell* glad he wasn't on the other one.

But you weren't going to invite him home for dinner.

I told myself it didn't matter, with limited success. Better was to just keep moving, keep focusing on the task at hand, so that's what I did. I found Selene upstairs in the office, predictably enough. I took one chair, Aiko took the other, and Snowflake curled up around my feet.

"Things go all right, Boss?" Selene said absently, not looking up from the paper she was reading.

"Eh," I said. "Might have gotten some more people. Decent skills, it sounds like, and fairly good numbers. But I *definitely* pissed some other people off, and they got away."

"How unlike you. Should I be expecting these people to try something?"

I frowned. "Doubtful. I don't think they even know where to go. But I suppose it isn't impossible." My frown deepened. "I should probably look at getting some better wards around this place. Something further out, so you'd have a little more warning." Crap. How was I going to work that into my schedule? Wards took time to design, time and effort to set up, and more time to repair after they'd been damaged.

Stop fidgeting, Snowflake said irritably. You're making it hard to sleep.

It wasn't until she pointed it out that I realized that I was tapping my foot. Once she did, I found that I'd been doing it long and enthusiastically enough that my leg was getting tired.

Double crap. Of all the times for my head to be out of whack, this was one of the worse ones.

"Business," I said, forcing myself to be still. "Starting with, why the hell do I apparently have a limo now?"

Selene grinned at me. "I've been thinking for a while that you need something with a bit more style," she said. "Something that was a little more appropriate for someone of your wealth and station. So I bought you a Rolls-Royce. Later today someone's going to come by and spruce it up a bit. You know, put your arms on the door and such."

I stared. Aiko chortled, probably at my expression. "You bought me a Rolls-Royce," I repeated.

"Well, technically you bought it," she said. "But I handled all the work, so I figure I get some of the credit. Apparently you have to jump through some hoops to get the armored version, or it would have been ready sooner."

"Did you clear this with Tindr first?" I asked. I didn't actually ask how expensive it had been. I was pretty sure I didn't want to know.

"Yep," she said cheerfully. "It was well within the budget. And the payment went through before all this started, so it didn't come out of the budget he gave you the other day."

"Okay," I said. It seemed fairly insane to me, but apparently that was just how things worked in my world these days. "Moving on. Any more replies come in?"

"Several," she said, losing any hint of humor. "Scáthach says that she won't give you formal support, but she will prohibit her people from causing any trouble within your territory for the next week. Apparently you have carte blanche to kill anyone from her Court you find here."

"Good enough," I said, with some satisfaction. Snowflake agreed enthusiastically, although she didn't bother putting it into words. Aiko looked a little less happy, which probably made sense. She had issues with the Sidhe.

"Gwynn ap Nud also sent a messenger," she continued. "He didn't promise support, but he did request that you pay him a personal audience. Watcher didn't reply directly, but she forwarded an internal memo recognizing you as the local authority and instructing her people to contact you before they take any action in your territory. Edward Frodsham called to say that his town isn't having any difficulties, and your friends are ready for pickup whenever."

Well, that wasn't great. It wasn't terrible, but I'd been hoping for more. Thus far all I'd gotten was unofficial backing, and while that was valuable in its own right, it didn't have the *oomph* that a formal statement would. It was hard to point to conditional statements and internal memos as grounds for your authority and respect.

"You also got a few unsolicited messages," she said. "Do you want to hear them now?"

I sighed. "Yeah, I'd better."

"Okay. First off, Katrin requests a meeting on neutral ground at midnight tonight. She included an address."

"Skip it for now," I groaned. I'd known it was coming, but still, I *really* didn't want to deal with that.

"You got it, Boss. Next, a man who identified himself as Jack called to offer his services. He claimed to be a mage, but didn't offer any details."

"Could be worth following up on," I said, glowering at the desk. "Could be a waste. Anything else?"

"One more," she said. "This one is from a Blind Keith. He says he wants to meet with you to discuss future prospects."

I groaned. Triple crap. Judging by our last chat, a discussion with Blind Keith was like playing with fire, if fire was intelligent and enjoyed scaring the shit out of people.

"Okay," I said. "I'm guessing you got contact information for all of them?"

Selene looked somewhat offended. "Of course."

"Right. Call Jack, tell him I want to meet with him before I commit to anything. Don't give him this address, though. Set it up at...shit, I guess Pryce's."

"Aren't you banned?" Aiko asked. "Just, you know, in case you forgot or something."

"I'm really hoping that won't be an issue," I said. I tried to think of what else I needed to do. Dealing with Katrin wasn't optional, but I also didn't really need to call her back. She wouldn't even be conscious for hours. I could pick up Kyra and Ryan later; I mostly wanted them in case I needed a werewolf for something, rather than as actual fighters. I liked them too much to want them fighting in this mess.

That was why I'd brought in new housecarls, and hired Jibril's ghouls. They were...disposable. And I hated thinking like that, but that didn't make it any less valid of a point.

That just left Gwynn ap Nud and Blind Keith, neither of which could be ignored. Of the two, I thought Gwynn was the higher priority. He liked me, at least a little, and he was a Twilight Prince, which meant that his opinion counted for a *lot*. Blind Keith was also powerful—I was sure of that, if nothing else about him—but I hadn't forgotten his parting words in our last meeting. He'd said he wouldn't come to my territory again without talking to me first, and given that he was fae of one stripe or another, there was no questioning that commitment.

In fact, that was very likely why he wanted this meeting. Which, in turn, meant that putting it off until I had other things settled down couldn't be a *bad* idea.

"Okay," I said to Selene. "Tell Gwynn ap Nud that I'll be there as soon as I can arrange it, and tell Blind Keith that I'm willing to meet with him. Ask him to pick a neutral location in...shit, I guess London." It wasn't my favorite place, but I knew a portal terminus there. It also had more supernatural protectors than the vast majority of cities, between the Conclave's strong presence in the city and various local powers. London was *old*, and that meant it had had the opportunity to pick up all kinds of protections.

"You got it," she said. "Anything else?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Is Kyi outside?"

"Yep. Putting the new recruits through their paces, I think."

"Great," I said. "I'll go talk to her, then."

Out back of the house, I didn't immediately see anyone. Not surprising, and just as well; there was another thing I needed to take care of.

Aiko amused herself painting graffiti on the trees while I struggled to get the phone to work. As Selene had warned me, reception was intermittent; I'd had fairly good luck earlier in the morning, but this time it took a few minutes to find somewhere I could make a call.

For much the same reason, I was expecting to have to leave a message. To my surprise, though, Erin answered on the second ring. She didn't say anything, though; I couldn't even hear her breathing.

I smiled a little. She'd gotten more paranoid, it seemed; the last time I called she'd at least had a greeting. "It's Winter," I said.

Instantly, the sense of quiet, latent hostility vanished. "Winter!" she said brightly. "Hey, how's it going? Nothing too bad after the whole prison thing, right? I wanted to come break you out, but Father wouldn't hear of it."

"I'm fine," I said, although she almost certainly knew I was lying. All of Conn's family were almost impossible to lie to. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure," she said. "I'm on a stakeout right now. Trust me, any distraction is welcome."

"Great. Listen, I had a question. I ran into a guy called Blind Keith the other day. I remember you mentioning the name, and I was hoping you could maybe tell me a little about what I'm dealing with."

There was a long, ominous pause. "Blind Keith?" she said. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, *that's* not good." Erin's voice was somber, and I shivered a little. She only had a couple of emotional states, and somber wasn't typically one of them. "Blind Keith is...well, I told you there's only so many people at the top of the business, right?"

"Yeah," I said. Said business consisted primarily of killing people and secondarily of killing people while preventing other people from being killed, but I didn't bother pointing that out. Erin was a little sociopathic, even by my standards. It wasn't so much that she enjoyed violence—that was standard for werewolves, really. She just didn't care about it at all. It had no real emotional value for her, and I wasn't entirely sure she grasped the basic *concept* of ethics.

"Well, he's one of them. Except he isn't really *in* the business, you know? Like, he doesn't take pay or anything. He takes strictly the jobs he wants, and he's in it for thrills."

Great. Just what I needed. "When you say he's one of the best," I said. "What does that mean?"

There was another ominous pause. "He's good," she said at last. "One of the more powerful people I've seen. The rumor is he could have been a Twilight Prince, but he didn't care enough. I know for a fact that he can call the Wild Hunt."

I shivered again. I'd seen the Wild Hunt, once. More than that, I'd *Seen* them, using the Second Sight. That experience had played a major role in convincing me that the Second Sight was not remotely worth the dangers of using it, in fact.

I knew the magic, the spirit of the Hunt. I knew exactly what it would take to call that power up and control it.

"Shit," I said. "This is not sounding good."

"No," she agreed. "Let me put it like this. As a bodyguard, I've lost five bodies. Four of them were killed by Blind Keith. I've only beaten him once, and that was on one of the luckiest days of my life."

"Shit," I repeated. "Do you have any advice for me?"

"Maybe," she said, then paused. "My mark just came out of his house," she said. "Hang on a second."

Before I could say anything, I clearly heard her set the phone down.

Then, loud and sharp and unmistakable, the sound of a gunshot.

Chapter Twelve

"Erin?" I said. "Erin, are you there?"

There was a brief pause, followed by the sound of running footsteps. "Sorry," she said. "I had the shot, and it was too good not to take. Anyway, where were we?"

"You were giving me advice about dealing with Blind Keith," I said, trying to ignore the fact that she'd just murdered somebody. Things were busy right now, I told myself. She couldn't have the free time to be doing freelance work, which meant that her mark had died because Conn wanted him dead. Conn wouldn't have given the order unless he deserved it.

Right. I believed that.

"Oh, yeah," Erin said. "Try to stay on his good side if you can. If he comes after you, he'll probably bring the Wild Hunt, so plan for that. And whatever you do, *don't run*. You run from him, you're as good as dead."

"Great," I said dismally. So far, all stuff I'd already guessed, and none of it helpful for actually beating him if it came to it. "Anything I can actually use?"

There was a short pause. I wasn't sure whether she was thinking, or she had to evade the cops or something. "He'll try to turn out the lights," she said. "I don't know how he senses his prey, but he doesn't need light to do it. He's vulnerable to iron, but in the same way as most of the Sidhe. I don't think it hurts him, exactly, but it makes him lose control, somehow. Be careful with it." She hesitated, and this time I *knew* it was deliberate. "He knew your mother. I don't know how, but they knew each other."

"Great," I groaned. "This just gets better and *better*." I sighed. "Thanks, Erin. Good luck with the killing people."

"I don't need luck," she sniffed. "I've got skills."

I hung up and dropped the phone back into my pocket. Aiko wandered over to stand next to me, looking curious. "What's the matter? You look like somebody just ran over your puppy."

"Blind Keith is a lot scarier than I was giving him credit for," I said sourly. "And he also knew my mother."

"Ah," she said. "Yeah, I can see how that might be awkward." She was quiet for a few seconds. "Does it seem like Kyi is taking a while?" she asked. "Because it sure seems like it to me."

I frowned. "Yeah. Yeah, it does." I took a step towards the trees, intending to look for her.

I was interrupted when Kyi appeared from behind an aspen that I would have sworn was too thin to conceal her. "Jarl," she said. "You are finished with your call, I take it?"

"Yeah," I said. "You've been checking out the new talent, I heard?"

She grimaced, and the expression told me all I needed to know. "I've been checking out the new *recruits*," she said. "Talent? That's another question."

"I see," I said. "Not good?"

She shrugged. "They have decent training. Some of them have useful skills—Nóttolfr's smooth, Thraslaug's a berserker. But they don't have the experience, they don't know how to deal with unusual enemies or improvise, and they don't know how this world works. Give me some time and I could turn them into something you could use, maybe."

Give her time.

Time, it seemed, was something that I did not have in plentitude. She would not have the chance to make them into a usable fighting force.

"I might not be able to," I said quietly. "And I might need to use them anyway."

Kyi was watching me, her eyes flat and unreadable within their nest of tattoos. "If you do," she said, "they won't hold up. Some of them will die."

"Yes," I said, even more softly. "I know." They would die, but they could create a hole that other, more capable forces could exploit. Drawing enemies out of position, leaving them open to attack. Sacrificing a pawn to take a rook.

The jötnar were the pawns in that comparison. Expendable. I was looking at them as resources, rather than people. Hell, I couldn't even remember most of their names.

Kyi was still looking at me, and I got the impression that she knew everything that had just run through my mind from those three words. "We are your housecarls, my jarl," she said. "We will serve." Then she turned and walked back into the trees.

I'd often felt like the world was stacked against me, like nothing I did could really make progress. Try to fix things, try to be something other than what I was, and it was like swimming upstream. One step forward, two steps back. Use the powers I had, and I could make headway, but the act changed me, making me less of who I wanted to be.

Let the wolf inside my skin off the leash, and I was stronger, faster, filled with certainty of purpose, but the wolf would never again be leashed quite as thoroughly as it had been. Use the Second Sight and I could see through the masks that were meant to fool me, but what I saw *damaged* me. Make a deal with Loki or Scáthach, and I got what I needed, the secrets and the power, but something was taken in return.

The pattern, overwhelmingly, had been that I could get what I wanted, but it wasn't ever free. If I wanted to accomplish something, I had to give up something else.

I'd never tried anything on this level. Nothing even close.

I watched Kyi go, and I knew that she'd never look at me quite the same, knowing that I was willing to trade the lives of loyal followers for nothing more than a tactical advantage. Kyi and I hadn't been friends, exactly, but there had been a certain casualness to our relationship. Less formal than what I had with the other housecarls. She respected me as a person, as well as a jarl. I had a strong suspicion that I had just lost that respect.

What *else* was I going to have to give, to hold my city together?

Gwynn ap Nud had sent a token with his messenger, a slender piece of wood that served as the focus for a powerful and intricate piece of magic. Once I was finished talking with Kyi, I broke the stick, and an instant later a hole appeared in the world directly in front of me.

I stepped through it, alone. This invitation had been for me and no one else, and I had no intention of upsetting Gwynn by bringing anyone with me. Which pissed Snowflake off immensely—she still wasn't over being separated from me while I was in prison—but she was smart enough to recognize that getting on a Twilight Prince's bad side wasn't worth it.

The portal dropped me in a small corridor, which appeared to have been carved into the bedrock. Clumps of crystals protruded from the stone at odd angles here and there, shedding just enough light that I could see. A human would likely have been blind, or at least nearly so.

I glanced back and saw that the corridor ended just behind me, as though the architect had simply stopped carving. No one else was in sight. I couldn't smell anything other than stone, the air wasn't moving, and as far as I could tell there were no animals within a mile.

I shrugged and started walking. There didn't seem to be much else to do.

Maybe ten minutes later, the corridor opened up into a room, as large as a small stadium, lit only by more of the small crystals. The ceiling was still low, though, almost enough to make me uncomfortable, and I wasn't a tall guy.

I paused just before crossing the threshold. I couldn't see anything immediately threatening—no weapons, no tripwires or odd-looking patches of ground, no mystic symbols—but there was something...*odd* here.

On an impulse, I glanced up, and saw mushrooms sprouting from the ceiling. Classic toadstools only an inch or two high, they grew from bare stone in a perfectly defined line, right at the boundary between the corridor and the room it lead to.

No, I realized. Not a line. It looked straight at a glance, but upon examination there was a very slight curvature to it, as though it were a tiny arc of a much larger circle. A circle, perhaps, that might include the entire room I was looking at.

I stared. Magic circles were simple spells, and not usually difficult ones. It didn't take that much power to make them work. But the power it did take was dependent upon size, and the relationship was an exponential one. A circle big enough to stand in could be charged easily. A bit of blood, a casual effort by a practiced mage—it didn't take much. Something the size of a small room was more challenging, requiring concentration. The largest I'd ever managed was a clearing, when I performed the ritual to claim Legion as my familiar, and that had been a *very* faint circle, just a whisper to block undirected currents of energy.

This was maybe ten times the radius of that clearing, which meant that the circle's total area was closer to a hundred times that of the one I'd created. Add in the exponential scaling in the actual power expenditure and I estimated that this circle would require somewhere around ten to fifteen *thousand* times that of the biggest one I'd ever created.

Even if I were to dedicate myself wholly to the task, drawing on the energy of the world around me and drawing on blood magic, it would take a couple orders of magnitude more than what I was capable of just to establish this circle. Actually using it to anchor a ward was...almost unbelievable, something that would take the power of a god.

Or, perhaps, that of a Twilight Prince.

I stopped short of crossing the circle. It was *probably* safe, given that I was invited, but I thought it wiser not to take the chance. "Winter Wolf-Born," I said, projecting the words clearly. "Here to seek audience with Gwynn ap Nud."

Enter and be welcome, as a guest in my hall, a voice said inside my head. It was a beautiful voice, in an odd way, a very inhuman way. There was a sort of delay to it, as though it had to translate each word before it spoke, and then my mind had to translate them again to process their meaning.

That was about as close to a guarantee of safety as I was going to get, so I swallowed hard and stepped over the threshold.

An instant later, the whole world seemed to change. I wasn't standing in a vast subterranean hall. I was in a similarly vast meadow, the evening sky perfectly clear overhead, stars so bright and pure that they looked like diamonds.

I glanced backwards and saw a of toadstools, almost hidden in the grass. They were on the ground now. Or I was on what had previously been the ceiling. It was hard to tell what was what, under the circumstances.

Was this illusion? The glamour of the fae, that let them mold illusions to their will and make the dream almost more real than reality? Or was it something deeper than that, the power of a demigod to

control the world he had built for himself? Which was real—the cavern, the meadow, both, neither, somewhere in between?

As was so often the case with the fae, it was hard to say what the answer might be, if there even *was* an answer. As was also often the case with the fae, although it had taken me longer to realize it, it really didn't *matter* what the truth was.

Directly in front of me, in the exact center of the meadow, was a throne, a massive thing carved from granite. I walked towards it. I could see things out of the corner of my eye, glimmers of light and flickers of movement, but I kept my gaze focused on the throne. I was dealing with the fae, after all, and I'd read enough fairy tales to know better than to look at the distractions.

Seemingly between one step and the next, the throne went from being a hundred feet off to right in front of me. Gwynn ap Nud was sitting in it, or so I presumed. I couldn't quite focus on him, as though my eyes slid from one side to the other, so that I could only see him in my peripheral vision. I got an impression of lean muscle and sharp features, well-worn hunting leathers and a sword, but details just weren't there.

"You asked me to visit," I said. Establishing my right to be there, before anything else was said. I'd been welcomed as a guest and that was enough to protect against most dangers, but it was best to be careful. There were all kinds of stories about guests of the fae that wound up getting more than they bargained for.

"Yes," he said, and I wasn't entirely sure whether I was hearing him with my ears or my mind. The voice seemed to have the same vagueness to it as his physical appearance, conveying meaning but leaving no memory of what it actually *sounded* like.

Damn, this was eerie. I'd dealt with Twilight Princes before, but never on their home ground. The difference was striking, unsettling, and more than a little frightening.

"I came," I said, redundantly, trying to gather my thoughts.

"You have attracted the attention of a powerful being," he said. "And not a kind one."

"I have attracted the attention of many. To whom do you refer?"

"You would call him Blind Keith."

I sighed. "Oh. *That* being. I don't suppose you could tell me anything about him?"

"The hunt is an ancient idea," he said, not answering my question. Unless he was; Blind Keith was a hunter, after all. "It is a primal concept, one that lies at the heart of the world."

"Yeah," I said. "The Wild Hunt. I know about it."

"Yes," he said, and the wind seemed to sigh the word with him, brushing through the grass and swirling around my ankles. "He is a lord of the hunt."

"So are you," I pointed out. "What's the difference?"

"There are many faces in the hunt," he said. "Once the fae were as a single people, but eventually it became clear that our differences were too great. Words had been spoken that could not be unsaid, and it was clear to all that there was no hope for reconciliation. Lines were drawn, alliances were formed, and we went our separate ways."

"And you were there for this?" I asked. It was almost incredible to conceive of. Logically I knew that many of the truly powerful beings of the world were also truly ancient, but it was one thing to know that and it was another to hear one of them discussing it.

"Yes," he said. "But I tell you this for a reason. On that day, the one you call Blind Keith was there as well. But when it came time to choose sides, he chose not to choose. He stood apart then, as he has stood apart ever since. He is not of the Tylwyth Teg, the Fomorians, the Sidhe, or any of the other great powers. He stand alone, and he does not choose to pursue the aims that others seek."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. As usual, that was the most important question. Powerful beings did nothing without a reason, and they did nothing for free.

"That is not for you to know. What matters is this. I am a hunter, as is Scáthach, and Herne, and Bleiddwn, and all the other masters of the Wild Hunt. And like them, I am more than a hunter; there is more to my story than the hunting. That is not true for Blind Keith. There is nothing in him but the hunt. Do not be fooled into thinking otherwise."

I wanted to ask again why he was sharing this, but he'd told me I wasn't supposed to know, and I'd have to be an idiot of monumental proportions to contradict a demigod in the middle of his own private world. So I just bowed my head and said, "I appreciate the advice."

"Go," he said, "with my blessing. My agent shall join your struggles shortly, and I shall speak on your behalf."

The next instant, between blinks, the meadow vanished, as did Gwynn ap Nud and the throne he sat in. I was standing alone in the middle of the cavern, the only light that which came from the luminescent crystals scattered around.

Well, that was one problem down, at least. And resolved pretty well. Sure, it was enigmatic as hell and I was absolutely certain that it was going to bite me in the ass at some point, but he was backing me, and right now that was what mattered.

I wasn't sure which hallway I'd entered from, so I picked one at random. It looked like what I remembered, and there was a portal waiting at the end, so I figured it was probably right enough, and stepped through.

Chapter Thirteen

"You know, I think this might be a first," Aiko commented, getting out of the car.

"Oh?" I asked, waving to Kjaran. He drove the Rolls off, probably going to park in a nearby lot. It fit with the chauffeur image, and if I had to ride in a limo I was damn well going to play up the image as far as I could.

"Yeah. I can't think of anyone getting a ban lifted at Pryce's before, offhand."

"Not a lot of reason for it anymore," I said, shrugging. Selene had spent several hours talking with him, and paid him a quarter of a million, but ultimately I knew he'd agreed because he wanted to. Not even Selene was persuasive enough to talk Pryce around once he'd really made his mind up about something, and he didn't care enough about money for the bribe to be the deciding factor.

"Still," Aiko said. "Not bad."

Inside, I walked straight to the bar, where Pryce was pouring what looked like a pint glass of brandy. The room was fairly crowded, but people were gathered in small groups, with lots of empty space between, making it look emptier than it should have. There was a decent group sitting at the bar, tossing back drinks with the grim enthusiasm you only saw when things were really bad, and the long table in the middle of the room was playing host to three different groups, all firmly ignoring each other.

"I'm here for the private meeting," I said to Pryce, not saying anything about having been allowed in again. He wouldn't appreciate it.

He grunted and nodded, not pausing as he handed the brandy to one guy and turned to grab a bottle of absinthe for the woman sitting next to him. A moment later, though, a member of his staff appeared next to me. He led us silently through the crowd to a small hallway, where he left us outside an unmarked oak door.

I licked my lips nervously before I opened the door. I'd hoped that I could take more time to get prepped for this meeting, reading up on people who would be attending. My handful of minutes in Gwynn ap Nud's realm had translated to a couple of hours in the real world, though, eating up the time I'd been hoping to use. After I'd checked in with Selene and Kyi and made sure that Jibril's ghouls were ready to go, it was already dusk.

Which meant that I'd not only been unable to do my research for this meeting, I was also already having to think about my coming chat with Katrin. Which was just *lovely*.

Inside, I found that Pryce's conference room hadn't changed much. The long table in the middle of the room was the same, with the same chairs along its length. The same banners hung from the rafters, adorned with the symbols of various major political groups. A fire burned brightly in the massive

fireplace, making the room uncomfortably warm—for me, at least. I preferred things chilly, *and* I was wearing heavy armor and a cloak.

I didn't have much time to look over that, though, because I hadn't been able to get here as early as I wanted to be. There were already almost a dozen people sitting at the table. Each of them had a wide space around them, the chairs evenly spaced along the table as though they were trying to consciously ensure that everyone had the absolute maximum possible elbow room. Apparently it still wasn't enough, though, because they were all looking warily at each other. At best; some were glaring daggers, and a couple looked like they were inches from pulling weapons on each other.

I recognized more than a few of them. Ironsides was about halfway down the table, trying a little too hard to look confident. Shadow had a chair near one end, her mask firmly in place, and Newton was sitting at the other end, smirking behind his own mask. He was trying to pretend that he was fully recovered from the battle earlier that morning, but not doing a very good job of it; his posture was tense, and he was favoring the leg I'd almost chopped off. He hadn't recovered yet, not even close.

Then there were some other faces, familiar from more than just the past couple of days. Luna was tense in her chair, fingering various pockets as though she were very much prepared to pull weapons out of them and *use* them. Rachel looked like she was in pain, which she probably was; she could sense emotions as easily as she could see, and the miasma of hate, fear, anger, and generalized stress in this room couldn't be much fun. Just down the table from her, Alexander looked mildly amused. He was practically the only one in the place that didn't seem at all concerned, which made sense; if he felt like it, he could probably take everyone else in the building at once. I was guessing Pryce was the only one who could even slow him down, and Alexander was smart enough that he would know Pryce's weak points.

I was a little surprised to see him there. He was wearing the heavy blue robes that he was entitled to as the Maker of the Conclave. It probably didn't matter—I was guessing I was the only one in the room who would know what it meant. But it was a reminder that he *was* on the Conclave, and considering how Brick had made that situation sound, I figured he'd have been in Russia helping to keep it contained.

I mean, he'd said it was an all hands on deck, maximum priority kind of situation. Watcher didn't strike me as the type to use that kind of description lightly.

"What are you doing here?" one of them said when I walked in. It was a guy I didn't recognize, wearing an expensive suit, who was otherwise about as bland as it was possible to be. He even had a pocket protector, and I didn't think *anybody* used those anymore. There was something about him that suggested it was an *intentional* blandness, though, an impression that had been carefully cultivated. It was a mask of sorts, I thought, something for him to hide behind.

"I have as much stake in this as any of you," I said. "Maybe more."

"I'll vouch for him," Alexander said. "He's not the type to break a truce."

"Fine," the bland man said, glowering. "But the female leaves. He gets one representative, same as the rest of us."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Aiko elbowed me in the ribs. It didn't hurt—I was wearing armor, after all, and it had been designed with nastier things in mind than that—but I got the message. I shut my mouth.

"That's fine," Aiko said. "I'll wait outside."

She left and I claimed one of the few remaining chairs, between Rachel and Alexander. That was good positioning, in that it put me between two of the people I was least anticipating an attack from. It was a little unfortunate, though, in that I was next to *Alexander*. If anyone did try something, he would be their main target, and if they knew enough to be here they would probably be smart enough not to hold back when they went for him. I didn't exactly want to be in the blast radius if that happened.

"We waiting for anyone else?" the bland guy asked. "I have obligations coming up."

"There's a couple guys said they'd be here," another person said, one that I recognized but didn't really know. "Don't know if they'll show or not. They're coming from a rough neighborhood."

Several others made similar comments, and the table returned to sullen, anticipatory silence. Over the next twenty minutes or so, more people trickled in. Some of them took seats at the table. Others were turned away, sent to wait in the main room of the bar. There was no single voice that determined whether a given person was going to stay or go. It was more of a general consensus. There was very little argument back and forth; one person might raise a complaint, another might retort, but it didn't turn into a general discussion. Most people agreed as to whether a given person was welcome or not.

Eventually it became clear that everyone who was going to be here was. I looked around warily, taking stock of who was there, and who wasn't. There were about twenty people, all told. I recognized almost all of them, and I could put names to maybe half the faces.

This wasn't a gathering of the strongest, most powerful people in the city. Oh, Alexander had backing on a global level, and I was a local power with decently large-scale recognition, but by and large these weren't the heavyweights of the city. They didn't have all that much power, on a relative scale.

What they did have was respect. These were the people who were respected in the community. People might not like them, but even their enemies admitted that they were worth paying attention to. They knew people, and when they said things people listened.

A few years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to include myself in that group. I hadn't been all that active in the supernatural community, but I'd known people. I'd been on good terms with most of them, not friends, but I could have asked for a favor and felt confident that people would trust me to pay them back. That sort of thing.

Now? The situation was...a little more complex than that.

"I think this is about all we're going to get," somebody said, about the same time I reached that conclusion. "Should we get started?"

"Yeah," the bland guy said. "I think we all know what we're here to talk about."

Rachel snorted. "Shit hitting fans, past, present, and future tense. Not complicated."

"I think we all have the same interests, here," I put in. "Things are bad, they're getting worse, and there are only going to be more people trying to take advantage of it going forward. We all want to minimize the harm done, locally."

"Well said," Alexander murmured. I felt an involuntary rush of pleasure at the compliment. It had been years since he was really my teacher in any meaningful way, but the habit was still there.

"You're missing the point," Newton said, glaring daggers at me. "Some of us have things to do. And the time is *ripe*. This is the best opportunity we're ever going to have."

Yeah, I didn't think he was going to forgive me for almost chopping his leg off anytime soon.

"You're thinking in a strictly short-term sense, fool," the bland man said, almost absently. "Overreach your position right now and you'll be crushed when the greater powers move in turn."

I couldn't see Newton's face, but I was confident that it went homicidally insane when he heard that. The telekinetic stood, gesturing furiously, and the glass of wine that had been sitting on the table by his elbow was suddenly flying at the bland man's head.

I was expecting there to be blood on the table at that. That glass was traveling at a speed more commonly associated with bullets than anything else, and when it hit it was going to *shatter*, sending razor-sharp fragments of glass into the man's head.

Except that it didn't. The bland man didn't even seem concerned. He pushed his chair back from the table, in no evident rush, and the glass flew past about an inch and a half from his nose. He then stood and turned towards Newton.

I blinked. You couldn't dodge an attack like that at close range. Human reflexes weren't that fast, especially not when the actual *dodge* was practically in slow motion.

Except that, apparently, you could.

Newton growled something inarticulate and grabbed a handful of ball bearings from his pocket, throwing them into the air in front of him. An instant later they took off like they'd been shot from a gun, a loose cloud of metal maybe five feet in diameter.

The bland man walked right through it. I wasn't sure how, and I was watching. He didn't actually do anything to stop the bits of metal. It was just that he wasn't where they were. They passed over him, beside him, between his legs, between his *fingers*. He didn't speed up, and he didn't break stride.

I was staring at this point. I was just now coming to my feet, as were many of the others, and the bland man had almost reached Newton. The telekinetic started to do something else, something big enough that I could smell it even through the cloud of magic in that room. My guess was that he was planning to flip the table over, crushing the bland man and many other people under its weight.

I felt just the tiniest whisper of power from the bland man, exactly as Newton's magic began to take solid form. It was a masterful bit of work, just enough energy at just the right time to shake the telekinetic's concentration. The spell fizzled out, accomplishing nothing.

He tried again, slopping even more power into it this time, and the exact same thing happened. Before he could try a third time the bland man reached out and pressed one finger against Newton's throat. Just one finger, but it was perfectly placed against his carotid artery, and this guy knew how to *use* that. Newton dropped in less than a second, out cold. He'd only be out for a minute or two from that, but somehow I didn't think he'd be in a hurry to start more trouble. Not after he got his ass handed to him *that* badly.

"I agree with the jarl," the bland man said, making his way back to his chair. He wasn't even breathing hard. "My employer has seen five different incursions across the state. Making gains right now is secondary to preparing yourselves to defend against similar attacks."

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews," Alexander said. "As usual, your analysis is sound. And thank you for dealing with that fool. He was becoming annoying."

The bland man—Andrews—smiled. "Agreed," he said, sitting back down.

"On that note," Alexander said, "I would strongly recommend you consider taking the jarl's advice, and fortifying yourselves. There is already an ongoing situation in Russia that is literally world-threatening in scale, and the possibility exists that others will arise. If a threat of similar scope arises here, you would be *extremely* well-advised to devote all your resources to combating it. That also means that anything you expend on infighting is a waste."

"Wait," I said sharply. "That thing in Russia. That's public knowledge now?"

He smiled. It wasn't a happy expression. "At the rate things are going, we aren't going to be able to keep it a secret much longer."

Andrews sighed. He sounded disappointed, but not surprised. "I would offer to assist," he said. "But I suspect my involvement at this stage would present more risks than it would solve."

Alexander shuddered. "God, yes. I said that things were world-threatening, not that I wanted to make them world-ending. No, we'll all be happier if you stay the hell away from Russia until this is resolved."

Andrews nodded. "I understand," he said. "And I will do what I can to provide assistance from a distance, of course, although my capabilities are limited. With that in mind, jarl, did you have a specific plan in mind before that interruption?"

"Not really," I said, looking around the table, meeting each person's gaze in turn. Alexander and Andrews were the only ones that didn't look down. "I know a lot of the people sitting here," I said. "A lot of you have grudges against each other, a lot of you hate each other. I don't expect you to set that aside. What I do expect is that you will refrain from acting on it until things have settled down."

"And what are you doing?" someone asked. I wasn't sure who; no one I knew, I thought.

"I'm going to be consolidating my power base and taking over the city," I said. There wasn't much point lying, and being blunt like that would be good for my rep. "I know many of you would rather I didn't, but at this point it's the only practical option. We need to have a strong organization to hold against these threats. What I am proposing is that I will provide that organization, providing the legitimacy and much of the manpower to prevent this city from being attacked."

"And then you take power after?" another person said. "Pass."

I shrugged. "Someone has to do it," I said. "I'm not after power. It's a means to an end, for me. It's a tool. And right now it's a tool I need in order to do things I actually care about, like protecting my city. I know you aren't likely to believe me, but I truly believe that we need a strong authority figure to deter aggressors, and I don't see anyone else that I'd trust to do it."

"Alexander?" Rachel said. "You have the reputation to hold a position like that."

The wizard shook his head. "I can't take that much time away from the situation in Russia right now," he said flatly. "There are three different people covering for my absence as it is. And even if that weren't the case, I likely wouldn't be a very good candidate for the position. I've not gone out of my way to make friends in life."

"Pryce?" someone else tossed out.

Another person scoffed. "Not a chance," she said. "He's neutral. And he only gets respect inside the city, which negates the whole purpose."

"Katrin?"

"That might work, but then you've set yourself up with a vampire overlord. Personally, I'd take my chances with a war first."

I cleared my throat, and was a little surprised when people actually stopped talking. "Excuse me," I said. "But I have another engagement that I can't afford to miss. And I'm going to do this regardless of your opinion of me. So feel free to continue discussing this, but I'm afraid I have to go."

I stood and walked to the door. To my surprise, Andrews fell in beside me on the other side. "Good work," he said. "Playing them off each other like that."

I eyed him warily. I hadn't forgotten Alexander's comment about Andrews being world-ending, and anything that could get that kind of reaction out of the old wizard was something best treated with *extreme* respect. "You helped me out in there," I said. "Why?"

He smiled. "I meant what I said," he said, which really didn't explain anything. "In the meantime, however, do you have a bit of time before your next engagement? My employer would quite like a meeting with you."

"And who is your employer?" I asked.

His smile got a little wider. "That would be Nicolas Pellegrini, at the moment," he said. "I believe you're already acquainted."

Chapter Fourteen

"You're not dead," Aiko said. "Congratulations. Who's the boring guy?"

"This is Andrews," I said. "He's one of Pellegrini's people. Whatever magic he's using is also apparently apocalyptically badass, which is fun."

"I'm strictly freelance," Andrews said calmly. "And Maker's concern wasn't so much about my own talents as the potential interactions it might have with the ongoing situation in Russia."

"Right," I sighed. Just what I needed, a pedantic superpower. "You said Pellegrini wanted to talk with us. I'm guessing that you didn't intend that to be, say, tomorrow?"

"No. And this invitation was for you, specifically."

"Screw that," I said cheerfully. "I've got a lot of people I'm supposed to be talking to. If Pellegrini is going to raise hell about me bringing Aiko, he suddenly dropped a few steps on my priority list." I saw that he was hesitating, and said, "Come on. Worst case, we get there and he tells me otherwise. I saw you in there. There's no way you're scared of us."

Andrews went dead still, instantly. It was sort of creepy, actually. Normally, even when people stop moving, they aren't really *still*. They fidget, at least a little, blinking, unconscious tics, eye movements, that sort of thing. They can't stop themselves, because they aren't even aware they're doing it.

Andrews wasn't moving, not even those little unconscious movements. He was still breathing, but other than that he might as well have turned into a statue. It was a short step away from seeing a vampire pull the same trick.

"Very well," he said, a moment later, his body relaxing back into the normal human state. "Your associate and your hound may accompany us. When we arrive I will ask my employer whether they are welcome in the meeting or they will be waiting outside."

He resumed walking and we followed him. There was something about what he'd said that bugged me, and it took a couple seconds to realize. Snowflake had stayed outside the building so that she would know if anyone tried to sneak up on us or otherwise cause problems.

Andrews hadn't ever seen her, to my knowledge, and even if he'd talked to someone who had, that shouldn't have told him that she was with me right now. So how had he known?

It didn't matter for the moment, so I tried to put it out of my mind. Outside, Andrews walked briskly across the parking lot, with Aiko and I a few paces behind him. Snowflake caught up within a few seconds, rubbing her head affectionately against my thigh. Armor on armor, there wasn't a lot to feel, but it was still comforting on a level.

I did pause when Andrews stopped by an expensive-looking silver Mercedes. "Wait," I said. "We aren't taking a portal?"

He paused and looked at me oddly. A moment later, he relaxed again. "Ah," he said, as though he'd just realized something. "You learned that trick from the kitsune, I take it?"

"Yeah," I said, a little confused. "Why?"

He smiled, the expression almost more of a smirk, and glanced at Aiko. "It's not my business," he said. There was an odd emphasis on the words. I wasn't sure what it was supposed to mean, and it was so faint that I optimistically assumed it was just my ears playing tricks on me. "And I don't interfere with things that aren't my business. Suffice to say that no, we won't be taking a portal. Get in the car."

I glanced at Aiko dubiously, then shrugged and got into the passenger seat. Aiko got in the backseat, and Snowflake sat next to her, her head extended up next to my arm.

What happened after that was one of the more interesting experiences I'd had recently. The streets were dark, more of the streetlights broken or disabled than were functioning properly. The sky was cloudy, blocking even what little light the crescent moon and stars might have provided, with the end result that the Mercedes's headlights were the only illumination most of the time.

The car was not exactly an off-road vehicle, and the streets were still in pretty crappy condition. Between those factors and the poor illumination, I would have expected Andrews to take it slow and careful on the drive.

Instead, he went a good bit faster than I would have felt comfortable with in full daylight. He was hitting speeds that would have been respectable on the Interstate on a good day, except he was driving mostly on back roads, in the dark, when the quality of those roads was deeply questionable.

I managed to keep from clutching something, but it took a serious exercise of will. Even Snowflake was a little unnerved, and that was saying something. For his part, though, Andrews seemed totally calm, not showing any concern for the possibility of a wreck. And he had the competence to back it up, too. Cars stopped and moving, piles of refuse, the occasional collapsed bridge or building—whatever the obstacle, he swerved around it smoothly. He might only leave a foot or two between the car and the obstruction, but apparently he was just confident enough in his skills that he didn't care.

Damn. I didn't know how he did that, how his magic worked, but it was pretty unnerving to deal with. Everything I'd seen so far pointed at his approach being something unusual, well outside what I'd normally seen. Most mages focused their talents on something concrete and immediate—water, fire, force, emotion. My own approach was more vague, focusing on the concept of *predation*, and extending out to other ideas that related to that concept to a greater or lesser extent. That was good, in that it meant I had a little more versatility than a lot of people managed. It was also problematic, though, in that it meant that I had one very specific thing I did reasonably well, and a whole bunch that I was pretty spectacularly bad at.

From what I'd seen of Andrews's work, I was guessing he was a step beyond even how I approached things. His magic seemed more *abstract*, something that didn't necessarily interact with the world in a way that I could easily categorize or describe.

I didn't have the faintest idea how he did what he did, and that bugged the hell out of me.

Maybe ten or fifteen minutes later, he skidded to a stop outside a small apartment building. We piled out of the car and stood around, waiting, as Andrews slowly got out of the car and locked it up.

I wanted to make a wisecrack about that kind of driving not being a whole lot safer than an Otherside portal. I restrained myself. It didn't seem like a good idea.

"Wait here," he said. "I'm going to go check with my employer about your associates attending the meeting."

We stood out in the street and waited while he went into the building. It started to drizzle, the sort of fine, cold rain that could drag on for hours. I didn't care too much about the temperature, and the others were encased in armor, but it was still gloomy.

Maybe three or four minutes later Andrews came back out. "They're cleared," he said. "Follow me."

Inside, things were...quiet. At a glance, the whole building was empty. I didn't hear anything, I didn't smell anything out of the ordinary. There were a handful of animals in the building, but nothing I could really get much use out of—rats, mostly, and a handful of pigeons and starlings on the upper floors. Nothing my magic worked well with. A quick glance through them suggested that none of them could see, hear, or smell anything which hinted of human occupation.

Eerie. Had Pellegrini emptied the whole building for this meeting? I didn't think so; the fact that vermin had already reclaimed the place suggested a longer period of emptiness. It was possible that he *owned* the whole building, and it had never seen use other than as a front, I supposed.

Or it was possible that it had been a normal apartment building, originally, and then something happened to the residents. Most of the supernatural predators I could think of would have left more signs of their presence, but there were ways to leave this kind of emptiness behind. A vampire could have walked in and just led the residents out without any kind of struggle, to be fed upon later. Some of the fae, or other, more exotic, creatures, could have slaughtered everyone without so much as a drop of blood to show for it.

I shivered a little. This place was creeping me out. Being led by Andrews, who had to be one of the creepiest mages I'd seen, wasn't helping things. And the fact that I was here to meet with Pellegrini, a ruthless crime lord who could and would arrange my death if he felt it was necessary? That was just icing on the cake.

Andrews led us to apartment 108, where he knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for a response.

The room inside was dim, except for one illuminated table. I think he wanted it to be completely dark, but he was used to working with human vision. The lamp he'd chosen cast enough light that I could see that the rest of the apartment was completely empty. Either he'd cleaned it out completely, or it had never been occupied in the first place.

Andrews walked to the other side of the table and sat down on the other side of the table, to the side of and slightly behind Pellegrini. An enforcer was sitting on his other side, a massive guy that Pellegrini had brought along at least once before that I remembered. He looked like the sort of dumb bruiser that got thrown out of the WWE for extreme brutality, but I was guessing he was smarter than he looked. Strong or not, you didn't get to be the lieutenant of a guy like Pellegrini if you were dumb.

"Hi," I said, sitting across from the crime lord. Aiko and Snowflake took up positions flanking me, mirroring the people on the other side of the table.

"Good evening," Pellegrini said. "I'm glad you could make it."

"No problem," I said. "I was hoping to meet with you soon anyway. Although I do have another meeting across town in," I glanced at my watch, "three hours. Damn, where does the time go?"

He smiled. It was a thin, dry expression, but I almost thought it might be sincere. "I'll try to keep this brief, then," he said. "I know that you've been building capital recently. I know that you've declared yourself the ruler of all things in this city. I'm still trying to determine whether it's in my best interest to assist you or shut you down. I strongly recommend that you convince me of the former."

I managed to keep from showing nervousness at that, but it wasn't easy. Pellegrini might be human, but he'd still kept himself on top of organized crime in this region for at least several years. You didn't do that unless you were smart, committed, and ruthless. He was the kind of guy that had to be treated with *extreme* caution.

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, then nodded. "Okay," I said. "Let me put it this way. You're a businessman, Mr. Pellegrini. And if there's one thing I've learned about business, it's that you need a stable operating environment to make it profitable. I'm trying to hold things together, keep things from turning into an even bigger mess. As I see it, backing my play is the best way you have to keep business in this city profitable."

"Assuming," he said dryly, "that you don't take action to limit or compete with my business yourself."

I snorted. "Why would I *want* to? You think I want to deal in your kind of business?" I shook my head. "No. I'm fine with you still owning the industries you do right now. I'm not interested in dealing drugs or running prostitution. I would have a couple of rules for you to follow, but nothing you'd be too upset by, I don't think."

"Rules," he said, with obvious distaste. "What sort of rules?"

"You'd have to acknowledge my authority for this to work," I said. "I can't maintain respect otherwise. Think of it as...we're equals, but you're operating in my territory, so you show respect, right? Other than that, most of what I want is stuff that you already enforce on your people. No pushing drugs to kids, no forced prostitution."

He nodded slowly. "Reasonable," he said slowly. "But why should I cede my territory in this city to you?"

"Because you can't hold it anyway. No offense, but we both know it. Andrews said during the conference that you've been attacked recently. Those attacks are just going to get worse as more people take an interest and stronger groups get involved. Apparently you've handled them so far, but it's going to get harder." I shrugged. "I'm basically offering to defend your holdings in this city for you. And I've got the ability to do so. As I see it, that's a pretty good deal for you. All you'd have to give me is recognition and maybe a bit of assistance."

"Assistance. What sort of assistance?"

"Information, primarily. Possibly funding; I have plenty of cash, but accessing it is difficult at the moment. I might want more concrete support at some point, but I'd negotiate that separately."

He pressed his lips together and nodded. "Very well. I will consider your offer. In the meantime, I believe you have another meeting to get to."

I fled, with gratitude and as much dignity as I could muster.

Not having Andrews's crazy driving skills, we did use a pair of Otherside portals to travel to the north side of the city. On the other end, Aiko took a couple minutes to recover from the effort of making them, then we stole a car. I felt sort of bad about it, but rationalized it away by telling myself that what I was trying to accomplish here was important enough to justify it.

I wasn't sure that I liked that train of thought. "The ends justify the means" was a hard ideology once you took it past the most basic level. That was how you rationalized things like preemptive war and genocide. At the same time, though, I'd seen what happened when you went too far the other way, doing the "right" thing without paying any attention to what it would cost. There had to be somewhere in between, a way to balance the two and *not* wind up doing horrible things.

Didn't there?

I shook it off and called Kyi. "Are you in position?" I asked, the moment she answered.

"Yes, jarl," she replied instantly. "Target is within sight and does not seem to have noticed us."

Was it my imagination, or was her voice a little colder than it had been before? Or maybe it was just circumstance. This was a time for professionalism, after all, not emotion.

"Good," I said, trying to ignore that thought in the back of my head. "We're on our way, should arrive soon. Get your people ready to move into final positions."

"Yes, jarl," she said, before hanging up.

The location Katrin had chosen for our meeting was a small outdoor amphitheater in a park solidly in the portion of the territory she'd claimed. I felt more than a little anxious as I walked up to it. It felt like I was being watched, probably because I almost certainly was.

The vampire was waiting for us. She was alone, which worried me more than a little. I'd killed Natalie, sort of, but she still had Hrafn. I wasn't sure why she wouldn't have brought her right-hand vamp, especially when he was an absolutely lethal fighter. Even by the standards of vampires he was hard to beat.

There were only a couple of reasons I could think of for her to leave him behind. I didn't like any of them.

"Good evening," I said, approaching her. Snowflake was growling quietly next to me—she likes vampires even less than I do, generally—but Aiko seemed entirely calm.

"Good evening," Katrin replied. She was doing that vampire thing, where she didn't breathe except to talk, and her voice was a dry rasp. "You're early."

"Yeah," I said. "That a problem."

"Not at all," she said. "You have been acting up. Making claims on the city."

"Yeah," I said. "But you're one to talk. The way I hear it, you're snatching people off the street to feed your minions."

"We need power to maintain order in this city."

"If that were your only interest, there are other ways you could have gone about it," I said. "You could have asked for volunteers. You could have asked me or Kikuchi for assistance."

A thin, cruel smile played around her lips. I might have been projecting a little, but I didn't think so. "Perhaps."

I considered her for a moment, then sighed.

So. It was like *that*, then.

I already knew how this was going to end, had known since before I even agreed to this meeting, but I thought I'd give Katrin one more chance to surprise me. "I'm taking over the city," I said.

"I'm going to keep things stable. Keep the peace. We made a deal, three years ago, that we'd provide assistance to each other against outside threats. Are you going to keep that deal?"

"Here's the thing," she said, with that smile still in place. "As I see it, that deal was made in a different context. The world's moved on since then. So let me give you a counteroffer. You withdraw your claim and get out of the city, and we can let bygones be bygones."

"I can't do that," I said quietly. I supposed that I should have been afraid, or excited, but I mostly just felt sad.

She nodded slowly. "I understand," she said. "I want you to know that I really did respect you, Winter."

Then she whistled, loud enough to make me wince.

And then vampires came out of the night. First one, then two, five, ten, then I lost count. Within thirty seconds, there must have been twenty-five or thirty vampires in that amphitheater, standing all around us. Some of them were holding weapons, others weren't. I doubted it really mattered. If a vampire hit you full strength, it wasn't too important what they'd hit you *with*.

"Kill them," Katrin said, in that same raspy, emotionless voice.

Chapter Fifteen

Before any of the vampires could do much in the way of moving, things started blowing up.

They were freakishly strong, almost invulnerable, and possessed of bizarre powers that I really couldn't even guess at. But at the end of the day, they were still meat. There were certain rules they had to follow.

When land mines started going off under their feet, they were about as helpless as anyone else. The sheer *force* of the explosions tossed them around like rag dolls, bodies flying ten feet or more into the air before falling back to the ground.

They weren't dead, barring unlucky exceptions. It took a lot to kill a vampire, and while explosions were a good way to get the job done, these particular weapons hadn't been intended to kill them.

What they did do was sow chaos and confusion, making it pretty hard for them to actually *do* much. Even the ones that hadn't been sent flying were falling to the ground, screaming in surprise or pain, if they were alive enough to feel pain. The things were horrifically strong and tough, but they were still meat, and they couldn't operate well with half their bones broken, or muscles torn to pieces by shrapnel.

Kyi had had enough time to remove the mines closest to us from the detonation pattern, so we weren't at risk of the same fate. The impact was still enough to knock Aiko from her feet, and Snowflake and I staggered hard.

A moment later, before anyone really had a chance to recover or adapt, the gunfire started. I couldn't really hear it—I was effectively deaf from the explosions—but I knew the plan, and I could see the results. This wasn't precision shooting with a sniper rifle; that kind of thing wasn't a great tactic for vampires, and the housecarls weren't exactly precision shooters, either. The weapons they were using were more crude, designed to just inflict mass damage. Automatic weapons, shotguns, that sort of thing.

Most of them just trained their weapons on the crowd of vamps and pulled the trigger. That kind of spray-and-pray tactic wasn't effective, but there were around ten of them shooting into a massed group of enemies. Even if one bullet out of ten actually hit a target, it was still inflicting damage, putting enemies down.

The handful that were actually competent—Kyi, Brandulfr, a couple of others to a lesser degree—were using the same weapons, but with a very different intent. They were aiming mostly at the vamps closer to us, they were aiming carefully, and they were shooting to kill.

It's hard to kill a vampire. It's even harder to get the job done with a gun. Guns are good at killing, but the way they typically get used doesn't lend itself well to vamps. But if you know what you're doing, and these guys did, it can be done. I'd seen videos of assault rifles being used to cut down trees; cutting off someone's head wasn't out of the question with sustained fire. Similarly, a couple well-placed shotgun blasts could pulp someone's heart or brain *well* beyond what a stake could manage.

When those attacks put vamps down, not all of them got back up again.

Those closest to us had started to react, though, rushing towards us at speeds considerably greater than what I could manage. Running was out of the question. Snowflake could probably get away. If I were on four feet, I'd even give myself decent odds. But there was no way Aiko could move fast enough, and her magic wasn't remotely strong enough to hide from a vampire.

So I did the next best thing. I drew Tyrfing, and I charged right at them.

I felt a few bullets hit me as I did so, either ricochets, missed shots, or bullets that had passed clean through their target and kept going to hit me. Most of them didn't penetrate the armor, and the couple that did didn't do any critical damage. Not right away, at least; bullet wounds could be tricky that way. But I was fine for the moment, and that was all that mattered right now.

I ran straight at them for about three steps. Then I threw Tyrfing at them. I didn't bother trying to aim. The objective wasn't to *cut* them, after all.

Then I forced power through the focus I'd built into the boots of my armor, thickening and controlling the air underneath them. It was very challenging to do it at full speed—turning it on and off in time with my steps, when I was sprinting as fast as I could—but I'd practiced it. I'd practiced a lot.

It was strenuous, not unlike sprinting up a very steep staircase, except that I also had to *create* the staircase. It was a massive physical, mental, and energetic strain, and I knew that I couldn't keep it up for long.

But by the time I reached the leading group of vampires, I was twenty feet above their heads, maybe a little more. They could easily have jumped and caught me, but they were still trying to adjust. I'd kept this facet of my abilities very quiet, specifically so that people and Katrin wouldn't know I could sort of mimic flight. Between that, the mines, the gunfire, and Tyrfing, they didn't react in time as I ran right over their heads, dropping a pair of grenades as I passed.

When they detonated an instant later it knocked me out of the air, sending me tumbling to the ground. It was a hard fall, hard enough to stun me for a moment.

That left me on the ground in the middle of a crowd of hostile vampires, but in an odd way that was actually the best place I could be. I was lying under the gunfire, for the most part, and in the chaos they weren't able to really make use of their advantageous position.

Then I called Tyrfin again, and swept it in a circle around myself, at around knee height. It sheared through flesh and bone, and vampires hit the ground all around me, crying out. I was swamped by the rush of dark, foul-smelling blood. There was no real force behind a vampire's blood—no heartbeat—but I'd just cut off their legs, and even without pressure that translated to a lot of bleeding.

There was another explosion, although I could only dimly hear it. A grenade, most likely. A moment later Snowflake burst through the crowd to my side. Her metallic teeth were stained with that same dark blood, her eye was bright with excitement, and her lips were peeled back in a snarl that I couldn't hear.

I could really get to hate this reliance on guns and explosives. They were potent, but being effectively deafened for minutes at a time was a pain in the ass.

And then, a moment later, I found myself being grabbed by the neck and hauled into the air. I tried to struggle, but I might as well not have bothered. The person lifting me was stronger than me, in the same sense that I was stronger than a puppy. I might as well have been trying to overpower a locomotive as outmuscle them.

Katrin lifted me up until my face was on a level with hers. She was tall and I wasn't, so my feet were dangling a couple of inches above the ground. I could breathe, barely—the armor was limiting the compression on my throat, and she wasn't really *squeezing*. But it's pretty much impossible to have much in the way of strength when you don't have anything to push against. I supposed that I could try to use Katrin herself as an anchor, but that seemed like a spectacularly bad idea.

She looked at me coldly, seeming completely oblivious to the ongoing hail of gunfire, to her minions screeching and dying all around. "You," she said, "are an exceedingly irksome man." She must have been almost screaming, for me to hear her clearly, but her face remained blank and calm.

I opened my mouth to reply, and then I felt something, a surge of emotion that wasn't mine. It took a second to process and figure out what was happening, by which time it was too late. Snowflake leapt through the air, jaws spread wide, claws ready to rake and tear.

And the vampire swatted her out of the air with one hand.

Snowflake was tough and strong and usually smarter than *that*. But she was still a dog, and not even a particularly large dog. Even with the armor, she couldn't weight more than about two hundred pounds, max. And she didn't have anything to push against either, which made it a matter of pure mass and velocity.

When Katrin hit her, she flew. *Literally* flew, twenty feet or more, out of sight. At the same time, I completely lost contact with her. My magic just suddenly stopped telling me that she was there, at all.

Before I had time to think about what that meant, Katrin threw *me* in the opposite direction. It almost felt like I was falling, the same wild and uncontrollable movement, and just about as fast. I was horizontal in the air and spinning, the world flashing before my eyes too quickly for me to take it in.

I'd felt a lot of kinds of pain in my life. There was the pain of having your eye melted out of its socket by magical fire. There was the pain of being crucified with silver spikes. There was the pain of broken bones and crushed organs.

The pain I felt then was easily on a par with the worst I'd ever felt, a solid bar of agony from one end of my body to the other. It hurt so much that I couldn't scream. I couldn't even really *breathe*.

I'm pretty sure I blacked out for a couple of seconds after that. Once I was cognizant of my surroundings again, I realized that I was lying face-down on concrete. I tried to roll over and look around, and this time I almost *did* scream. And all I really managed was to flop around a little. My body wasn't responding the way I wanted it to.

Biting my tongue to keep from making any more noise than I had to, I tried again, and again. By the time I managed it I was sweating hard, I felt like I was about to throw up, and my tongue was bleeding.

And it was still a relief. For a second there, I'd been genuinely terrified that my back was broken.

Lying there, I took a few seconds to think, trying to figure out what had happened and what I should do. As far as I could tell, I'd slammed flat on my back into a brick wall, then fell to the ground. My spine wasn't actually *broken*, but I'd still taken some serious damage. Broken ribs, a spectacular amount of bruising, probably some internal damage. It was hard to say for sure.

I tried to stand, and couldn't. Everything hurt, my coordination was shot, and my balance wasn't much better. I could *maybe* have gotten on my feet, but I didn't know how long I could stay there, and I was scared that another fall would knock me out for good, leaving me helpless at a time when I really couldn't afford to be.

So I rolled back onto my stomach, gathered my cloak around myself for a little bit more concealment, and started crawling back in the direction I'd come. I wasn't sure what I'd do when I got there, but I'd be damned if I just let this happen.

Chapter Sixteen

Okay. So my situation wasn't great. I was effectively crippled, Snowflake was probably unconscious and definitely out of commission, and there were still at least a dozen vampires up and fighting.

As I crawled, I took stock of what I still had to work with. My people had superior positioning. Katrin obviously hadn't been prepared for me to have something like that arranged, or her minions wouldn't have been hit nearly so hard. That meant that the vamps were going to be struggling to respond. Katrin would be able to coordinate them, I was sure, but it would take a few precious seconds.

That meant that they would just now be starting to hunt people down. My housecarls were split into groups of two, which meant that the vamps would have to split up comparably to tackle all of them at once. I was guessing they would do that rather than concentrate their forces on one at a time. Vampires tended to be rather arrogant in my experience.

The other main advantage I could think of was that Katrin couldn't really have expected me to be back in the fight. If they were trying to hunt me down they'd already have found me, which made me think that they were probably prioritizing taking the other targets down first.

Which was the right choice, tactically. But it also put me in a position where I could potentially do some good.

The first thing I had to do was get to a position where I could see the scene of the fight, make sure that my guesses weren't totally off. The gunfire and explosions were sure to have terrified any animals away, and I would probably need to spend several seconds going the wrong direction to lay eyes on it myself.

Fortunately I'd thought ahead. Each team of jötnar had a cat in a carrier, where it could see the target area. In addition to giving me a clear idea of where each of my teams were, it also gave me a way to see for myself what was going on.

The nearest of these cats was pressed tight against the back of the carrier, not looking in remotely the right direction. I tried to nudge it to turn so that I could see, but it was scared almost out of its mind, and not inclined to pay attention to me.

So I pushed a little hard, taking control and just *moving* it, until the amphitheater was in my field of view. I could see a lot of vampires, on the ground or struggling to stand. None of them were in condition to fight, and there weren't as many as had initially shown up, which made me think that my guess about what they were doing was probably accurate.

I didn't see Katrin or Aiko.

I let go of the cat and kept crawling, moving towards the closest group of housecarls. They were about a hundred feet away, on top of a small hill.

I paused as I went. A hundred feet wasn't that far, but...I wasn't running right now. I wasn't even walking. At a crawl, it would probably take a minute or so for me to get there.

A minute was way, way too long for my people to hold out against vampires. And that wasn't even taking the other locations into consideration.

I needed to be moving faster.

I took a deep breath and called Tyrfin. The sword appeared in my grasp, the weight a comfortable presence in my hand. I unsheathed it, setting the scabbard carefully by my side so as to avoid making a sound, and then used it as a sort of cane to push myself to my feet.

It wasn't so much that the cursed sword made the pain go away, exactly. It was more that it just didn't *matter* as much. Rage and bloodlust rushed through me from the weapon, bringing something like an endorphin rush to swamp out the pain signal from my body. The emotions called an answering impulse from within me, raging hunger and a violent, feral anger at those who had dared to violate my territory.

Normally I would have tried to fight those feelings. They came from the wolf more than the man, and under most circumstances letting them run rampant was a *very* bad idea. I'd gotten used to limiting the way Tyrfin affected me, locking them out, until I hardly even had to think about it.

This time I encouraged them, stoking the anger up until the pain was lost behind it.

It still hurt, and my body still wasn't responding to my directions quite right, but I managed to stagger forward, using Tyrfin to help my balance. It wasn't pretty, but I was moving.

I heard a shout of pain from about the right location to have come from one of my housecarls, and gritted my teeth. Those people were *mine*, dammit. There was no way in hell I was going to let vampires have them. I started moving more quickly, although it still wasn't nearly as fast as I'd usually be.

A few seconds later I got a look at the hill. There was one vampire, instantly recognizable by the strange, stiff grace of its movements. Brandulfr was on the ground in front of it, with an obviously broken arm. Skallagrim was halfway up a tree nearby, out of immediate danger, but obviously not confident in his ability to shoot the vampire without hitting Brandulfr. And that tree wouldn't mean much of anything against a vampire. The thing could probably *jump* high enough to hit him.

I'd wanted to get a sneak attack in, take the vamp by surprise, but it would only be seconds before it killed the downed housecarl. That necessitated certain changes in my approach.

"Hey," I shouted, moving closer. "You didn't really think that killed me, did you?"

The vampire glanced over its shoulder at me. Then it grinned, a wide and profoundly *wrong* expression that showed teeth a bit too sharp for comfort, and turned back to Brandulfr. It wasn't carrying a weapon, but it didn't need one.

I growled and tried to run, managing only a sort of slightly-faster shamble.

I wasn't going to make it in time.

I stopped and lifted Tyrfing, getting ready to throw it at the vamp. It was a stupid thing to do, but I had to do *something*, and I couldn't think of any other weapon I was carrying that could put it down before it had time to kill Brandulfr.

Then the vampire paused suddenly. I couldn't see its face, but its posture looked confused.

A moment later Aiko flickered into view, standing right next to him. Her wakizashi was thrust through his neck to the hilt, sticking out the other end covered in blood. She leaned in close and whispered something in his ear, then pulled the blade back out.

The vampire dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. She'd cut through the spine entirely, apparently.

"Nice job," I said, trying to pretend that hadn't surprised me as much as everyone else. I kept walking forward, not leaning on Tyrfing. That wouldn't be good for my image. "Do we know what happened to the others?"

"Kyi and Nóttolfr bolted," Aiko said instantly. "Pretty sure they got away. The rest...I don't know."

"Okay," I said. "We're going to go check on the rest. Brandulfr, Skallagrim, you're with us."

The next location was an office building, currently empty. Haki and Njáll had been on the third floor, barricaded inside an empty office.

Now the door on the office was hanging open from one hinge. Njáll was lying on the ground under the window, broken in ways that not even a jotun was going to be standing up from. There was no sign of Haki.

I didn't like that, but if there was one person on my team who could get by on his own, it was Haki. So we kept moving, looking for the next team.

Continuing around the park, it took more than a minute to find the next location. This one was a small store that had been empty for several years for reasons I wasn't entirely clear on. Ragnar and Vigdis had been on the roof earlier to get the height they'd needed to shoot down into the crowd. From the sound of things, though, they'd since moved down into the main room of the store, and they were still fighting.

I froze, startled, then rushed into the building.

The interior of the building was a striking tableau. Three vampires were on the ground, each marked with damage from the bullets and explosives, then decapitated. Vigdis was lying next to the door, her right leg snapped like a toothpick just below the knee. Ragnar was still standing, holding a broken spear, which he was using to fight against the last vampire still standing.

The vamp was missing its left arm near the shoulder, and the other injuries were severe enough that it could hardly stand. And it was still obviously, easily more than a match for the jotun. He was feinting with the spear, keeping it at bay, but there was no question of who would win.

I didn't say a word, just stepped up behind the thing and swung Tyrfing, aiming to chop its head clean off. It heard something and dodged at the last second, so rather than kill it, I cut deep into its right shoulder.

Not lethal, but still pretty decent. Now both its arms were effectively useless.

That's what I thought, anyway. I was swiftly proved wrong as it spun, not seeming to care about the injury, and slapped me in the chest.

It couldn't put more than a small fraction of its full strength behind the blow, but then, I wasn't in much better shape. Even that weak of a hit was enough to knock me from my feet.

The others were filing in the door, though, and the vampire was seriously outnumbered. It turned, looking at what was happening, then tried to bolt for the door.

Vigdis's hand around its ankle brought it up short. The giant had to be in terrible pain, but she held tightly enough that even vampire couldn't jerk away easily, and she was grinning wildly.

Ragnar lunged forward, trying to impale the thing on his spear. He succeeded, sort of, but apparently he missed the heart, because it didn't even slow down. It didn't even turn to face him as it lashed out, kicking him in the chest.

Ragnar flew backward, his feet coming an inch or two off the ground, and hit the wall. He dropped, instantly, and I was guessing he was out of the fight. Maybe permanently; that was a hell of a kick.

Vigdis took the opportunity to tug his supporting foot out from under the vamp, toppling it. That put it on the floor not far from me. I grabbed the spear sticking out of its chest and started pushing, trying to shove it further into the thing and get the heart.

The reaction was instant and violent. It had been trying to stand, but once I grabbed the spear it gave up on that and started scrabbling away from me on the ground.

It had only three limbs, one of which was basically nonfunctional, and poor leverage, so it made only limited progress. A moment later Vigdis let go of its ankle and moved up, pushing against its back and shoving it into the spear.

The vamp went berserk, bucking against me, kicking out and hitting me with its remaining arm. I gritted my teeth and shoved the spear another inch into the thing.

The vampire screeched, a sound more like metal tearing than a human scream, loud enough to hurt my ears. I ignored the pain, braced myself as best I could in such an awkward position, and *pushed*.

The vampire bucked one more time, almost throwing me off completely, then went still. I pushed myself slowly to my feet, still holding the spear, and looked at what I'd done.

The vampire was lying on the ground, perfectly still, blood trickling from its mouth. I'd shoved that spear clear *through* its body and an inch into Vigdis's breast on the other side. She didn't seem to care about that injury, any more than the broken leg. She just kept right on grinning at me, wild and ecstatic.

Skallagrim grabbed one of Vigdis's axes off the floor and brought it over without any hesitation. He glanced at me to make sure it was okay, then brought it down, chopping the vamp's head clean off.

I felt woozy standing up, almost so much so that I *couldn't*, even leaning on Aiko. When I looked around, the rest of the crew didn't look much better. Brandulfr had a broken arm, and Vigdis wasn't going to be standing on that leg any time soon. Ragnar was unconscious, and even if he weren't that kick had shattered several ribs, apparently driving them into his lung.

A normal human would very probably have died from that already. Jötnar were tougher, but whether Ragnar was tough enough to survive this was not at all certain.

"Okay," I said, and then stopped to cough. I was a little surprised by how much it *hurt*; I couldn't even see straight, and I had to lean heavily on Aiko to stay standing. Apparently some of my ribs were cracked, too. I didn't want to think too much about what might have happened without the armor. Grappling with a vampire wasn't high on my list of things to do again. "Where are the rest of us?"

"Watching from the roof, it looked like almost everyone made it to the shelter," Vigdis said. "We were farther away and they'd already sent some vamps after us, so we thought it'd be better to hunker down here."

"Shelter," I said. "You mean the basement we prepped?"

"That's the one," she said.

I sighed with relief at that. I'd done what I could to prepare for this, but I hadn't had much warning. The closest thing I'd been able to arrange to a decent fallback position was the basement of a nearby house. For reasons I couldn't even really guess at, he'd converted his basement into a tornado shelter. I'd had my people reinforce the door as best they could, and sent Jimmy and Aubrey to set up some basic wards.

It wasn't great, as fortresses went. The best I could really hope for was that the vampires would think it was more work than it was worth. But it was the best I'd been able to arrange on such short notice.

"You stay here," I said to the housecarls. "Aiko and I will go check on the scene there." I didn't like leaving them there, but there was no way Vigdis or Ragnar could travel. This building was reasonably defensible, and Katrin had already sent four vampires to clear it. With luck, she wouldn't bother throwing more at the job. And if not, well, Brandulfr, Skallagrim, and Vigdis were still in shape to fight, sort of. I'd give them even odds against one vampire. Against more than one, I'd lose at least one housecarl, maybe all four.

Not great. But probably better odds than if they came with us.

The five blocks to the shelter were among the hardest in my life. I could barely walk, it hurt to breathe, and I was terrified that a swarm of vampires would fall on us at any moment. It didn't help that Aiko had seen where Snowflake fell, and we detoured to pick her up.

I'd seen her injured as badly before, but very seldom. Her shoulder was shattered, as were a couple of her ribs, and I thought her skull might be cracked. In any case, she was definitely unconscious, and to my magic it felt like she was *more* unconscious than usual. It was like, if the usual feeling of her being knocked out was a phone that was playing a dial tone instead of her voice, this time the phone wasn't even plugged into the wall.

A crappy metaphor, especially when I couldn't even *remember* the last time I used a landline. But it was the best I could come up with.

I wasn't sure how Aiko managed it, given that she was carrying Snowflake and holding a lot of my weight up as well. I only really straightened up again when we reached the house in question.

The basement-turned-shelter had a separate entrance, a heavy steel door set in the ground. Runes cut crudely into the metal acted as the focus of the warding spells, and I knew that there were several steel bars hastily welded to it to help hold it closed. A vampire could probably batter their way through it, given enough time, but not casually.

Luckily, there were no vampires nearby. Apparently Katrin had been confident that the minions she left behind were enough to get the job done, and she hadn't thought that getting the rest of the housecarls out of this shelter was worth the effort.

I looked around for a few seconds and then cut a branch off a nearby tree with Tyrting. I used the branch to tap on the door. The pattern was simple enough that I didn't need to worry about messing it up, but complex enough that an aggressor was unlikely to get lucky and guess it.

There was a brief pause before I heard the locks, bars, and chains being undone. A moment later the door opened a crack and Kyi stuck her head out. "You made it," she said, with some relief.

"Yeah," I said. Looking inside it seemed like all the rest of the housecarls were here. Even Haki had made it, though I wasn't sure how he'd been able to cross the entire park on his own after his partner was killed by a vamp.

"Almost all of us made it," Aiko said. "Now it's time to start thinking about how to get back at them for this betrayal."

I nodded and sat down, leaning against the house. Katrin's betrayal, if you could even call it that, had been inevitable and entirely predictable. Now that we'd gotten through it, I could finally slap her down for good without worrying about taking a hit to my rep.

Maybe after a nap. A nap sounded good.

Chapter Seventeen

"Coma," the vet said firmly.

"Are you sure?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from showing any emotion.

Apparently I wasn't doing a great job, because he looked at me with an odd expression. I wasn't sure quite what it meant. "Absolutely," he said. "Traumatic brain injury leading to coma. Probably cranial hemorrhage as well."

I swallowed hard. "Can you fix it?"

"Maybe," he said doubtfully. "Probably not, especially if she's bleeding internally. And even if she wakes up, she'll probably never walk again with the damage to her shoulder. It's probably kinder to let her go. She's suffered enough already."

This time there was no mistaking what his tone meant. Accusation, plain and simple. Just as well, I supposed. If a vet saw a dog with severe trauma, a missing eye, and teeth replaced with metal implants, and he *didn't* feel a certain amount of condemnation towards that dog's owner, he wasn't a very good vet.

"Fix it," I said, more firmly. "I'll see to it you have whatever you need."

"A hospital," he said instantly. "I don't have the equipment to treat this kind of injury in my clinic. If you want her to live, she needs to get to a hospital immediately. And it'll take a neurosurgeon to deal with it if there is a hemorrhage."

I nodded. That made sense, I supposed. Vets probably didn't have much call to treat comas. "Selene," I barked, turning away from the scene. I couldn't stand to watch Snowflake lie there, so close and yet utterly beyond my ability to help.

She appeared next to me so fast that she must have been just standing there waiting for me to call. "Yes?" she said.

"Take the housecarls and take over the nearest hospital." I racked my brain, trying to think of which hospital that *was*, but I couldn't remember, so I left it at that. "And recruit a neurosurgeon."

"How should we handle this?"

"Do what you have to," I snapped. "Bribe them, threaten them, whatever. You're smart, you'll figure something out." Turning back to the vet, I asked, "Is that everything?"

He pursed his lips and nodded. He clearly still disapproved of this, on numerous levels, but he wasn't arguing. Offering someone a quarter of a million in cash, up front and no questions asked, tended to have that effect on people.

"Good," I said. "Because I'll blame you if anything goes wrong." Turning back around, I saw that Selene was still standing there, and glared at her. "Why are you still here?"

She cleared her throat. "Blind Keith got in touch while we were on our way here," she said. "He named a location in London for your meeting, and says he expects you there in two hours." She held a piece of paper out to me, which presumably had directions written on it.

"Shit," I muttered to myself, glancing back at Snowflake. She was lying on an examination table, her breathing labored, although at least if the vet was right she was too far out to feel any pain.

I wanted to be there with her. But I knew I couldn't do anything to help her now, and if I didn't go to meet with Blind Keith things were liable to get even *worse*.

"Don't screw this up," I told the succubus, before stalking out of the room. It wasn't the best stalk, if only because it still hurt to walk. Not just a little, either; I'd gotten a few minutes of rest on the way to the vet's, but the inactivity only served to emphasize how bad of shape my body was in right now. It was letting me know in no uncertain terms that I would need some rest, and *soon*, or it was going to give out on me entirely.

Not that I had any idea of when I could manage that rest. There were just too many things going on, too many balls in the air—as evidenced by this message from Blind Keith. I'd almost forgotten that I was supposed to be meeting with him, and now that was coming back to bite me, since I hadn't prepared for it at all.

I tried to plan as I walked to the edge of the road. Two hours wasn't much time, not enough for me to really do anything else first, especially if I wanted to show up early. I hated to waste a moment right now, though, so I thought I might pick up the werewolves before going to London.

"Where are we going?" Aiko asked, falling in step beside me. She'd been watching the area, making sure that Katrin's people weren't planning a follow-up attack while we were distracted.

"London," I said. "Blind Keith wants a meeting. With a stop in Wyoming on the way to get the werewolves."

"Cool," she said. "Staging point in Faerie, I'm guessing?" She turned to the edge of the road, starting to spin magic out into a portal without waiting for me to answer.

"I can get it," I said.

She snorted. "Sure," she said dryly. "But it's obvious you're pretty much dead on your feet, and I'm feeling decent. I can handle this one."

It only took her a few minutes to open the portal, dropping us into the middle of a small glade in the deep woods. It was a quiet, isolated place with a small stream running through it, one of Aiko's favorite staging points.

She was obviously more tired than she'd let on, because opening that portal took something out of her. She wasn't even fully recovered by the time I'd finished the next portal, so I went to Wyoming without her. I was feeling too hurried to wait for her, and she would be safe there. It was one of the more secluded places in Faerie, and she knew her way around.

It was a short walk from my destination point in the forest outside Wolf to town. It felt a lot longer today, with how overwhelmingly crappy I felt, but I didn't waste time feeling sorry for myself.

All I had to do was think of Snowflake, crippled and maybe dying on that table, to drive *those* thoughts out of my mind. I'd gotten lucky. I'd gotten *very* lucky.

And if I had anything to say about it, Katrin was going to die slowly and in a great deal of pain for that. Trying to kill me was one thing. I expected that; it was nothing personal, for either of us. But what she'd done to Snowflake, *that* made it personal.

Once I got to town, I spent a few moments trying to think of where I could find the people I was looking for, then snorted. I was still thinking like a human. If there was anywhere in the world, any *single* place, where I could reliably use my magic to find someone, it was this town. A decent chunk of the population here were werewolves, probably eighty percent or more had some kind of pet that I could work with, and I knew the terrain as well as anywhere. It had been years since I spent all that much time here, but nothing much had changed.

Nothing much had ever really changed, here. That was part of why I'd had to leave. Even with the current turbulence, the way things *everywhere* were changing dramatically and permanently, I had a strong suspicion that I'd be able to come back in another ten years and still recognize almost everything.

It took me a couple of minutes, but I eventually found them in the town's only real bar. They were sitting around with the attitude of people who'd been sitting around for a while, and were starting to get pretty tired of it.

I hurried to get there, as best I could, and it was only a couple of minutes until I pushed open the door and stepped inside. My left leg gave out as I did, with spectacularly inconvenient timing, and I had to grab at the door to hold myself up. I still stumbled forward, knocking over the sign that had the night's specials written on it.

The clatter from that ensured that everyone present was looking my way. I could practically see the bartender debating whether he should go for the shotgun he kept behind the bar, but luckily he was smart enough to look around first. Kyra gave him a thumbs-up, and he relaxed again.

I walked over to their table, managing to avoid any more embarrassing incidents, and slumped into one of the open chairs. "Hey," I said. I would have said more, but that one word triggered a coughing fit that went on for a few seconds and left me breathing hard and biting my tongue to keep from making embarrassing noises from the pain.

"Damn," Kyra said. "You look like crap."

"I feel worse," I said, grabbing her beer and taking a sip to try and keep the coughing down. There wasn't enough alcohol in it to matter to me. "Got in a fight with Katrin a little while ago."

She frowned, then suddenly blinked. "You mean the vampire? How'd that go?"

"I lived," I said, shrugging, and then wincing at the pain that caused my ribs. "Snowflake maybe didn't. She's in surgery right now, brain injury, some broken bones, maybe internal damage."

I was a little surprised at the reaction that provoked. I'd expected Kyra to care, but Ryan reacted as well. Even Daniell, the other werewolf Kyra had brought with her when she came to Wyoming, looked concerned.

The only person at the table who didn't seem to care was Unna. But then, that was to be expected. The selkie had to be more personable than most of the fae, given that she and Ryan had apparently been married for a couple of years with a reasonable amount of happiness. She still wasn't human, though, or anything like it. Even if she cared, it was pretty unlikely she'd show it in a way that I could recognize.

Kyra was looking at me oddly, and I realized that she must have said something that I missed. I shook my head, trying to shake some sense into it. I needed to focus. "I'm sorry," I said. "Missed that."

"I asked what you're doing here while she's under the knife," Kyra said patiently. She had her tough face on, but I knew her well enough to recognize that she was covering up genuine concern, for me or for Snowflake. Probably both, now that I thought about it.

"Have a meeting in London," I said. "Big, nasty fae that might want to eat me. I thought I'd pick you up on the way. Hopefully you guys can track Katrin's people back to their hideout and I can take her out during the day."

"So you just left us hanging until you needed something," Ryan said. I thought he sounded upset.

"How long have you guys been here?" I asked.

"Most of the day," Kyra said. The anger in her voice was more deeply buried, but I knew her well enough to pick up on it. "Eight or ten hours, I think?"

"Crap," I said. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize I'd kept you waiting that long. Too many things to keep track of right now...." I shook my head again. "I'm sorry. I need to get moving if I'm going to make it to that meeting on time. If you don't want to come with, I understand."

"Of course we'll come with you," Kyra said, clearly exasperated. "Let's go."

London was dismal. It had been close to dawn in Wyoming by the time we left, which put it closer to noon in England, but it was overcast, the air somewhere between a heavy mist and a light rain.

I'd reluctantly stopped long enough to take a massive dose of painkillers, enough to have a little bit of an effect even with my metabolism, but even with an accompanying dose of stimulants it hadn't done much to shake me out of my near-daze. Determination and chemicals could only take you so far beyond the limits of your body, and the result was that at the moment was that I felt almost the same amount of pain, exhausted, nauseous, a little dizzy.

How long had I been awake, now? It was hard to remember. Almost twenty-four hours, I thought. Pretty close to that. And I'd been moving pretty much nonstop the whole time, a couple of fights, a couple of high-stress meetings, the time in between spent trying to organize everything.

Not the best state to be meeting one of the scariest predators in Faerie, I had to admit. But there wasn't much I could do about it.

Blind Keith had given me an address, but it took a while to find it. I'd thought that London would be better off than most of the world right now, and in a sense I'd been right, but one of the things that was easy to forget when you weren't a local was that London wasn't really a city in the same way that I was accustomed to. It had built itself organically over the last two thousand years, and the result was a city that had so many neighborhoods, boroughs, and regions that you could spend your whole life there and not see more than a tiny fraction of the sprawling mass of streets that was London.

Blind Keith had chosen one of the very worst parts of that mass, a back street near Soho that had never really gotten its act cleaned up from when that part of town was a scary one. It was the kind of place you went to do things that were legal only so long as nobody was watching too closely, and that had been *before* the shit hit the fan.

Now, well, it was worse. My portal location in London was a good distance away, and the streets weren't in much better shape than those back in Colorado. Maybe worse, in areas. Our stolen car was decent, but it still took a while to reach our destination.

The building he'd selected was a small one, dingy and easy to overlook. There were bars on the windows, and only a small sign in one of the windows identified it as a sex shop. I didn't see anyone around or inside the building, no customers, no employees.

Where were they, I wondered? Had they just chosen not to go to work today? Had they shown up, but been scared away by Blind Keith so that we could have our meeting?

Or had he chased them through the streets, hunting them down, their lives ended in blood and pain and fear?

I tried not to think about it too much.

The door was unlocked, and the interior of the building was dark except for one light above a door. I went to that door, carefully, flanked by Aiko and Kyra. The other werewolves were waiting outside, watching for trouble.

Kyra whined a little as we crossed the room. Discomfort over being there, or thinking about what might have happened, perhaps?

Or maybe it was the aura of fear, of primal heart-pounding terror, that Blind Keith carried with him. I could feel it myself, a little, although I might not have recognized it as unnatural unless I'd already encountered him. It was just a nagging sense, at the back of my mind, that this was bad, that I should turn and run *right now*, because there was something very very very bad upstairs and if I kept going I was going to die, I was going to run and scream and bleed and die and there was nothing I could do....

I pushed that feeling away, although it was a struggle. Blind Keith's magic was designed to speak to a part of me that didn't have a lot in the way of reason or control, an instinctive level of my hindbrain that just wasn't capable of too much in the way of rational thought. He scared people, made them revert to hunted animals at the mercy of anything lurking beyond the firelight, and then he capitalized on that. If I wanted to survive the next few minutes I had to keep that part of my psyche tightly controlled, because if I let *it* control *me* Blind Keith would eat me alive, maybe literally.

For a moment, I considered walking away. If I could run far enough, or find a good enough hiding place, I might be able to get away. I'd have to abandon the responsibilities I'd taken on to do it, of course, but I could be safe. I could give up the power that had been thrust upon me, that I'd never really wanted but felt that I had to take, for one reason or another. I could stop dealing with gods and monsters. I could stop having nightmares about these things.

Then I sighed. It was a nice thought, but in the end I knew I wasn't smart enough to back down now.

I opened the door and went inside.

Chapter Eighteen

The staircase was steep, dark, and narrow enough that we had to walk in single file. I went first, with Aiko behind me and Kyra behind her. The werewolf was in fur, and handling steep stairs on four feet was tricky enough that everyone involved would be happier in the back.

It occurred to me that might not have been the best idea. Kyra had plenty of experience in fur, and she was generally better off that way in a fight, but it also tended to bring out the more instinctive parts of a werewolf's personality. That might well leave her more vulnerable to Blind Keith's influence.

Too bad, if so. It was a little late to stop so she could change.

I thought for a moment that the door at the top was locked, but it turned out to just be stuck, the wooden door warped in its frame by the years. I pushed a little harder, forcing it, and it popped open with a groan.

Through the door was an apartment, dimly lit by the light coming in the windows. The floor was carpeted, relatively clean, but cluttered, like the person who lived here had a tendency to just set things down wherever was convenient and then not bother to pick them up again—not a slob, exactly, just someone who didn't necessarily feel a need for the space to be open and tidy.

There were no lights on in the apartment that I could see, but I could hear a quiet, regular creaking from the room to my left. I walked that way, moving carefully and ready to fight or run at any moment. I didn't see Blind Keith being the kind of guy to set up an ambush at a peaceful meeting, but I'd been wrong before.

The other room appeared to be a living room of sorts, small and cozy. Blind Keith was sitting in a rocking chair, and the creaking noise came from the chair as he rocked back and forth. The movement was precisely timed, one cycle every three seconds, like clockwork. It was hard to say in the dim lighting, but I was pretty sure he looked exactly like the other time I'd seen him, a grey figure that was only vaguely humanoid in its shape, with a heavy grey bandage wrapped around its eyes.

I wasn't aware of us having made a sound, but he knew we were there. Of course he did. "Hello, Shrike," he said. "Come in, have a seat."

I stepped into the room, still expecting something to happen at any moment, but nothing did. "Hello, Keith," I said, walking to a small love seat across the room from him. "You wanted to talk?" Kyra and Aiko stayed by the door.

Blind Keith didn't seem to care; his attention was all for me right now. "Yes," he said. "I've been looking into you since our last meeting, Shrike. You piqued my interest."

Oh, man. That couldn't be good.

"You've accomplished impressive things, for your years," he said. "I want to see for myself whether your skills are as great as they say. I think you and I should go hunting."

I opened my mouth, then paused. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but this wasn't it. "I'd have to know a few more details," I said cautiously.

"We shall hunt. What more is there to know?" Blind Keith asked curiously.

I tried to gauge his expression, but it was too dark. In fact...I glanced around the room and confirmed it. Things actually *were* darker than they had been just moments before, and it wasn't because there was less light coming in the windows than there had been. It was like Blind Keith somehow made it harder to see, by his presence alone.

It made sense, I supposed. He was an embodiment of the hunt, and he inspired terror by his very nature. Darkness went along with that, isolating people and removing the comfort of knowing what was around them. Still, it was annoying.

"Well," I said, hoping I wasn't making a very bad mistake, "what would we be hunting?"

He grinned, showing teeth sharper and longer than belonged in a human mouth. "I hadn't decided," he said. "But I am sure we can find worthy prey." He stood and held his hand out to me. "Come."

I hesitated again. I knew that it might make me look weak to someone who I really didn't want thinking of me like that, but I couldn't help it. I'd come into this expecting something like the Sidhe, a clever conversation where I had to watch for hidden traps and shades of meaning. Blind Keith was nothing like that, no subtlety or illusion. He was what he was, and he was about as in-your-face about it as it was possible to be.

What had Gwynn ap Nud said about him? He wasn't Sidhe, wasn't a part of any of the groups or factions, but he was still fae. I could use that.

"A day and a night," I said.

He cocked his head to the side, looking at me curiously. Well, sort of. For a certain value of looking.

"I have obligations to fulfill," I said. "Commitments. Give me twenty-four hours to take care of those first." I smiled a little. "Surely you wouldn't force me to default on the commitments I've made." I was concerned that I might be laying it on a little thick, but better that than the alternative.

This time it was Blind Keith's turn to hesitate a moment. He obviously didn't want to wait, but he was fae, and the one thing that you could say with confidence about the fae was that they were good to their word. They bent the truth, but they didn't lie. They exploited any loophole you left them, but they didn't actually break their word. And, naturally, they respected the same qualities in others.

"Of course not," he said, letting his hand fall back to his side. "I shall collect you in a day and a night, then. Now go carry out your duties, and take those two with you."

Back in Colorado, I checked in on things first. Snowflake was still in surgery, which was good and bad. If she hadn't died yet there was a good chance she'd pull through, but to have been under the knife for so long...well, it wasn't exactly reassuring.

I'd seldom felt so helpless. I wanted to be there with her, helping her, but I knew that I'd only get in the way. She was hurt, maybe dying, and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

I channeled that frustration into action instead. Back in the north side of the city, I set the werewolves to tracking down Katrin and her vampires. I had Kyra, Daniell, and Ryan to look for scents, with Unna there to do any necessary talking. I doubted the selkie's ability to smooth things over with the police, but at the moment that was a minimal concern.

I couldn't help with *that* either. I was middling useless as a tracker, never put the time in to really learn. That was the whole reason I'd gone to get the werewolves for this.

That left me with nothing to do but pace around my office while the work went on around me. Most of the housecarls were either patrolling the area or making sure the hospital Snowflake was in was secure, but Selene and Tindr were at the house, as were the mages and the new, human recruits. The work going on right now was passive in nature, support and logistics, but still absolutely vital. And, again, nothing I could help with. Having the warlord making coffee and running papers back and forth would be more distraction than it was worth, even without the hit to my image it would entail.

All of which meant that over the past thirty minutes I'd gotten better acquainted with that office than I'd ever wanted to be. Ten steps, turn. Ten steps, turn. Rinse and repeat until I thought I'd lose my mind.

When Selene stuck her head in, it was a relief, but I was so full of pent-up frustration that I almost snarled at her anyway. "What is it?" I snapped, turning to face her.

She didn't seem to care. "Someone here to see you," she said. "One of Kikuchi's people."

"Send them up," I said, moving over to my desk and sitting. I tried to relax, let the frustration fade. By the time the door opened, I thought I'd done a pretty decent job of pushing that aimless anger away from the forefront of my mind. I wasn't calm—I wasn't likely to *get* calm until this was all settled, one way or another—but I thought I could carry on a conversation without making the other person think I was about to kill them.

"Hi," Kimiko said, walking in. "Am I interrupting something?" She smirked.

I stared. I'd been expecting a tengu, not the only kitsune in Kikuchi's employ. "He sent *you*?" I asked.

"Yeah," she drawled. "Apparently we've got a working relationship, whatever that means. Plus we've got a bit of a situation on our hands right now, and he didn't want to send one of his soldiers to get you. About that, by the way...he said to tell you he didn't intend to fall back on it so soon, but this is the sort of thing your deal should cover, so if you could give us a hand, that'd be great."

I thought about it for maybe half a second. "Fine," I said. Anything to be moving, to be *doing* something, anything. "Where are we going?"

"So the thing is, we've been helping out where we can," Kimiko said, lounging back against the seat of the limo and sipping from a water bottle. "Nothing obvious, nothing people could point to and say that we were doing your job for you, but we've been active. Feeling people out, pushing on them when we thought they were a little more resistant to the new order than we wanted them to be, spreading the word to the people that would listen to us. That kind of thing."

They had? Interesting. I hadn't heard about anything like that, but it was a hard sort of thing to verify, and under the circumstances it wasn't unlikely that I *wouldn't* have heard about it.

"So what's the problem?" Aiko asked. She and Kimiko had taken one look at each other and made an unspoken agreement to pretend the other wasn't there, apparently. They were cousins, but neither one was terribly fond of her family. You'd think that would give them some common ground, but apparently the opposite was true.

"Well, a while ago Kikuchi noticed that some people were responding weirdly. Like, they seemed really passive, but they wouldn't actually listen. Show up, tell them how it's going to be, and they don't argue, but they don't adjust, either. Like they're only listening to get you to go away. Except it seemed like they *wanted* to agree with him, but they didn't. And they were all in a certain area, too."

It wasn't hard to put that together. "Another faction," I said. "One that's playing the long game. They don't want to make a move yet, but they're ready to."

"That's what he said," she agreed. "So he decided to move on them, see if he could force them into the open. And now...well, we're almost there. You can see it for yourself."

The car coasted to a stop less than a minute later. I reached for the door, but Kjaran was opening it before I could, stepping out of the way and bowing.

I blinked. He'd been *driving*. How the hell had he stopped the car, gotten out, gotten back to the backseat door, and opened the door before I could move my hand a foot?

I got out, suppressing a shiver. Bloody hell, that guy creeped me out.

It wasn't hard to see what *situation* Kimiko had been talking about. A trio of tengu were standing in the road about a hundred feet away, looking like humanoid crows, and carrying swords. That was normal enough for them, but something about their posture made me think they were being more

serious about it than usual. There was a tension there, a tautness that made me think of a cat about to pounce.

Standing opposite them were half a dozen other figures. These things were harder to categorize or identify. They looked human, generally, but each of them had something *wrong* about it. One was grotesquely fat, its frame loaded down with so much excess flesh that it shouldn't have been able to stand. The next was better than six feet tall and skeletally thin, with a tiger-striped beard and his hands tucked into his sleeves. A third looked almost like a ghoul, with limbs too long for its body and the suggestion of a muzzle, with paper-white skin covered in intricate tattoos.

There was no commonality there, nothing that I could point to as a unifying feature. There was something oddly familiar about them, though, something that made me think I should recognize them. I felt a vague sense of foreboding, and hurried my pace a little.

"Ah," the creature in the center said. This one looked perfectly human, even normal, but his *shadow* was that of a hulking, predatory monstrosity. "And there's the man of the hour now."

The tengu turned to face me. "Jarl," one of them said, dipping his head slightly—not a bow or a sign of subservience, more a salute between equals. "I am glad that you could come."

"Dai-tengu," I said. "I feel similarly." Then, to the other creature, "What's going on?"

His smile spread, and the shadow smiled as well, showing teeth that were easily large enough to dwarf those of a werewolf, easily six or seven inches in length. "It's quite simple, really," the thing said. "We owe the both of you a rather serious debt. I'd planned on waiting a little longer before we moved, but I think this will work just fine."

A moment later his body melted and flowed in a burst of spice-scented magic, jasmine and ginger with hints of cardamom. He took on the shape that his shadow had suggested before, a vaguely tiger-shaped creature that stood easily eight feet tall, with massive claws and obscenely oversized teeth. His shadow, though, looked human now.

At that moment, I realized several things. The first was that there was a *reason* these things had seemed familiar. I'd encountered that vaguely floral scented magic before, and it had belonged to things that looked much like these, strange and warped. The second was that I'd accidentally advanced too quickly, leaving Aiko, Kimiko, and Kjaran a ways behind me. The third was that more of the creatures were pouring out of the alleys and doors around us, surrounding me and the tengu, and they didn't look friendly.

With a cacophony of roars, screams, and whistles, the rakshasas charged us.

Chapter Nineteen

Had I been alone, I would quite likely have died in the first few seconds of the fight. I was in rough shape, and my reflexes were slowed by injury and exhaustion. I was guessing the leader of the rakshasas could literally tear me to shreds if he got those claws on me, and I wasn't going to be doing much to stop him.

Kikuchi, on the other hand, was still fresh, and he hadn't gotten his position by being nice and persuasive. Before the rakshasas had taken three steps he was right up in their faces, fighting three or four of them at least and making it look easy. He was fast, faster than me, but more than that he was good. He had the skill to make every action count, moving just enough to get the job done, and often serving multiple purposes with a given movement. He moved out of the way of one attack and it also put him into place to strike another rakshasa from behind; he moved into the swing to put power behind it, and it put him just beyond the reach of a third attacker.

The other two tengu spread out to fight the rakshasas attacking from the sides, from behind us. They weren't as good as Kikuchi, not by a long shot, but they were still deadly quick and skilled. They were holding their own against several rakshasas, not *winning*, but not obviously losing either.

It gave me enough time to think for a second, anyway, and that was enough to save me for the moment. My first priority was getting back to the group. Kjaran and the two kitsune would be able to contribute a great deal here, and I needed the help.

I'd come loaded for a serious fight, this time. I hated to do it, hated to burn through my very limited resources, but it wouldn't do me much good to have my arsenal if I got killed here. So I reached into a pair of pouches I was carrying on my belt, grabbing handfuls of the tiny glass spheres inside, and then threw them into the crowd of rakshasas.

These particular toys were one of my newer ones, something that Jimmy had worked up. He didn't have much in the way of a talent for making things with his magic, certainly not enough to bind the kinds of power I was accustomed to working with into his creations. In a way, though, that had been an advantage for these. They were easy to make, taking him maybe half an hour each once he'd gotten the hang of them, and the fact that they were less impressive also meant that they could be used at closer range without needing to worry.

I threw maybe twenty of the things into the front ranks of the rakshasas, and I threw them *hard*. Some of them hit armor, or they hit the pavement, and the glass shattered. As each one broke, it went off like a large firecracker or a small bomb, a sudden burst of heat and force. Where they were packed together, and I'd thrown enough of the things that they mostly were, each one that detonated managed to break others, triggering something of a chain reaction.

Individually, the explosions weren't that impressive. They wouldn't have killed a normal human, or probably even hurt that much. But there were a lot of them, and it added up.

The front rank of rakshasas pulled up short, screeching in pain and surprise. Several of them stumbled or fell, and even the ones that didn't were slowed, burned or blinded.

The creatures pressing against them from behind had no such handicap, and kept running at full speed. Suddenly rakshasas were tripping over each other, falling to the ground in tangle of limbs, which naturally just slowed the next group even more.

I glanced around as they were trying to recover, making sure that I wasn't about to get mauled from behind. Kikuchi was still handling his side of things admirably, holding off close to a dozen rakshasas on his own. I noticed that he was avoiding engaging their leader, though, and I had a strong suspicion that the creatures he *was* fighting were cannon fodder, sent to die in hopes of just tiring him out a bit.

The other two tengu weren't faring as well. To my right, the rakshasas were pressing closer, pushing the tengu back. The bird-man was bleeding from a gash on his right thigh. It wasn't a light injury; blood was running freely down his leg, splattering the ground with every step. It was the sort of wound that could easily kill if left unchecked, and we didn't exactly have time to fix it.

The other tengu, to my left, was doing even worse, bleeding in several places and surrounded by enemies. As I watched he went down under a warped mass of fur and claws that looked something like the mutated offspring of a tiger and a grizzly, with a little bit of kangaroo thrown in for style.

I turned in that direction, drawing Tyrfin. There was no question of saving the tengu that had just gone down. After a second or two under that rakshasa, I was basically certain that he wasn't going to be getting back up. But we couldn't afford to let that flank collapse; if they could move in and surround us, getting between us, we'd be done.

That meant I had to handle fully half of the circle, keeping the rakshasas *out*. Under normal circumstances I'd have said I had a passable, but not great, chance of doing that. I was more than a match for most of these things, from what I'd seen, but they had numbers, and I wasn't really that great at dealing with large groups.

Now? Things were...not looking so great. I was in bad shape, moving slowly, and I knew I couldn't take anything like the damage I normally could before going down. Unless I handled this just right, things were about to get *ugly*.

I turned and charged them, roaring and waving the sword around like a maniac. The rakshasas turned to face me, many of them snarling and brandishing weapons or claws, several of them falling back a step or two. I pulled back after a short rush, though, well out of their reach. I was really just doing it to make them hesitate while I repositioned, moving into a position closer to the center of the area I was now supposed to be dealing with.

To the side I started to hear gunfire, carefully spaced bursts. That would Aiko and Kimiko, I was guessing, and I knew from experience that they were both *quite* good shots. This was nothing like the spray-and-pray fire my people had employed against the vampires.

The first of the rakshasas were starting to get their feet under them again after I'd tripped them up and burned them. The other rakshasas, the ones that hadn't been knocked down, were starting to press in again. I brandished Tyrfinn again, screaming incoherently, but they didn't seem inclined to slow.

I glanced at the tengu, barely visible under the rakshasa ripping at him. *Sorry about this*, I thought. *But you're done anyway*.

Then I plucked a grenade from my cloak, pulling the pin and tossing it in one motion.

I threw it a fair ways, *behind* the enemy. Most of them didn't seem to have any idea what I'd just done, which I supposed made sense. They weren't exactly natives of this world, after all. There was no particular reason they should be afraid of grenades, and they weren't. They just kept advancing.

That changed a few seconds later, when the explosive went off. The force of the explosion made them stagger towards me, off balance, and knocked a couple off their feet entirely, but that was nothing compared to the *real* damage. *That* came from the shrapnel, hundreds of tiny pieces of metal propelled into them from behind.

I'd put the grenade far enough away that I wasn't affected much, the force not noticeably worse than a moderate headwind, the shrapnel absorbed by the layers of rakshasas in between. In the moment of opportunity that afforded I charged forward again, and this time I *didn't* stop before I reached them.

Tyrfinn came down and cut cleanly through the first rakshasa's spine, almost chopping the thing in half from shoulder to hip. I wrenched the sword back out and the thing fell, giving me room to keep cutting, wide slashes that opened bloody gashes in their flesh or lopped limbs off entirely. I wasn't trying to put any one of them down, so much as I wanted to hurt a lot of them, debilitating them and keeping their attention firmly focused on *me*.

Of course, that had the entirely predictable effect that they were attacking me, and not just a little. They came at me with fists, claws, axes and blades, and I wasn't exactly in a great position to be defending myself. The grenade, coupled with the sheer brutality of my initial attack, bought me a bit of time and space to work with, but I was still dangerously vulnerable.

My armor did a lot to mitigate the damage, and I managed to fight through the rest, ignoring it. It was a hindrance, don't get me wrong; the injuries made me slower, weaker, clumsier. But I forced myself to keep moving anyway, keep fighting.

That lasted for maybe four or five seconds, until one of the less humanoid rakshasas got its claws on me. They hadn't been having much luck penetrating the armor to that point, and maybe this one realized that, because it took a different tack. Rather than try to slash at me, it put one claw on either side of my torso and *squeezed*, crushing me between them.

I can ignore a lot of pain. More than is healthy, really.

Having my already-broken ribs squeezed by four hundred pounds of superhuman muscle?

That was a bit much even for me. Tyrfing hit the ground, and I'd have screamed if I could get the breath for it.

A moment later I found myself being flung through the air for the second time in the past day.

The rakshasa didn't—couldn't, probably—throw me anywhere near as hard as Katrin had. When the vampire had done it I'd flown through the air like a fastball, and hit a wall hard enough to break bones. This was more of a lob, and while I did still fly into a wall, it was more of a gentle slap than the crushing impact of earlier.

Not that it mattered too much. My ribcage had been in bad shape already, and that squeeze had been *hellish*. It hurt to breathe, and sitting up was almost beyond me, even with a wall to lean against. That rakshasa's attack hadn't been all that impressive, really, but it had been almost perfect for exacerbating the injuries I already had.

Looking at the fight, I wasn't sure whether what I'd done had made enough of a difference or not. The kitsune were putting a lot of bullets downrange, and some of the rakshasas were obviously suffering for it, bleeding or stumbling. Kjaran had also reached the crowd, and was currently laying waste.

Kjaran was the odd duck of my housecarls, in a great many ways, and one of those was showing up now. He wasn't all that great of a fighter, not that skilled, not that quick. But he was insanely strong even by jötnar standards, and in this situation, up against a crowd of brutes even less skilled than he was, that was enough to tip the scale.

He was carrying an oversized club that one of the rakshasas had dropped, and swinging it in wide arcs, crushing rakshasas and tossing them aside with each motion. Occasionally one of them got close enough to tag him, and I was pretty sure he'd taken a couple of rounds from the kitsune, but he didn't seem to care. His sheer bulk made the wounds almost inconsequential by comparison, the equivalent of taking a knife to a grizzly, and he was stoic enough to just not care about them.

Kikuchi had also fallen back a few steps, until he was standing beside the other tengu. The two of them were a marvel to watch, every movement perfectly in sync with each other. It was beautiful, more like ballet than a fight to the death. The contrast with Kjaran was...impressive, although I wasn't sure who was winning that particular contest. The tengu were beautiful to watch, but the jotun was dominating the battlefield.

Regardless, one thing that was certain was that the fight was going better for us than the rakshasas had anticipated. They'd caught us by surprise and they'd had the advantage of position, but now that we'd weathered the initial onslaught, things weren't going so great for them. They weren't having much luck cracking Kikuchi's defenses, Kjaran was demolishing their weaker soldiers, and they'd only managed to take *one* of us out of the fight permanently. I supposed they could turn and come at

me next, but I was a good distance away. To hit me in any kind of numbers they'd have to turn their backs to the tengu and the giant, and I didn't think that was a very good idea.

So *naturally* that was when they chose to change the nature of the game.

All at once, around half of the rakshasas still standing seemed to disappear. I could tell that they weren't actually gone—I could still smell that spice-scented magic, and I could feel the disturbance in the air when they moved, sort of—but for all practical purposes they were invisible.

I noticed that the ones still standing were all those that looked more human, less monstrous, and cursed myself. I'd thought that Kikuchi was avoiding their leader earlier, but it had been the other way around. This whole time the stronger rakshasas had been biding their time, waiting for the opportunity to strike and make it count, and they'd just seen it.

I tried to track them, but it was hard. Following somebody by keeping track of the air they displaced when they moved was hard enough when it was calm and I was feeling good. At the moment I was a mess, physically and mentally, and there were a *lot* of people moving around, making it hard to get a read on things.

I pushed myself to my feet, leaning heavily against the wall, and lifted Tyrfing again. I knew it was a waste of time, though. It was almost impossible to fight back when you couldn't see the thing you were fighting, and in the state I was in I wasn't going to be intimidating much of anyone.

They weren't coming after me, though. A moment later a deep wound appeared on Kjaran's leg, slicing halfway through his leg at the back of the knee. Blood poured out and he hit the ground instantly, but he didn't make a sound, and he didn't stop. On the contrary, the injury seemed to provoke even more ridiculous heights of strength from the giant. He lashed out with that club two-handed in a broad semicircle, and I could hear the *crunch* of impact from where I was standing.

I was guessing he'd hit more than one of them, but only one appeared, flying through the air. The side of its chest was crushed in almost to its spine, and its arm was flopping around like a length of rope, it had been broken in so many places.

I stared. With damage like that, no wonder it couldn't maintain its invisibility. Even for a rakshasa, that blow must have been almost instantly lethal.

They wouldn't have stopped there, though, and Kjaran didn't seem to be taking any more hits. I followed the direction of travel the rakshasas must have taken, looking past the giant to the two kitsune.

Just in time to see Aiko lifted into the air and thrown by an invisible force. They'd learned how to deal with our armor, it seemed. They couldn't penetrate it, couldn't cut it, but they were strong and the armor didn't make the *person* inside any tougher.

Aiko was lighter than I was, and the throw was correspondingly harder. She hit streetlight *hard*, and the way her body wrapped around the pole made me terrified that this throw had done what I'd thought Katrin's had, and broken her back.

A moment later, before I could so much as take a step, a set of holes appeared in Kimiko's abdomen. It was the strangest thing; I couldn't see the rakhasa that had done the damage, but the injury itself was easily visible, meaning that I could clearly see inside her as it happened. Five holes, evenly spaced in a way that suggested a claw, and they punched deep enough that I could *see* them punching into her intestine. Kimiko cried out and doubled over, almost falling.

The wounds started to bleed a couple of seconds later, suggesting that the claws had been removed. It wasn't a whole lot of blood; the claws were narrow. It didn't matter. Her intestines were clearly perforated, in multiple places, and that was the kind of injury that killed slowly, painfully, and reliably. It was an ugly, *ugly* way to die, and even in a working hospital there wasn't necessarily all that much they could do about it.

The leader of the rakhasas appeared next to her, still in his monstrous form. He was holding her up with one claw, but he waved at us with the other, sending droplets of blood flying.

Then he picked Kimiko up and slung her over his shoulder, eliciting a scream of agony from the kitsune. He took off down the road, moving at a pace that I doubted I could match even if I were in good shape. Snowflake could probably have caught him, but she wasn't going to be doing any running any time soon.

Well, *that* went bad quickly.

Chapter Twenty

"You're sure you're okay?" I asked, for maybe the fifteenth time.

Aiko rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm sure," she said. "Still. I'm *fine*, Winter. It just hurt a lot, it didn't break anything."

"Okay," I said. Turning around, I found myself about eighteen inches away from Kikuchi, and flinched away a little. "What the hell," I said, maybe a little more loudly than I'd intended. "What are you doing?"

"She is uninjured," he said. "We must go. Matsuda Kimiko requires assistance."

I eyed him. "You do realize they only took her to use as bait to lure you in, right? I mean, she's probably already dead anyway."

"I know," he said. "But they chose their ploy well. I cannot ignore this."

I sighed. I could probably back out of this—it wasn't like I had any personal responsibility for Kimiko. But I wanted to earn some goodwill with Kikuchi, and ditching him when the going got rough wasn't the way to do that.

And besides. I'd *seen* some of the things rakshasas did to the people they took. Death, even a slow and nasty death from peritonitis, was a kindness by comparison. I didn't know Kimiko that well, but I still liked her too much to leave her to that.

"Fine," I said. "Can you track her?"

He narrowed his eyes slightly. "No."

"Agh," I said, almost growling, and pulled out my cell phone. Thanks to a high-quality impact . "Fine. Give me a few minutes to get some people down here."

Maybe fifteen minutes later, a limo pulled up and disgorged a large pile of fur. The werewolves stood up and started sorting themselves out, looking around.

"Rakshasas," I said, while they were still getting their bearings. "They'll smell like humans, for the most part, but with weird tones. They started down that road, moving pretty fast. I want to know where they went, soonest."

Watching werewolves tracking prey was always impressive. This time, the rakshasas hadn't made any attempt to hide their tracks, and it was even more impressive as a result. The three of them raced down the middle of the street, moving at almost full speed and only occasionally pausing to sniff at the ground. Occasionally one would bark at the others, using a mixture of sounds and the pack bonds

to communicate surprisingly complex ideas. On the rare occasions that one of them lost the trail, one of the others would bring them back on track within seconds.

All in all, it took barely fifteen minutes for them to track the rakshasas to their lair a couple of miles away, and the only reason it took that long was that they had to wait for us.

And that was when the problems started.

"A shelter," I said, staring at the building. I was feeling a peculiar, cold and remote sort of anger. It was not a feeling that heralded good things. "They're in a homeless shelter."

"Looks like it," Aiko said cheerfully. "Not a bad move, if you think about it. Easy to hide, easy to defend."

"Kikuchi," I said, "do you remember the humans they had in their lair last time? The ones who decided to kill themselves rather than surrender?"

"I remember."

"Do you think there's any way to fix them?"

The tengu looked thoughtful, to the extent that I could read any emotion on his face. "I researched the matter afterwards," he said. "In some detail. I could not find any documented cases of the condition being repaired or reversed."

I nodded slowly. "Okay," I said. "And you're sure they're in there?"

Kyra barked a strong affirmative, and one of the other wolves bobbed its head in a nod.

"Okay," I said again. "New plan. We get Kimiko out of there, and then we level the place. Any objections?"

"None," Kikuchi said. "But I am curious how you plan to achieve either of these objectives."

"First step," I said, "is for Aiko to call and tell Pellegrini that we would appreciate any explosives he can spare. You take care of that; I'm going to see if I can get an idea of the layout of this place."

I fell into my magic without waiting for a response. It felt easy, easier than normal, even, and strangely calming. There was something about that disassociated anger that I was feeling that made it oddly easy to take the next step and dissociate myself from my body as well.

They must have had some idea what I could do, because an effort had been made to clear the building of animals. There were no dogs, no cats, no foxes or raptors. But the shelter hadn't been maintained very well, and there were plenty of food scraps and garbage lying around. No amount of effort could totally clean the place from rodents, and they hadn't thought to cover all the windows.

I drifted through the various rodents, the rats and mice that were hiding in the walls and closets of the building, trying to get an idea of what we were dealing with. I did, sort of, but it was frustratingly limited. I had a picture of the layout, where the walls were, where the closets were, but the creatures were trying to hide, staying away from the rakshasas and their human slaves, when those were the places I needed to know about the most. I could see a little more through the eyes of a handful of pigeons and gulls looking in through the windows, but there were still large sections of the building that were totally unknown to me.

I didn't know, and I needed to know.

This kind of magic had always had some odd effects on my mind. It made me feel disconnected, from both the passage of time and my own emotions. Thus, although only a few seconds passed, I had plenty of time to consider what was happening. I found myself thinking again about how the world just didn't want to cooperate with me. It was one step forward, two steps back.

Had this been arranged? Set up with the intention of forcing me into the exact position I was in? It seemed plausible. Loki or his ilk interfering to force me to this point, to the *choice*. Or it might have been coincidence. The universe had never needed help to screw me over, after all.

Either way, the facts were the same. I needed to know, and I didn't know, and my usual approach wasn't good enough. The answer was obvious, and I normally wouldn't have gone anywhere near it, but it would *work*, and I was desperate.

Cold comfort, that. Was there ever a monster that *didn't* start out with that justification? But then again, I'd hardly feel any better if I quit now. If the sacrifices I'd already made were for nothing. There was just no winning this game.

At that thought, I felt a distant stirring of that same anger from earlier, cold and remote.

At the same time, I slid my mind more completely into one of the rats in the building. Look around, blink, try to get used to a radically different set of perceptions. I was accustomed to working with scent as much as sight, which made it easier to adapt.

I urged the rat out of its hiding place, pushing it out into the open. It resisted, refusing to do something so obviously detrimental to its own health, but I pushed harder, putting more magic into it.

The rat's resistance shattered, and I slid further into its body, taking control. I felt its fear in the back of my mind as I moved us out, a little unsteady on our feet. I left enough of myself drifting to maintain a mental map of the building, using that to guide our steps through the hallways. I did take care to keep us to the corners of the rooms, places that we weren't as likely to be seen. I was willing to take a risk with the rat's life, if that was what it took to get the information I needed, but I was going to do everything I could to minimize that risk.

We passed rakshasas, and I tried to remember their locations, mapping them out within the building. There were a lot of them, and it was hard to keep track of them all. My memory wasn't *that* good, especially when I was already managing so many tasks with my magic.

There were humans, as well, in large numbers. As I'd suspected, they were only technically still alive. All of them that we saw had the stiffness, the wooden, puppet-like manner of the rakshasa-enslaved humans I'd seen before. They were barely even people, at this point, and from what Kikuchi had said there was nothing whatsoever I could do to fix them.

Finally, after far too long of searching, I caught the scent I'd been looking for, blood and feces with a hint of something odd to it, something *other*. I pushed the rat to follow that path, and at the end of the hallway we found a small room that was the source of the odor.

The door was closed, but I wasn't about to be stymied by that, not when I'd already gone so far. At my direction the rat started chewing at the wall. It was cheaply constructed, as might be predicted, and we managed to get a hole opened fairly quickly. It wasn't large, not large enough to move through, but it was enough to get a look inside.

Kimiko was tied up at the far side of the room. Her hands were tied behind her back and fixed to a ring in the wall, just below her waist height. I knew from experience how uncomfortable that position was. You couldn't stand without having to bend over backward, and you couldn't lie down or kneel without pulling your shoulders out of socket. That left you with the choice of either standing up and arching your back to an uncomfortable position, half-kneeling and putting your legs under the strain, or lying down and letting all your weight dangle from your shoulders.

Under normal circumstances that was a stress position. It was torture, not a showy kind of torture, but torture all the same.

In Kimiko's condition? It was worse. *Much* worse. I wasn't sure how she was able to maintain the posture, and it was obviously putting her in agony to do so. It wouldn't be much longer until she couldn't do it at all.

There were a handful of rakshasas standing in the room, standing around and conversing quietly in a language I couldn't place. There were a couple of humans as well, standing quietly without reacting to what was happening.

If I'd had any doubts before, that settled them.

Maybe five minutes after that, I slipped inside the building, wrapped in my cloak of shadows. Aiko would have been the better choice for this, for a variety of reasons, but I was the one who knew where to go. My understanding of the building's layout was solid, but it wasn't the kind of thing that I could translate into a map or a description.

I knew where to go, which hallways I could take without alerting the rakshasas. It required me to take a meandering route, but that was more of a feature than a bug, all things considered.

I did pass human slaves occasionally, lugging heavy loads around, for the most part. They didn't react to my presence. There wasn't enough personality left in them to have initiative, and evidently their instructions hadn't covered what to do in case of an intruder. That was good. I could have dealt with it if they had responded, but this was...neater.

Then, as I'd known I would, I reached a small, out of the way closet with two rakshasas in it. I wasn't sure what they were doing, but I recognized the attitude. People shirking work had a certain attitude, even when one of them was an anthropomorphic tiger and the other could have passed for the Elephant Man's cousin.

They weren't in my way. Not exactly. But I had to walk by that closet to get where I was going, and that meant there was a chance I'd be seen.

I hesitated for a moment. Just a moment. I'd killed, a lot, but usually it was in the heat of the moment. I wasn't accustomed to this kind of work. It was...cold.

Then I remembered what they'd done to Kimiko. I remembered their slaves, burned so badly that they could hardly be recognized as human, but still moving, desperate to serve their masters.

Yeah. All things considered, I could be cold.

I stepped into the closet. From their perspective I suspect it was just like watching an animate shadow move through the door, a vague silhouette that hinted at metal and suggested at the wolfish mask of the armor, but showed nothing clearly.

Except the sword. That was very clear.

I cut them down both down in instants. The tiger-shaped rakshasa almost managed to stand before I took its head off; the other didn't even manage that. I stood over the bodies for a moment, my hands dripping with blood, before I sheathed Tyrfin. The cursed sword was clean. The sword was always clean.

Moving on, I reached the door I had been going for this whole time. I had managed to avoid causing any alarm thus far, but the time for stealth and secrecy was done. I kicked the door and continued inside without pausing.

There was a brief pause as the rakshasas tried to adapt to what was happening. I didn't allow them the opportunity. As soon as I was inside I darted at the first one and ran it through with Tyrfin. I preferred decapitation when I could get it, but the way the thing was standing made that awkward this time, and stabbing something through the center of mass with Tyrfin was almost as good.

The next tried to create a kinetic barrier, using magic to keep me at bay. It might as well not have bothered. Tyrfin cracked its shield, and then took its head off on the backswing.

The third went for a preemptive attack instead. Claws and teeth hit hard, bruising and eliciting a burst of pain from the broken ribs, but it wasn't able to actually penetrate the armor, and it wasn't smart or informed enough to go for an attack that would actually be effective. I stabbed it, coming in from the side under its ribs. It collapsed on the ground in a rapidly-spreading pool of blood when I took the sword out, and I removed its head on the way by.

The fourth ran rather than fight, bolting for the door. I ignored that one, the same as I ignored the humans. They weren't important right now.

Making it to Kimiko, I found her barely conscious, almost dangling from the ropes. She was still supporting enough of her weight to keep from dislocating her shoulders, but it was obvious that she was in *bad* shape.

I cut her down and caught her before she could fall, holding her up. I was scared that I might be exacerbating her injuries by moving her like this, but it was better than the alternative.

Holding her in one arm, I turned to face the door, keeping Tyrfin drawn in my spare hand. Standing like that, I started to pull magic to myself, forcing it into the shape I wanted.

About a minute before I could finish, the door opened again. This time the leader of the rakshasas stepped through, in his humanoid form. As before, his shadow was hideous, something that by all rights should belong to a monstrosity ten feet tall with claws and teeth that put a tiger to shame.

He was carrying a young woman in one hand, holding a knife to her throat with the other. She was maybe nineteen, and unlike the other humans I'd seen here, she wasn't wooden or emotionless at *all*. On the contrary, she was obviously terrified, crying and choking.

"Hello, jarl," the rakshasa said. "I thought you might try something like this. You see my pet here? There are more like her in this building. Seven of them, in fact. Unless I tell my associates otherwise, they will all die in pain over the course of the next, oh, five minutes, now, I believe."

"Let me guess," I said, sheathing Tyrfin. I continued to focus most of my attention on the spell, weaving the last few strands of magic into place. "This is one of those 'unless I give you the kitsune' ultimatums?"

"No, you can keep her," he said. "I just want you to leave us be. My primary conflict is with the tengu, not you or the kitsune. Quite a bargain for you, I'd think."

I looked at the girl. She was terrified, hurt, lost. Alone.

How many of the rakshasa's other victims would be just as scared and hurt, if they had the choice?

"Not worth it," I said quietly.

After that, several things happened almost simultaneously. The first was that I finished my spell, an Otherside portal snapping into existence right in front of me. At about the same time, the rakshasa dragged his knife across the girl's throat, smiling the whole time.

I pushed the button on the device I'd grabbed when I put the sword away, and then stepped through the portal, pulling Kimiko with me. The last thing I saw before I crossed over was the girl lying on the floor in a pool of her own blood, twitching a little as her life flowed away.

I ended the flow of power to the portal as soon as we were both across, drawing Tyrting and cutting through the magic as well just for good measure. I wanted to be very sure it was closed.

Five seconds later, the detonators which had been inserted into the blocks of C-4 which I had scattered in and around the building went off.

Chapter Twenty-One

"I'm sorry," I said. "For a lot of things, I guess, but mostly because I wasn't here when you needed me to be. The rest of it I can mostly make excuses for. That one is...it's harder."

I hadn't expected a response, and I didn't get one. I started to reach out to touch her, but my hand fell back to my side without touching fur. Snowflake's condition was still delicate enough that a careless touch might cause serious damage. The doctors hadn't even wanted me to be in the same room with her, but they hadn't really tried to keep me out. Probably they'd known better.

"They tell me you're completely out," I continued, not looking directly at her. "Can't hear a word I'm saying. They're good at what they do, and my life isn't storybook enough for you to be awake in there and this whole thing to just be a bad dream or whatever. So I guess I'm mostly talking to myself here." I snorted. "You know, in case I wasn't crazy enough already."

I risked another glance at Snowflake, and promptly looked away again. There was something profoundly *wrong* about seeing a husky lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to the tubes and wires associated with life support. It was surreal, in the worst way.

When that husky was Snowflake? That was worse. That was so much worse.

"Anyway," I continued, injecting some forced cheer into my voice. "Kimiko's still alive, I hear, which is some consolation. I don't know if she's going to stay that way. I mean, I *saw* how deep those claws went, and I smelled it when I was getting her out of there. She's got shit in her blood, literally, and that's the kind of thing you don't come back from. But Kikuchi knows a doctor who he seems to think can handle it, so she'll probably be fine."

Unlike you. I didn't say it, and she couldn't hear it, but it was all I could think of.

"The neurosurgeon had a tricky time adjusting to working on a dog," I said. I felt like I was about to cry, but my voice was even more cheerful than before. I wasn't sure why I bothered pretending, when I was the only one who could hear me. Maybe it just made it feel less real. "But apparently the basic work was the same, so he could handle it all right. Apparently you're stable, so unless something goes really badly wrong you aren't about to die. That's good news, right?"

Still no answer, no matter how much I wanted there to be.

"The bad news," I said, more quietly now, "is that none of them seem to think you're going to wake up. They don't come right out and say it, but they make sure I know they're thinking it. You aren't waking up, or if you do, you won't be *you*. You'll be missing things. Basic functions, personality traits, memories. *You*."

For several seconds the only sounds came from the gentle whir and hum of machinery. Monitors, ventilators, intravenous tubes and God knew what else. I wasn't even sure what half of the machines were supposed to be doing.

"I'm not going to let that happen," I said.

The words sounded casual. They weren't. The rest of what I'd said had been at least partially intended for Snowflake, on the off chance that she wasn't quite as comatose as they thought she was.

But that last line? That was for me.

I was *not* going to let that happen. To hell with the price.

I sat in that little room and listened to the machines for another five minutes or so, then stood and left.

I pulled my phone out and dialed a number from memory. "Any news?" I asked the moment they picked up.

"Plenty," Selene said. "Have you gotten any sleep?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "Tried a while ago, but I wasn't going to get any rest, so I got back up."

"You're just making it worse when you finally crash," she said disapprovingly.

"Honestly, if I live long enough for that to be a concern I'll be pretty happy. Now. News?"

"Right," she said, and I could almost see her grabbing her notebook to read out of. Except that Selene didn't need notes; if her memory wasn't perfect, it was close enough to fool me. "You remember the mage that contacted us a while ago? Guy named Jack?"

"Yeah," I said. "I told you to set up a meeting, right?"

"That's the one. Well, I just finalized the meeting. Three hours from now, at Pryce's. Does that still work for you?"

"Sure, fine," I said absently, getting into the car. I was driving my SUV right now, since the armored truck was still out of commission and there was no way in hell I was driving a limousine. Selene had wanted to send me with a chauffeur, but I'd put my foot down at that. There was too much work to be done right now to tie up one of the housecarls on driving me around. "Next?"

"Next," she said. "The werewolves reported in. Apparently they think they've tracked the vampires down to their lair, or at least to *a* lair. Some fancy house on the north side of the city, according to the selkie."

"All right," I said, glancing at the sky. Sunset was getting close, not immediate, but close enough that we'd have to push to get anything meaningful done before night. And I really didn't want to attack a vampire lair in the night.

But I also didn't want to give them another night to attack me. And I might not have another chance to take them out in the daytime. My twenty-four hour reprieve from Blind Keith was set to end just after dawn, and I wasn't going to count on him giving me a second longer than I'd bargained for.

"All right," I said again, more firmly. "I'm going to go clean out that lair. Send some of the housecarls to meet me. Kyi, Vigdis, and whoever they think is a good fit."

"You got it, Boss," she said. "Give 'em hell."

Even knowing what I did, it was hard to believe *this* was the secret lair of the vampires that had been causing me so many problems for so long.

"You're sure?" I asked quietly, looking at the small semi-detached house. It looked so innocuous.

Kyra barked. Everything about her, her tone, her posture, it all indicated extreme confidence. If the vampires hadn't gone into that building, they'd done a really spectacular job of setting up the fake. Theoretically they thought they'd killed me, which made putting that kind of work into setting up a trap a pretty extreme thing to do.

Not that I had any intention of taking chances. Once Kyra had confirmed it, I signaled the housecarls, and they started carrying boxes over to the house. They set the boxes down at regular intervals around the walls, fiddled with them a bit, then walked back to the semi for more boxes. Vigdis threw rocks at several of the second-floor windows, hard enough to shatter them, and then followed them up with slightly smaller boxes.

After a few minutes, the housecarls stopped and moved back to where I was sitting with Aiko and Kyra. A human I employed but didn't recognize in the least got into the semi and drove away, moving fast and not looking back.

Kyi handed me a remote control with a twisted smile. "Whenever you're ready, jarl," she said.

I looked at the remote. It was very simple, just a black box with one big red button. The button was covered by a plastic shield. This was not the kind of button you wanted to push by accident.

Were there people in there other than vampires? Almost certainly, I thought. I had an idea of how vampires operated, and one of the big things was that they were extremely vulnerable in the daytime. And they *knew* it, and they hated it. For beings who were otherwise so incredibly powerful, the idea of being utterly helpless to defend themselves against their enemies had to be a sore spot the likes of which I could hardly imagine.

So they took steps to mitigate that vulnerability. Traps were obvious, but sometimes you needed something more than just an automated response.

And that meant minions. I wasn't sure just what form those minions would take, although I could make some guesses. There would be humans, both as servants and as food. There would be augmented creatures, things that resembled mortal creatures but were invested with power by the vampires, making them more dangerous. And there would be some hirelings, ghouls or low-ranking fae, something like that.

Minions. That was all I really needed to know. Some of them probably deserved to die, some of the probably didn't, and there wasn't a whole lot I could do to sort the one from the other. Not without taking a hell of a lot of risks.

In a lot of ways, it was the same choice I'd been faced with infiltrating the rakshasas' lair, or attacking Natalie way back when. I had to weigh the certainty of killing some innocents against the risk of much, much greater harm.

And, in the end, I knew that I was going to make the same choice I'd made those times.

I flipped the shield up and pushed that big red button.

These weren't the same as the explosives I'd used on the rakshasas. Those had been military-grade plastic explosives provided by a major crime lord. I didn't have his connections, and I hadn't wanted to purchase more from him. The last batch had been enough of a strain on my funds, to say nothing of the risk of lowering his opinion of me. If I had to rely on Pellegrini for more than very occasional assistance, he wouldn't have much reason to tolerate me.

Fortunately, while I didn't have his network of criminal contacts, I did have some connections of my own. I owned, through various shell companies and aliases, a variety of companies throughout the city, and I had shares in a lot more. One of the ones I owned outright was a construction company that did a lot of demolition work. They were actually more regional than local, but Tindr had ensured that they had a warehouse in the city, giving me ready access to construction supplies.

And, more importantly for my present purposes, access to demolition supplies. Including explosives.

When I hit that button, the charges went off. I was sitting a couple hundred feet away, but the force was still enough to push me back, and even with my ears plugged and muffled the sound was painfully loud. It wasn't just the explosion, although that was loud as hell. On top of that, though, there was the sound of shattering glass, breaking wood and bricks.

And screaming. There was some of that too.

I watched with a sort of horrified fascination as the building suddenly tilted to the side. The explosions had been precisely calibrated to damage the building, destroy a lot of it and probably kill the people inside, but not actually collapse it.

Even the most precisely arranged demolitions charges weren't exactly surgical instruments, and some of the nearby buildings were also damaged, some of them quite badly. We'd evacuated them beforehand, but it was still pretty devastating to whoever happened to live in those buildings. Their whole lives, just wiped away.

And the worst part?

I'd do it again without a second thought.

"Come on," I said, once the dust had settled. I got out of the car and glanced at the sky one more time, confirming that we still had time. It was hard to say exactly how *much* time, since "dusk" was a measurement with a certain amount of room for error, but I was guessing we had at least half an hour, at most twice that.

The housecarls fell in behind me as I walked up to the door. It had been left untouched by the blast, deliberately. That way I could kick it open and stride inside. It looked more badass than just stepping inside.

That sounded like a small thing, but it wasn't. I had my housecarls here, and I knew for a fact that there were a ton of people watching, Innocent bystanders, people we'd evicted, spies and members of other factions, they were all watching. If I came across as a badass, as someone they'd rather not cross, that was another brick on the wall.

I walked inside with Tyrfing out in my hand, watching for any movement. Many of the interior walls were sagging oddly, the studs and drywall shattered, but things were stable. Mostly.

I wondered idly whether blowing the place up first had really been a good idea. I was starting to have my doubts.

We'd been inside for less than thirty seconds when I heard a doorknob rattling to the left. I walked that way and found the door in question, a solid oak door barred from the outside. I chopped through the bar and pulled it open, revealing an emaciated looking man. "Thank God," he said. "You have to get me out of here."

I stepped inside. I hadn't sheathed Tyrfing.

He noticed. "Hey," he said, backing away from me now. "Hey, man, I'm innocent. I didn't do anything! They just kidnapped me, and...you've gotta get you out of here, man! I'm innocent!"

"Probably," I agreed. "But I don't have a way to tell for sure, and I can't take the chance. Not with half a million lives riding on it."

Tyrfing lashed out and took his head off in a heartbeat. It was as quick and painless and merciful as I could arrange. It was still very lethal.

"No survivors," I said quietly, turning back to the housecarls. They looked back at me impassively. The only exception was Vigdis, who grinned like a kid in a candy shop.

There was a reason that I'd asked for her by name. The other housecarls were soldiers, and they could be brutal, but they still had limits. They had honor, and morals, even if they didn't line up well with most of humanity's.

Vigdis, though? She only understood morals as something that other people had, and even that was a vague conception.

I watched as they scattered, moving through the house to look for anything still moving or a way downstairs. I didn't for a moment believe that the vampires were aboveground during the day.

"Pretty brutal," Aiko commented. "Killing everyone like this."

"Yeah," I said. "That's the point. Do it like this, the next person that thinks about challenging me remembers this and changes their mind. Somebody that will do this is somebody you don't want to fuck with."

"That's cold," she said.

"Yes," I said. "It is."

On my other side, Kyra whined quietly and pressed against me, butting her head against my thigh. I dropped one hand and scratched her ears absently.

It felt good, in a way, to have her there. To have a friend there. I loved Aiko, but at the same time she was tied up in this, the violence and the magic and the ugliness. Our relationship had started with blood and death, and for all that I loved her there would always be that element of darkness to it.

I loved Aiko, and she loved me, but at the same time, she'd fallen in love with Fenris's child, a man who walked hand in hand with monsters and left death and destruction in his wake.

Kyra, though, knew me back when I was just...well, *me*. It felt oddly comforting to have her there with me as I took the next step away from that person, and into the person I was becoming.

Nothing else was said as we waited for the housecarls to finish their work. It only took a few minutes for them to start returning to the room where we were waiting. Most of them were stained with blood. None of it was theirs.

"Found a staircase hidden in the closet," Kyi said. Her hands and clothing were clean, but that didn't mean much for Kyi. She was an assassin at heart, and it's a clumsy assassin that gets blood on herself.

"Good," I said. "Let's do this."

The staircase had been hidden behind stacks of folded laundry, and it was opened by a hidden switch. I wasn't sure how Kyi had managed to find it, but I didn't ask. It didn't matter, and it was better for my image if I seemed to already *know*.

The staircase was narrow and steep, totally unlit. Most of the housecarls had headlamps, though, which was good enough for us. None of us needed as much light as a human. At the end of the staircase was another door, not unlike that on a werewolf safe room. This, though, was meant to serve a very different purpose. It kept things *out*, rather than *in*.

I eyed it for a few moments, then stepped up and drew Tyrfinn again. I chopped through the hinges, then through the lock, and kicked it as hard as I could.

The door weighed close to five hundred pounds, I was guessing, so it didn't fly through the air or anything. But I did knock it out of the frame, and when it hit the ground, it was *loud*. That was good enough for me.

Stepping over it, I saw a group of people standing up from a table across the room. It looked we'd caught them in the middle of dinner, and maybe a game of poker as well.

I didn't wait to see what they would do, just pulled another stored spell out of my cloak and threw it at them. This one was more traditional, a simple, high-energy fire spell.

They burned. They burned hot and fast. People were screaming, several of them dropping to the ground and rolling in an attempt to put it out, but it wasn't working. This was more like napalm than normal fire, and nothing that simple was going to stop it. One person tried to run. Kyi shot him in the leg with an arrow before he'd made it three steps, and he hit the ground like the rest of them.

It was only a few seconds before the screaming and moving stopped, and the fires were just burning peacefully. I walked forward without hesitation, gathering cold to myself until Aiko and Kyra were shivering just from my presence. The fires died as I came close to them, deprived of the heat they needed to keep burning.

I decapitated one of the bodies with Tyrfinn as I passed, to make sure he was dead and as a statement. The housecarls followed suit as they passed the corpses, ensuring that each one really *was* a corpse.

The vampires were in the next room. To my amusement, they weren't in coffins, but rather lying on expensive, antique beds. It made sense, I supposed.

I was just glad they were really here. To have done all this and have it be a false alarm...I didn't want to think about that.

There were fifteen vampires in that room. I removed the first one's head with a single stroke, then stabbed it through the heart. There was no reaction at all, but presumably it was dead for good

now. We'd take the corpses with us when we left, just in case. I was planning to burn them, mix the ashes with salt and have them blessed by several priests each, and then scatter them widely. Overkill, maybe, but from what I'd seen overkill wasn't even a meaningful term when it came to vampires.

Kyi, Aiko, and Kyra all stood with me and watched as the rest of the housecarls finished the job, decapitating each of the vampires in turn and stacking the bodies in the middle of the room like cordwood. They did the job quickly and efficiently, until the only vampire left was the one on the largest bed, set on a small dais.

I approached that one myself. This was their leader, evidently, and that meant it was my job to handle it. Image, again. This vampire was female, not Katrin, unfortunately, but apparently one of her high-ranking lieutenants, if she had this many vampires under her command.

She was also awake, at least a little, watching my approach with milky eyes. I didn't think she could move, really, but she was clearly aware of her surroundings. We'd waited a little too long, maybe. Or maybe she was just stronger than the rest. I'd always suspected that the strongest vampires were more *inconvenienced* than actually incapacitated by the sunlight.

"You're a monster," she said. Her voice was a dry rasp, a mockery of what a voice was supposed to sound like. She sounded accusatory, and I thought she might know exactly what I'd done. She might very well have been watching this whole time, by one means or another.

I smiled a broken, ghastly smile. I was just as glad that no one could see it under the helmet. It was bad enough to *feel* that expression on my face.

"I am what you made me," I said, still smiling.

Tyrfing came down one more time, and I turned away from the body.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Good evening," I said, dropping into the chair. "You must be Jack."

The man sitting across from me grinned easily and nodded. "That's right," he said. "And that makes you the jarl." His voice was respectful, but there was a hint of mockery underneath.

"So why do you want to work for me?" I asked. "I don't get a lot of volunteers."

He shrugged. "It seems like you have plenty of my kind of work," he said. "And my last job fell through rather suddenly."

"Your kind of work," I said cautiously. "What is that, exactly?"

He smiled at me, a vaguely lopsided smile that didn't touch his eyes, and pulled a pistol out of his pocket, setting it on the table. "Three guesses," he said. "And they all involve this."

I nodded slowly. It was a bit of an aggressive way to introduce yourself, but that didn't match the rest of his attitude. He seemed casual, almost strangely so. Aside from that one action, I didn't get the macho vibe off of him.

A test, then? Seeing how I reacted? It seemed plausible.

"You carry a gun," I said calmly. "That's unusual for mages, in my experience."

"They're useful tools," he said, still with that odd smile. "And my particular talents don't lend themselves so well to offensive applications. The gun is a way to compensate."

"A mage who makes a living off violence, but isn't good with offensive applications," I mused. "What *are* you good at, then?"

"My specialty is more defensive in nature," he said. If he was offended, it didn't show. "Kinetic barriers and such. I have some secondary talents as well, of course, but I'm sure you'll understand if I prefer to keep those to myself for the time being."

"Of course," I said. Prying for the exact details of what someone could do before you hired them was more than slightly rude. It gave the impression that you were looking for *weakness*, and people who had any meaningful dealings with the supernatural learned quickly not to show weakness.

And besides, what he'd already told me was enough. Kinetic barriers were one of the most broadly useful, effective defensive spells around. They were a staple of any combat mage's arsenal, and my total inability to use them was a problem I'd often been frustrated by. None of my other mages was much better, either. If Jack was really good with them, his value as an employee was suddenly pretty high.

If, of course, being the key word in that sentence.

"Interesting," I said. "Would you mind demonstrating?"

"Not at all," he said. His smile looked a bit more honest as he picked up the gun, put it to his temple, and pulled the trigger.

I flinched away a little, more out of surprise than anything, but he just grinned and lowered the gun again. The bullet clattered to the table a moment later, flattened and cracked like he'd shot a concrete wall. "I can also make them reflective," he said. "So they reverse the force of anything that hits them, instead of just countering it. But that didn't seem like a good idea in here."

"That's a pretty useful ability," I said. "Anything else I should know about in particular?"

"Not really," he said, shrugging. "Other than that, most of what I've got is only situationally useful. I do have a fair amount of experience, so you don't need to worry about training me."

I nodded. "Have you ever worked with the Conclave?" I asked. It was a bit of a risky question, in some ways. The Conclave wasn't a *secret*, exactly, but they also weren't common knowledge. If he didn't know I'd risk looking crazy, or else I'd give him the idea that I might know *other* secrets, which was damn near a worst-case scenario when it came to hiring someone on.

And if he did know who they were? In a way, that was even worse. The only way he was likely to know what I was talking about was if he was a member of a recognized mage clan, or else he routinely dealt with people who were. If that was the case, asking the question was as good as an open admission that I also had dealings on that level.

Either way, it was something that I normally wouldn't have asked without having a decent idea of who he was, how he would react. But I didn't have time to spare right now, and I needed to know before I could really commit one way or another on hiring him.

Jack narrowed his eyes slightly, and I got the impression that he was thinking about the same things I was. "I've done some work with the Guards," he said carefully. "Strictly as a subcontractor, on some jobs where they wanted more defenses. Is that a problem?"

"No," I said. "Just checking. I like to know what I'm getting myself into when I hire someone. On that note, is there anything else I should know? Any other obligations you have, anyone who's out to get you for one reason or another?"

"Not that I know of. I mean, it's always possible that someone held a grudge for something I did. That's always a possibility when you're a freelancer. But I don't know of anyone that you would need to be concerned by."

"Good," I said. "You mentioned that you're a freelancer, which brings me to my next question. How long are you planning on working for me?"

"As long as you're paying me," he said easily. "Most people prefer to hire me for specific jobs, but if you want to do something longer-term, that's fine with me."

I frowned. "Someone with your talents, I'd be more inclined to keep you on retainer. How does a hundred grand per month sound, extra for unusually hazardous jobs or expenses?"

He stared at me. "A hundred grand per month," he repeated. "Are you serious?"

"I'm a very wealthy man," I said. "And I don't want you to be tempted to stray. Speaking of which, if you take this deal? You work for me. Not just a little, not casually. You're one of my people. You stay loyal and I'll take care of you. You cross me, you betray me or work to undermine my position, I'll kill you. Plain and simple."

"I'm a professional," he said, sounding more than a little offended. "I wouldn't do that."

"I'd like to think so," I sighed. "But you'd be amazed how many people just *don't get* that concept. Well, unless you have any more questions, I think we're good."

"I'm good," he said. "What now?"

I grabbed a napkin off the table and a pen from my cloak. "Go to this address," I said, scrawling it on the napkin. It was mostly legible, I thought. "Big house, on the south side of the city. Ask for Selene. Don't cause any trouble. She'll hook you up with the down payment on this month's pay; it might take a while to get the rest. Funds are tight right now, with how the financial system is going crazy. If you need any kind of equipment, ask her and she'll see if it can be arranged."

"Okay," he said, taking the napkin. "After that? What do you want me to do?"

"Stay there," I said. "If anybody's dumb enough to attack the house, I expect you'll cooperate to defend it. Other than that, just wait. I'll be there to pick you up at some point."

He nodded at me. "You got it, Boss," he said. Then he stood up and started for the door, his hands firmly in his pockets. I noticed that he'd taken the gun back, along with the napkin. I was betting one of those hands was on his gun, and the other might very well be on a weapon he *hadn't* shown me. He acted confident, he dressed casually, but Jack was as ready for a fight to break out at any moment as I was.

Then again, I supposed it made sense. A man who specialized in kinetic barriers, who could maintain one on the surface of his skin while he moved, hardly needed to worry about how he dressed. He could walk around naked and be protected as well as I was in my armor. Maybe better.

I felt a pang of jealousy, but pushed it away. I had other talents to compensate.

I looked around, thinking I'd flag down a waiter, but one of them appeared next to my table before I could. Typical of Pryce's, really. "Food," I said, pressing a hundred-dollar bill into his hand. "Lots of it, don't care too much about the details. Meat. And a pitcher of iced tea."

He nodded once and moved away, slipping easily through the crowd. Not that there was all that much of a crowd. It was getting late, sort of. It was after sundown, and with the way things were going right now that was late enough that a lot of people weren't happy to be out and about. The ones who were present were tense, jittery.

I'd noticed that the last few times I'd been to Pryce's. People were tense, scared.

It made me wonder. How long could you keep the tension up, how far could you push it, before things started to break?

Not that much farther, I was guessing. People were resilient, and they could bear up under a lot of stress, but this was a different kind of thing. It was a constant tension, something that never let up. You couldn't just make it through it, because the next day was just as bad, and the day after that. You couldn't rest, couldn't recover from the stress.

People would still be able to cope, I thought. But the *ways* they coped would be problematic in themselves. People would break, in a variety of ways.

I shook that thought off and stared at the table instead. I was drumming my fingers, I noticed, although I hadn't realized it.

I forced myself to stop, and shook my head. I needed to get my head in gear. I hadn't slept in so long that I *knew* it was starting to affect my performance, and I was so hungry that I couldn't look around the room for fear that I'd lose it and attack someone for their food. Or maybe even to *make* them food; I was still a werewolf, after all. It wasn't like I hadn't eaten people before.

And the worst part was that there wasn't much, if anything, I could do about it. I tried to sleep earlier, but I couldn't rest. When I closed my eyes I saw Snowflake lying in that hospital bed, and *that* wasn't going to do me any good. I'd just ordered a massive amount of food, but I knew it wouldn't do much to assuage my hunger.

It occurred to me that the line of thought I'd had a minute ago, thinking about stress and tension, might be applied to me, too. I could handle a lot, but push hard enough, long enough, and I'd start to break.

I couldn't follow that thought much further before someone else sat in the chair Jack had vacated. I looked up and saw that it was Luna, and she was grinning at me.

I forced myself to sit up straighter. Luna wasn't a predator, exactly, and we were almost friends, but the fact remained that she was an exceedingly dangerous person. Showing weakness around her wasn't a good idea.

"Hi," I said. "I'm surprised you're here."

"Why's that?" she asked.

"Dangerous times. I figured you'd be hiding out somewhere."

She rolled her shoulders in an odd, graceful sort of shrug. "I couldn't stand to stay at home right now," she said. "If there was ever a time when I wanted my ear to the ground, it's right now. Dangerous times means opportunity." She grinned a little wider. "Although I guess you'd know, wouldn't you?"

"Oh?"

"Yeah," she said. "Word on the street is you're making moves. *Big* moves, from what I've heard."

"Really," I said. "What exactly is this word on the street?"

"Depends. What do you have to trade?"

"A bit," I said cautiously. "But I was actually wondering whether you'd be interested in a different arrangement. Working for me on an ongoing basis, rather than this individual transaction deal."

"I don't know," she said dubiously. "I like my independence. I *like* working on my own, you know?"

"You like it because of the climate you've done it in. Things have been calm, mostly peaceful. The handful of people that actually start problems have mostly left the small fish alone, you know what I mean?"

"And you don't think that's going to be true going forward." It wasn't a question.

"I know it's not," I said quietly. "This...everything is different now. A lot of the protections we're used to, the rules that limited how aggressive the big players could be, they're *gone*. The people we're talking about here don't have any problems with the idea of snatching people off the street. I heard from a reliable source that there's an entire district in Amsterdam that's empty. Someone went through, killing everyone they saw, and they didn't stop until there was nothing larger than a cat in a five-block radius."

She whistled. "Damn."

"Yeah. If these people are willing to do things like that, do you *really* think they'll hesitate to lean on you if they want something."

She was quiet for a moment. "I feel," she said at last, "like there's a word for what you're doing here. It's like you're playing good cop, bad cop, but you're using the *idea* of someone else as your bad cop, so you come out looking good. Trying to intimidate me into agreeing to your offer when I'd rather not."

"In part," I admitted. "But what I'm saying is still true. I'm offering you protection, stability, and a chance to get in with what might end up being the dominant group in the city. I'm maybe offering you a say in how the world works going forward, even. And all I'm asking for is that you give up a little bit of

your independence." I shrugged. "I get that it's not an ideal situation. But realistically, I do think this is the best offer you're going to get. Up to you whether you take it."

She didn't look happy, but she didn't tell me to screw off, either. "How much are you offering?"

"Hundred grand a month," I said. It was the same offer I'd made Jack. I figured they were about equally valid to my operation, although for very different reasons, in very different ways.

"Hundred grand...damn." She shook her head. "That's a lot of money."

I shrugged. "I make a lot of money these days," I said. "And that's not all I'm offering. You'd have a secure base of operations, official authority that a lot of groups will respect. Armed guards when you're making a deal, protection if somebody comes after you. I'd even give you some funding and logistic support for the deals you make with other groups."

She looked at me oddly. "You aren't going to stop me from working with other people?"

"Of course not," I said, feeling a little confused. Was *that* what her problem was about? "Most of what I'm hiring you for is your mind, Luna. You know people, and people are willing to deal with you, talk with you. Why would I want you to shut that down?" I shrugged again. "I mean, there's some information I'd want you to keep private, and I'd want to hear about any unusual requests, but I have no reason to stop you from doing what you're doing."

She considered that for a long moment, then sighed. "Fine," she said. "Where do I go to start?"

"Go to this address," I said, grabbing a napkin.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Wake up," I said. "We have work to do."

Lights flickered to life in Legion's eye sockets. The pale blue color seemed a little more intense than usual, a little bit more vivid. "Excellent work, Boss," he said. His voice was flat and toneless, as always, but somehow I knew that the demon was excited. "You really shook things up, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"What else?" he asked. "I'm talking about the way you changed the game. I haven't seen anything this promising for four hundred years. And then the way you dealt with those vampires earlier? Let me tell you, Boss, that really made me proud to work with you?"

"How do you even know about that?" I asked. The other I could understand—the way the world had changed in the last few week or so was extreme enough that even a hibernating demon could plausibly know about it—but the vampire thing had been just a few hours earlier, and it hadn't been that important in the greater scheme of things.

"This is what I am," he said, and I knew he was confused by the question. "And you're the one that did it. How could I not know?"

"Okay," I said after a moment. "We're going to just pretend that doesn't have horribly disturbing implications. Moving along now. Tell me about Blind Keith."

There was a long, ominous silence. "You really are an expert at getting into trouble, aren't you?" he asked. "Granted, we've known this for a long time, but Blind Keith, too? You must have done something *really* special to get on his bad side."

"I'm not on his bad side," I said irritably. "He wants me to go hunting with him. I just want to know what I'm dealing with when I do."

"Right," Legion drawled. "Tell you what, Boss. You get back from this hunting trip, and then we can talk about whether you're on his bad side. Anyway, you know anything about him already? Give me something to work with, maybe?"

"Yeah," I said, just a little smugly. "I know he's fae, and he doesn't belong to any of the current factions. He predates them. He's powerful enough that he could be a Twilight Prince, but he doesn't care enough to bother. He's a hunter, with strong connections to the Wild Hunt, and he inspires fear in anyone who gets close."

"Sounds like you have the basics down," Legion said reluctantly. "But you're understating it a bit. He's not just a hunter. He's the spirit of the hunt, the embodiment of it. I've even seen some theories saying that he's the original Wild Hunter, and everyone else is just imitating him. I'm not convinced of

that, but he's definitely old. You mentioned he inspires fear. I'm guessing that means you've been around him?"

"Yeah. It was distracting, but I could function through it."

"Don't believe it," Legion said seriously. "Blind Keith has total control over how strongly he affects people. He would have wanted you to think you could resist the effect, but I wouldn't count on it. He's an embodiment of the hunt, the interaction between predator and prey. If he decides to make you the prey, it's going to be very difficult for you to resist that state of mind. That goes double for werewolves, since he has power over animals and hunters."

"Wonderful," I said sourly. "So, purely hypothetically, fighting him would be...."

"A very bad idea, yes," Legion confirmed after I had trailed off. "A lethally bad idea, in fact. If it takes him more than a few seconds to kill you, it's only because he's dragging it out to amuse himself. There's not much you can do to avoid the fight, either."

"There isn't?"

"No. Not really. Blind Keith isn't Sidhe, but he is still fae, which means that there's an element of caprice to his nature. Maybe things start peacefully, maybe he even likes you, but there's no guarantee that things will stay that way. And if he does change his mind, it might only take a couple seconds to go from casual conversation to him pulling out your intestines and skipping rope with them."

I frowned. "But he is fae," I pointed out. "So if I could get him to swear an oath not to do things like that, he'd keep it."

"Blind Keith wouldn't swear an oath like that," Legion said with perfect confidence. "And trying to get him to is one of the things that might start that fight."

"Wonderful," I said. "Just wonderful. So I've got an ancient, incredibly powerful fae hunter who may or may not try to kill me as soon as talk to me, and there's really nothing I can do to defend myself if something goes wrong. And I agreed to go hunting with him."

"Pretty much," Legion said cheerfully. "Is that all?"

"I don't know," I said. "Can you tell me anything which might actually help me?"

"Not really," he said. "Blind Keith is...pure, maybe, would be the word? There's no subtlety to him, no delicacy or hidden depths. He is what he is, plain and simple. Clever maneuvers and elaborate plans won't work on him, not really. He doesn't have any secret weaknesses that I know of, either, except for what works on any of the fae."

I sighed. "Okay."

"Sorry, Boss, but I can't really help you with this one," Legion said. "Did you have any other questions?"

"No, not really," I said, then paused. "Wait, yes, there is one thing. Why am I constantly hungry recently? Food doesn't seem to help, either. And it's getting worse."

"Maybe it's because you're a werewolf?"

"Don't be a smartass," I said sourly. "I know what a werewolf's metabolism feels like. I *know* how much food it should take to keep me going. This isn't that."

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "the next obvious explanation is that you aren't actually hungry, *per se*. You need some other kind of sustenance, but you aren't accustomed to it, your body and mind don't know how to interpret that need. So you're perceiving it as hunger, because that's the closest analogue you can come up with, but the reality is that you need something completely different."

"Huh," I said. "That's...interesting. What kind of sustenance?"

Legion gave the impression of a shrug, though he didn't move a bone. "Hard to say. There are a lot of things it could be. I couldn't necessarily say what it is without checking a few dozen possibilities, and even then we could only rule out the most likely answers. If it's something more obscure it might take weeks to narrow it down. You should be able to make a decent guess based on when it feels worse and when it lightens up."

"Interesting," I said again. "But probably not my highest priority."

"Oh, I don't know," Legion said sarcastically. "You've only got Blind Keith breathing down your neck and the world on fire around you. What could be more important than figuring out why you feel hungry?"

"Thanks, Legion," I said.

The demon snorted. "Thanking me," he said to no one in particular. "That's new."

I went upstairs and checked on the castle again, doing my rounds. The wards were still strong, the door locked and barred. I couldn't detect anything amiss in or around the building.

Kyi had wanted to post guards here, but I'd overruled her. I didn't have the manpower to maintain a guard so far from the real center of my activity. Not right now.

And besides, this was my territory. *Mine*. I didn't want the housecarls here, or the mages, or the ghouls. Being jarl had taken over most of my life. If I didn't keep something to myself, I'd go insane.

I wanted to be back in Colorado, to be *doing* something. I itched for it, almost literally. But there was nothing to be done right now. I couldn't take the fight to the vampires in the nighttime, and other than that I'd mostly dealt with the people that would have liked to keep me from claiming the city for my own.

There was still work to be done, but at this point it was mostly work that was better left to other people. Right now it was all about organizing, managing, and recruiting for the group, and those weren't exactly my specialties. Soon there would be more of my work to do, negotiating with other groups and fighting people that would try to stop us, but for the moment it was out of my hands.

After I got back from Pryce's I'd mostly just paced around my office until Selene flat out told me that I should leave and get out of their hair. Then I'd gone back to Transylvania to ask Legion questions, thinking that I could at least do something productive with my time. Aiko stayed in Colorado to keep an eye on things, promising to call me if anything came up.

Except now I'd gotten any useful information out of Legion that I was going to right now. Which left me with nothing to do again.

So, once again, I started pacing, this time around the castle. I walked along the halls, up and down the stairs, through the rooms, moving faster and faster, until I was almost running. It didn't make me feel any better, not really, but it at least gave me something else to focus on besides my own helplessness.

Finally I found myself on the roof of the tower, leaning against the battlements and panting. It was almost dawn, in Transylvania, and I stood there and watched the sun come up, painting the forest and the mountains a delicate gold.

It was a beautiful sunrise.

Afterwards, I went back downstairs and went to bed, pulling the curtains closed around the bed. With our schedule—if you could call something that erratic a schedule, which was doubtful—we often wound up sleeping while the sun was up. But the heavy velvet curtains around the bed blocked any light from coming in, leaving it as dark as if it were midnight.

I laid down and pulled the covers over myself, staring up at nothing.

I felt cold and lonely, to an extent that I hadn't anticipated. I was used to sharing that bed with Aiko and Snowflake. Without them it was too large, and too empty. It emphasized their absence, bringing images of Snowflake lying near death in a hospital bed and Aiko almost being killed by a rakshasa to the forefront of my mind.

After a few minutes, I broke down and grabbed Aiko's pillow, holding it close. It smelled like her, fox and spice with a hint of something more floral. Not as good as having her there, but as good as I could get for the moment.

I closed my eyes and drifted off, feeling more at peace than I had in days.

I wasn't sure what woke me, exactly. Maybe there was some slight sound, a small movement or a breath. Or maybe it was just the awareness of Blind Keith's sheer *presence*. Certainly, once I was awake I was acutely aware of it, a faint edge of tension with no explanation.

I sat up and opened the curtain, and there he was, silhouetted against the window by the sunlight coming in from behind him. I couldn't make out any details, but I knew it was him.

"Blind Keith," I said, nodding to him.

"Jarl," he replied, not moving an inch. "It is time."

"Yes," I said, grabbing my armor from the floor beside the bed and pulling it on. I put my boots on and stood, draping my cloak over my shoulders. It was still loaded with weapons and tools from before I went to sleep, everything I'd thought of that might help me make it through the next few hours.

"Are you prepared?"

"Yes," I said again. "Let's go."

He nodded once and turned, opening a portal to the Otherside in an instant, without even a whisper of wasted power. He disappeared through it a moment later.

I felt an odd relief as I followed him. I might be about to die, but at least I'd be *doing* something.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Blind Keith's realm was dark, and it was cold.

I was *aware* of the cold, in a sense, but it didn't affect me the way it would a normal person. I wasn't in pain, I wasn't slowed or clumsy or numb. Almost the opposite, in a way. It felt like I was more awake, more *alive*, with the cold pressing against me. I felt sharper, more alert, the fatigue and the hunger I had been feeling both receding from my awareness.

What was with that? I'd never really been bothered by the cold, but I hadn't had this reaction, either. Was there somehow more jotun in me than there had been previously? Or was this an effect of Blind Keith's favor, rather than my own nature?

I shook my head, forcing myself to focus. If I wasn't careful here, death might be the kindest fate I could hope for.

The portal had deposited us in the forest, although it wasn't a forest in the sense I was accustomed to thinking of them in. This was a primeval sort of forest, vast and trackless, the trees towering above on a scale that defied logic. I'd seen a similar effect before, in Inari's Wood, and the forests of Jotunheim, and the wilder parts of Faerie.

The moon was full overhead, casting more than enough light for me to be comfortable, but not much made it through the tree cover. The shadows under the trees were pitch black. Darker than they should be, considering the snow on the ground. It should have been reflecting the moonlight into places it couldn't reach on its own, but the shadows stayed stubbornly dark.

And there, again, I had an odd experience, simultaneously aware of how I *should* feel and actually *feeling* something completely different. The ground was covered in snow, much of which had frozen into ice. Even if I didn't feel the cold, my footing should have been terrible, my feet getting bogged down in snow or slipping on the ice.

But that didn't happen. Instead, it was exactly the opposite. The ice was comfortable, providing exactly enough traction. It was like walking on pavement. The snow was even better, yielding when I wanted it to yield, providing resistance when I wanted something to push against. All told, I was faster and more comfortable in this terrain than I would have been walking down a city street.

And I wasn't even thinking about it. I didn't even have to think to make the snow be firm here, and soft there. I just walked, following Blind Keith, and my surroundings reshaped themselves to my will.

Keith, I noticed, didn't have the same effect. He was moving as fast as I was or faster, but it was a different kind of speed, a more traditional kind. He was just fast enough to plow through the snow.

Not his power helping me, then. Not unless he could do something similar to what I was, and chose not to.

As we walked, I could feel and smell and *see* a familiar effect beginning. Blind Keith's form was wreathed in mist, light at first, but it grew thicker over the course of a minute or so, until his actual body was hidden within a miniature storm cloud. Sparks of lightning crackled within the cloud, and the snow swirled and danced in his wake, as though he carried a tiny windstorm with him.

Neither of us had said a word since entering the portal. He led, and I followed. There seemed to be nothing to say.

I glanced at myself, more to confirm a suspicion than anything, and saw exactly what I'd expected. The storm cloud was forming over me as well, slowly but surely. Wisps of cloud drifted over my forearms, my legs. A band stretched from one arm to the other across my torso, and more tendrils extended from that, spreading across my armor.

I was a part of the Wild Hunt this time. Not just an observer. Not the prey.

In a strange way, I was more worried than I might have been if I *were* the prey. The Wild Hunt was *old* magic, something that stretched back to when the world was young. It had a meaning to it, a weight. The only other time I'd seen the Hunt, I'd been a target rather than a participant, and it had still brought the predator in me so far to the forefront of my mind that logical thought became impossible. I could probably expect something similar this time, but to an even greater extent.

Oddly, that was the only thing I was really afraid of. The other dangers I was facing right now—Blind Keith, the Wild Hunt, even the things waiting for me back in Colorado to some extent—they were undeniably serious, but at the same time there was something almost comfortable about them. They were things I could understand, things I could *deal* with. Even if I failed, there was a limit to how bad things could be.

This was more like Loki, or the Twilight Court, or even the mysterious all-hands-on-deck situation the Watchers were facing in Russia. It was big, and ominous, and there wasn't a whole hell of a lot I could do about it. There were no actions I could take, really, to protect myself.

And, much like those threats, it had the potential to do much worse than kill me. If I was lost to the Hunt, I might be lost *forever*. Still alive, but not *me*, just enough left of the person I was to be aware of the monster I had become. *Forever*.

I wasn't afraid to die. But there were so very many fates worse than death out there.

I kept walking, kept the fear in check. It was harder, around Blind Keith. I'd thought he made people afraid, but now I realized that wasn't quite right. What his magic did was *exaggerate* fear. It was natural to be afraid of something like him, almost inevitable. Now I discovered that it worked on other fear, too. I would have been anxious about the Hunt anyway, *had* been anxious, but now it was worse. It was a paralyzing sort of dread, almost overwhelming. I had to force myself to keep moving through it.

I looked around, trying to distract myself, and realized that we weren't alone. Other figures moved in the night, hounds and wolves, creatures mounted on horseback. Some were Sidhe, beautiful

beyond words, with wild, fey smiles and gleaming weapons. Others were goblins, brutish and ugly creatures with an almost frenzied look to their eyes.

The storm was building slowly, wreathing each of us. It was alive, in a way, although not a way that had much in common with humanity. Blind Keith wasn't *creating* it, not really. I got the impression that he was more summoning it, bringing it into being in this place, this time.

Which was interesting, because what I could see of the magic, the way it smelled, made me think he didn't have nearly as much control over it as I would have guessed. Legion had said that Blind Keith was supposed to be the original leader of the Wild Hunt, but from what I could see I was almost sure that wasn't the case. He wasn't creating the storm of the Hunt. Everything I could detect about the relationship there suggested that he was more evoking it, calling it up.

This wasn't his magic. it was in line with his nature, he understood it, he *breathed* it, but it wasn't his.

I wasn't sure why, but something about that seemed important.

We kept walking, and there was still no discussion, but now it wasn't because there was nothing to say. It was because there was no *need*. I didn't have to look or think to know where every single member of the Hunt was. They were all around us, moving through the forest out of sight, and I knew where they were. I knew what they were going to do before they moved.

My practice running multiple bodies let me split off a piece of my mind to analyze that information, looking at the bigger picture from an objective perspective. What that part of me recognized was interesting, in a really scary way. We were moving as a unit. One person moved forward and another swung to the side to compensate, maintaining the same distance, maintaining coverage throughout the area. It was more like watching a single organism moving than a group. In a way, that's exactly what was happening. I was watching the Wild Hunt, not the hunters.

Every member of the Hunt had perfect knowledge of what the rest were doing, and they were coordinated on a level that was considerably deeper than cognitive thought. It was...terrifying, in a way. I knew that I'd only been able to avoid them the last time because they weren't really trying, but damn. I'd had no idea just how easy it would have been for them to take me down any time they felt like it.

I was running on autopilot now, moving at the direction of the Wild Hunt rather than my own desires. It wasn't like being a puppet, exactly. I was still doing what I wanted. I just happened to want whatever was best for the Hunt as a whole from moment to moment.

There were a couple of ways that I could deal with that. I could keep myself separate from my body, let the Wild Hunt have that part of me, and keep my mind relatively clear. There were enough predators around that I would have no trouble finding hosts, and I thought I could insulate myself from the effect by doing that, at least a little.

The other alternative was to *go* with it. Put the predator, the wolf, in charge of things. It was close enough to the Hunt to operate within it, while still being *me*.

I ended up going with a mixture of the two. The wolf inside my skin took over my body, and the difference was profound to watch. There was no single change I could point to and say was responsible. It was in a lot of little things. I was a little more in tune with the Wild Hunt, a little more able to count on the other members of the Hunt for information rather than doing everything myself, a little smoother in how I used the help that the ice and snow was lending me.

And the reason I could see that? There was a piece, just a small piece, of my awareness split off on its own. Watching, observing, processing the information coming in from the Hunt. I was riding in my own mind the way I rode in the mind of other animals, aware of the process from both sides at once, and it was the strangest feeling I'd ever had.

But it worked. I was moving, I was aware and in control of myself, and I was simultaneously disconnected enough that I could observe things and think things through on a cognitive level rather than a purely instinctive one.

I noticed something odd about me, and I told me to take a look at myself. I obeyed me, glancing at myself between steps, and confirmed what I'd thought I'd noticed. The storm around me *was* different, very slightly, from that around Blind Keith and the rest of the Hunt. It was paler, more a fog than a cloud, cold enough that ice was forming on my armor, and while it still flickered with lightning, there were snowflakes mixed in.

A different storm to reflect a different kind of Hunter? It made sense, but the explanation seemed incomplete. There was something more to it than that, something that I wasn't seeing.

The rest of me kept moving. The storm had almost finished wreathing us now, and I knew on a level just below consciousness that that would be the signal for the hunt to start in earnest. It was very nearly time.

I knew that another member of the Hunt was coming closer and did nothing, waiting. He stepped up beside me, a wolf walking on two legs, wrapped in fog, snowflakes settling on his shoulders, his face. I couldn't see him through the cloud, knew it was him only because the Wild Hunt knew. "I told you we'd hunt together one day," he said, barely whispering. I understood more because I could feel the movement and the intent than because I could hear him.

I asserted control over myself long enough to turn my head and look at him, confirming what I'd suspected. The storm around him was very nearly the same as that around me, the pale fog, the snowflakes. Paying more attention to that facet of the information feed I was getting from the Wild Hunt, I realized that there were a handful of others in the crowd that were similar, a few Sidhe, some of the goblins, several of the more animalistic, less easily-categorized ones.

Not just a different storm for me, then. Two storms, slightly different but connected. The rational part of me could think of several possible explanations for that, few of which were good. The

part of me that was more in tune with the Hunt *knew* what it meant, but it was on a level so basic that I couldn't really define it or encapsulate it in words, even for myself.

The storm was complete, now. We were all covered, all connected by the power. It was time to hunt.

Blind Keith did something, a twist of power, and the world we walked through grew even darker, the moonlight fading out until nothing was visible at all, and I was navigating based on the knowledge the Wild Hunt was feeding into my brain each second. Reality faded in again a moment later, and now it was a different reality. We weren't on the Otherside anymore. We were in *my* reality.

More so even than I'd thought, I realized a moment later. I recognized the trees, the hills, and it wasn't just being in my world, it wasn't just the influence of the Hunt.

I *knew* this place.

It was still fall here, rather than deep winter, and there was no snow on the ground. It didn't matter. Where I walked the ground was blanketed with frost and ice by the storm, giving me perfect footing, simultaneously making it harder for anyone else.

The wolf still walked beside me, wrapped in the same effect. He should have been slipping on his own ice slick, and he wasn't, and it took a moment for me to realize *why*. The ice was helping him, much like it helped me. It gave him traction when he wanted it, a smooth and frictionless surface when he didn't. He had a power like mine, it seemed.

No. Not like mine. He had *my power*, my magic, shared through the connection of the Wild Hunt. In much the same way, reaching out through the storm, I felt the various abilities and magics that the other hunters brought to the table, waiting and ready for me to call upon them.

Wait. The Wild Hunt didn't just share knowledge and sensation, it shared *magic*? It let individual members tap each other's powers when they needed to?

God *damn*. I'd known it was a terrifying force, that there was no real winning against it, but I hadn't even begun to comprehend how much of a threat the Hunt was.

We kept moving, moving out of the trees now, and I saw what I'd known I would.

The town of Wolf, Wyoming. The first place I'd ever been able to call home in any meaningful way.

The streets were largely empty, but that just emphasized the small proportion of people who *were* out and about. I recognized many of them, and knew what the rest were. These were the werewolves of the town, brought forth by their *awareness* of the Wild Hunt's coming. They were just close enough to us in nature that they knew we were there, that they were drawn out of their homes and businesses to join us.

Except they weren't being invited to join. There was no storm gathering about them. I thought about it and knew that they were here to play a different role. They were the prey for this night's hunt. It was night, now, although the last I'd been aware of it had been dawn in this area. I had lost a day, apparently.

I tried to tell myself to stop, that this was going too far, but the Hunt's influence was stronger now, and I wasn't inclined to listen to me.

The werewolves realized what was going on. Some turned and fled, running further into the town, or at an angle, into the forest, or the plains around town. Others stood their ground, preparing to fight. I recognized Edward, in his human form, pistols ready to hand, but not yet drawn. He didn't need to draw them yet, not with how fast he was.

I felt a twinge at that, paused for half a heartbeat as I walked, then kept going. The more detached part of me noted that Edward wasn't reacting to my presence, not that I could tell, and I didn't think he'd be able to mask that particular reaction. Likely he didn't know I was there, couldn't see me through the storm. I had to remind myself that it was an obstruction to other people's vision.

Then I saw the wolf standing by his side. She wasn't particularly large, or really notable at all, except that there was an element of grace to her that most werewolves lacked. Not agility precisely, more that she was in tune with herself, in tune with the wolf, even to some extent in tune with the Hunt. There was no resistance to her own nature, the way there often was with werewolves.

Anna, I realized a moment later. The only werewolf I'd ever been responsible for who then turned out to *work*. The only one whose story hadn't ended in tragedy.

And, if I had my way, it wasn't going to.

This time, I did stop moving. The wolf didn't understand much, but pack was one of the big ones, and it's understanding of that was deep enough to push the Hunt aside, letting me reassert control over my own body.

"This is wrong," I said aloud, knowing that the connection of the storm would convey my meaning even to those of the Hunt who couldn't hear. "These are predators, not prey." It was the only objection I could think of that might carry weight with the Wild Hunt, without acknowledging that I had a personal relationship to these werewolves.

"Of course," Blind Keith said. I heard him more through my awareness of the Hunt than with my ears. "No baser prey would serve this night." I could feel him smile, a hundred feet away. "Or do you oppose my choice?"

He knew. Fuck me, he knew. I had no idea how, but he *knew* what these people meant to me, he'd chosen them specifically *because* of that.

Legion had mentioned that his essential nature was that of the fae. He'd mentioned that this also meant that there was an element of the capricious to him. What I hadn't quite acknowledged, on a conscious level, was that the fae also had an element of...not malice, exactly, but *cruelty*. Even the gentlest of the fae had a sharper side. Even when they were being kind, handing out gifts, there was always a catch.

And Blind Keith was not a gentle fae.

"Yes," I said, knowing what it meant, what the consequence would be. "I oppose your choice."

Blind Keith grinned at me, although I knew only because I felt him through the Wild Hunt. And then he turned his magic on me at full strength. He took every fear I felt, every worry, every niggling doubt and minor concern, the dread I'd been feeling this entire time and the entirely rational terror I felt at crossing him. He took all of them, and on each of them he turned the dial up to eleven.

There was no question of fighting back or resisting.

I ran.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I was running through the trees. I blinked, and I was standing in a forest, but it was an entirely different forest. The trees were larger, the snow was deeper, and the moon overhead was a huge full circle rather than just a sliver.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded of no one in particular.

I stepped up next to myself, grinning widely. The new me looked almost exactly like me, except that he wasn't wreathed in storm and he wasn't wearing a helmet, presumably so that I would be sure to recognize my own face. "I'm guessing it's a lot of factors at play," he said. "If you think about it, you're something of a special case."

I blinked again and was running through the forest. There was blood on my mouth, and the fog around me had grown, painting a ten-foot swath of the forest white with frost.

Blink again, and I was standing still beside myself.

"What the *hell* is this?" I asked, not blinking. It was more a mental exercise than anything. I didn't *need* to blink, not really. I didn't really have *eyes* here.

"You ever really think about what it means?" my double asked. "What you're doing right now, to a lesser extent what you do all the time, splitting up your consciousness, moving it out of your body. You ever wonder what you're really doing to yourself, like that? Whether there's some kind of damage involved?"

"Of course I do," I snapped. "Or else my subconscious wouldn't be asking about it. But what's that have to do with what's going on now?"

"Well, if you think about it, there's a lot of sources of damage," he said, walking casually along. "You *Saw* the Hunt last time, remember? That's the kind of thing that, you know, it's going to have an effect, right? Or, oh yeah, you *died*."

"Pretty sure I'm alive," I said.

"Nooo," he said, dragging the word out. "Nope, you definitely died. You got most of your arm torn off by some kind of abomination from the void, you got shot in the chest, and you bled out on the floor of your own house. Sure, Loki brought you back after, but there's no guarantee he put you back together the way you were."

"I'm still the same person I was," I said irritably. "In every way that matters. I'm sorry, did you have a point with all this rambling?"

"I'm just saying," he said, grinning. "If you think about it, there's all kinds of things about you that are just *messed up*, you know? So I figure what happened is when Blind Keith hit you with that

magic, making you lose control of your fear, it had a weird interaction with something. It broke you on a level, making *this* happen."

I frowned. "Okay," I said reluctantly. "I can buy that, I guess. So that would make this...the spirit world," I said, realizing it with a sinking feeling.

He clapped slowly. "Congratulations," he said, his voice almost dripping with sarcasm. "I mean, it's not like this is almost the *exact same* thing that you saw the last time you were trapped on a spiritual level. Or like you know for a fact that the last time you ran into the Wild Hunt you saw them on a spiritual level and it disrupted your ability to distinguish physical and spiritual perceptions. Seriously, there's no way you could have figured this out more quickly than that."

"My subconscious is kind of a dick, isn't it?" I commented.

He snorted. "Again, congrats, Captain Obvious. I feel I should point out that time *is* still passing while you're standing there babbling."

"No pressure," I muttered to myself. "Okay. So the more animalistic parts of me, the werewolf, it's running my body. Probably taking the worst of the fear, too, so I can think things through. Make a plan." I frowned. "Not sure how much I can do here, though. I don't see a lot of openings I can exploit."

"It's not his magic," my double said, his voice oddly intense. "The Wild Hunt. It isn't *his*, not really."

I frowned and nodded. I'd noticed that—of course I had, or I wouldn't be telling myself about it—but I hadn't had a chance to really think through the implications. "He summoned it," I said, thinking out loud. "But he doesn't own it. I don't think he even controls it, really. He brings it to him, but after that it does its own thing. And this time it split in half, sort of. One half looks like the last time I saw it, but the other half is pretty clearly associated with me. My kind of magic, my kind of *environment*. Which mean...oh, hell no. You have *got* to be kidding me."

"There's nothing funny about this," my double said. It would have been more convincing if he weren't grinning from ear to ear.

"The Wild Hunt thinks I should be leading it?"

"Or it thinks you have the potential, at least," he agreed. "That's the best explanation I've got."

"Okay," I said. "This...I don't know how to deal with this, really."

"Don't worry about the implications," he said. "Worry about right now. What does this mean, in the immediate sense?"

"It's something I can use," I said, thinking it through. "A weapon. A dangerous weapon, but that's the best I've got. Now I just need to figure out how to use it."

It took me a minute to see it, but when I did I couldn't believe I hadn't seen what I needed to do right away. It was a terrible plan, foolish and self-destructive and very likely to have *consequences* later on, but I thought it had a decent chance of solving the problem at hand.

In short, it was one of my plans. Now I just had to put it into effect.

I blinked again.

I was running through the forest. My heart was pounding, my lungs were heaving, my mouth was flecked with blood and spittle. Blood oozed from my hip as well, where a razor-sharp blade had slipped through my armor like it wasn't even there to draw a narrow line of fire on my skin.

I was still human in shape, generally, but not remotely human in thought. There was nothing in my mind but fear. There was nothing to do but to run. Rational thought, planning, any idea of fighting back, they were all impossible.

I looked at this, then turned my attention outwards, to the Hunt as a whole. I could feel that there was still that split in it, with some members being wrapped in a thunderstorm, and others in a freezing fog.

There were fewer of them in "my" storm, now. The Wild Hunt shifting its focus to the candidate it felt was more deserving? Or was it on an individual level, people subconsciously aligning themselves with the person winning the contest? Either was plausible, and it didn't really matter. The split *existed*, and that was all I really needed for my plan.

I turned my attention to the magic affecting me. Blind Keith's magic, rather than the Hunt's, this time. I could detect the effect, the way it was removing the limits and controls on my emotions. And, having detected it, I could affect it.

I couldn't stop it. This was *Blind Keith*, a being on par with Twilight Princes and demigods. I couldn't hope to overpower his magic, and I didn't even try.

But I could redirect it.

I stepped in the way, redirecting it slightly, changing what part of me it was targeting.

The world went white.

Fear. Terror. Blind, absolute panic, the kind of fear where thought was impossible, where doing anything to resist the emotion was out of the question. Get hit with this, and you were going to run, and you weren't going to stop until you literally could not move.

Except I wasn't moving. I had totally ceded control of my body to another part of my mind, and what I'd done, stepping in to take the effect with the more rational, analytic part, was enough to largely shield that part from the fear.

Parallel processing, I thought dimly, through the haze of terror. Blind Keith could shut me down, but he couldn't shut *all* of me down when my consciousness was split this deeply, and he wasn't paying enough attention to pick and choose what parts of me were affected.

I was still running, but I'd stopped and reversed my direction on the spot. A goblin was close behind me, but it didn't have the traction on the ice to change direction so swiftly, and it ran right past me, slipping and falling to the ground. The next creature on my trail was a mounted Sidhe, wielding a crystalline blade that crackled with lightning. I ignored the weapon and went for the horse instead, putting one hand on its chest and *pushing*.

I'd expected to just push it aside a little, maybe cause it to slip on the frost-covered ground.

What I got instead was a surge of power from the Wild Hunt, wolves and blizzard winds howling in my ear, and a push that picked the horse up from the ground and hurled it bodily through the air. A thousand pounds of charging horse, and I tossed it through the air with one hand.

A new note of fear entered the mass already within me, and was promptly magnified a thousandfold by Blind Keith's magic. I wasn't supposed to be that strong. Not remotely.

I kept running, borrowing speed from the hounds, grace from the Sidhe, using my knowledge of the Hunters' locations to navigate. It was *easy* to run through the forest. I didn't even have to look. Everything that fell within the storm around me was outlined in my mind, so that I was perfectly aware of every single thing at once. I didn't even have to think to know when to duck, where to step, when to jump or dodge.

There was a slight shift in the Hunt's composition, I noticed. A few more on my side, rather than Keith's. Responding to my success, perhaps?

Moving forward, I sped up, moving even faster. I was going almost as fast as I would have in fur now, slipping back through the middle of the Wild Hunt, and it was so *easy*. I was stronger, faster, and there was so much knowledge pouring into brain with every second, being processed so quickly, that I could hardly even grasp it all. I was almost prescient.

I could see how this feeling got addictive.

The rest of them had all the same advantage, of course. I was operating on a level I'd hit maybe once or twice in my entire life, and they were still keeping pace with me easily, all around me. Maybe half of them were with me now, wrapped in my fog, coating the world in frost. The other half were solidly on Blind Keith's side.

Where the two met they clashed, violently. Weapons and magics were turned against the other Hunters, not inflicting much damage, but still very much a battle. Even the different storms seemed to be in conflict, sparking angrily where they met, one melting the frost and ice as fast as the other laid it down.

I could probably have stepped in, altered the course of the conflict. I didn't, and neither did Blind Keith. It might have been out of some sort of honor, but I doubted it. The Wild Hunt wasn't about honor, not in any sense that human society recognized as such. No, we were staying out of it because we had other things to do, bigger things to worry about.

In my case, it was getting to my destination. I still had a plan, and the wolf was a part of me, which meant it *knew* the plan. I had a goal, and getting to it was more important to me than making a small difference in a fight here and there.

Blind Keith had a goal as well, but it was a very different one. He was hunting *me*, personally.

He was blind, obviously, but I didn't imagine for a moment that that actually handicapped him at all. He was mounted, and he was far more experienced than I was.

I had two slight advantages over him, though. The first was, ironically, his own magic. Much of the fear was being intercepted by another part of me, but what got through was still enough to spur me to new heights of effort. If you want to run, there's nothing quite like being terrified for your life to make you run *fast*.

The second thing was also his fault, in a way. This was *my* place. I knew it, not just through the Hunt, but also from my own memories. I'd run through these hills and trees more times than I could remember. It had been a long time since I lived here, but I still knew the lay of the land, where the shortcuts were, which way to turn at critical junctures. He'd had the choice of terrain for this little conflict, and he'd chosen one of the most advantageous locations for me possible.

They weren't big advantages, but they were enough that I had a slight lead as we came into town. I sprinted through the streets, everything put into speed now. The asphalt was smoother than the ground of the forest had been, taking the frost more evenly and thoroughly. Blind Keith had to slow down a little so that the thunderstorm around him could melt the frost, or else risk a fall. He chose the former.

I'd crossed most of town by the time I found the people I was looking for. Edward was still human, Anna was still in fur. I recognized most of the rest, couldn't put names to them right now.

"Hey," I said, slowing. It was a struggle to slow, to speak, when I had the Hunt and the fear both pushing me to move, to revert to more primitive, animalistic behaviors. "I...I need help."

Edward stared at me. "Winter?" he asked. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," I said, pushing the fog away from my face with a struggle. I pulled my helmet off, wincing at the light. It was only a crescent moon and some stars, but it felt like I was staring straight into the sun at high noon. "Yeah, it's me."

He looked at me, sniffed the air, and then nodded. "Okay," he said. "What do you need?"

"To hunt," I said. "Are you with me?"

"Of course," he said, sounding almost offended.

I smiled, relieved, and put my helmet back on. I'd been pretty sure he would agree, but *pretty sure* isn't really enough for something like that.

"Good," I said, as the cold, stormy fog began to spread across my face again. "Let's go."

The werewolves followed as I walked back towards Blind Keith and the Hunt. As we moved, the storm began to wrap itself around them as well.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Pacing through the trees, I was surprised at how much I could notice the difference from adding the werewolves to the Wild Hunt. I felt stronger, but the difference wasn't that serious in comparison to the power that was already there.

The real difference was in the sensory input I was getting. I could sense everything in a dozen miles, or at least it felt like it. The combined senses of a dozen werewolves, most of them in fur, were enough that very little could escape them. The scents and sounds flooding into my mind were so overwhelming that I felt like they should have incapacitated me, and they probably would have if not for the mediating influence of the Wild Hunt.

But with that influence, I could process and understand all of this input without even having to think about it. I could map everything in my mind, so that I knew where all of us were, and where every notable feature that we could see, hear, or smell was. I knew it all.

I also knew a couple of things that were a little more immediately important. First, I knew that my "side" of the Hunt was growing. More of the Hunters were wrapped in my ice storm rather than thunderclouds, and generally they were winning when the two came into conflict.

And I knew where Blind Keith was. He was still on his horse, but they were going barely above a normal running pace. There was enough frost and ice on the ground—enough people spreading the frost—that there weren't many places where the animal could go much faster without running the risk of a potentially catastrophic fall. Apparently he didn't think it was worth the risk.

That was all on the basic, instinctive level of awareness. That was going on in the part of my mind that was more animal, more predatory.

The rest of me was still occupied with being terrified out of my freaking mind. It was weaker now that Blind Keith was further away, and I thought that the weakening of his influence over the Hunt might matter too, limiting the influence he could exert on me through that medium.

So I was still conscious. I could function and observe, even process most of the information I was getting normally. I could think and make decisions other than just to gibber at myself or attempt to run away at maximum speed.

It was just very, very hard.

I could feel him getting closer, in spite of everything, and gathered myself to face him. I could feel the support of the others behind me, although very few were anywhere close to me in a geographic sense. The werewolves of the pack were the closest, both physically and in a more abstract sense, but I could also feel a few of the Sidhe, some goblins, quite a few hounds of various kinds. There were

stranger things in the mix as well, creatures that I *understood* on a fundamental level through the Hunt but couldn't have named.

It was a powerful force, almost terrifyingly so, especially with the magic of the Wild Hunt tying them all together. Hopefully it would be enough. It should be enough.

Against Blind Keith, when he was backed by his own contingent of the Hunt? It was anyone's guess, really.

I saw him with my own eyes a moment later, riding up. His horse hadn't struck me as obviously unnatural earlier, but now it was taller than it had any right to be, thin to the point of being skeletal, with dark fires burning in its empty eye sockets.

But it paled beside its master. Absolutely and completely paled.

Blind Keith was shrouded in his thunderstorm, but I could see through it as easily as I knew he could look through the fog and frost shrouding us. I could see him clearly, a tall, gaunt figure that seemed to loom out of the darkness, more a presence than a person. He still had that blindfold wrapped around his eyes, but now it didn't seem a handicap. Rather, it contributed even more to the unnerving, disturbing nature of the sight. The dissonance there—a man who should by all rights be blind, coupled with behavior that was very much *not*—drove home how fundamentally *wrong* the scene was.

The werewolves whined and cringed, even those who weren't in fur, and several of them took a step or two back. Edward was the only exception, but then that made a certain degree of sense. He was the Alpha. It was in his nature to stand when others ran.

"I really didn't intend for things to go this far," Keith said casually. His voice was quiet, almost silent; I could hear him more because of the Hunt communicating his meaning to me than because I could actually *hear* him. "I only meant to push you."

Consider me pushed, I thought, as sarcastically as I could. The rational side of me didn't have enough control or interaction with my own body just at the moment to express an idea that abstract, but I was confident he would hear me thinking it. He would get the idea, anyway.

"Doesn't matter," I said out loud. My words were as hard to understand as his, but for very different reasons. Blind Keith spoke so softly that a human couldn't have heard from two feet away. I spoke in a snarl, more animal than human, the voice of someone who only vaguely understood how speech works.

"I suppose you're right," Blind Keith said, though which statement he was responding to was unclear. "What's done is done. It falls to us to deal with the consequences."

I wasn't sure what he was going to do next. There was something about his attitude that said it was going to be big, and violent, and probably something I would regret deeply, but I couldn't guess

what it would be specifically. I mean, this was *Blind Keith*. Everything I'd heard about him said that there were so many things he could do that I couldn't begin to guess at what he'd choose.

Before we could find out, Edward drew his gun and fired. He'd been practicing his quick draw for a couple hundred years now, and he was very, *very* good at it. It couldn't have been more than half a second between when he decided to act and when the third bullet hit its target.

I'd been expecting him to shoot at Blind Keith, and apparently the fae lord had been expecting that too, because he didn't do a thing to stop Edward, and I knew he could. He just didn't need to. Bullets meant basically nothing to someone on that level.

But Edward was a canny old wolf, and he knew that as well as I did. So he didn't shoot Blind Keith.

He shot the horse.

The bullets were precisely, perfectly aimed. The first two hit the creature in either eye, putting out the flames that smoldered there, and the third slammed home dead center in its throat. The horse staggered to the side and began to fall, and before it had moved six inches another two bullets hit it, aiming for the heart this time. Edward put one more round into it, in the side of the head, and then returned the revolver to its holster. I couldn't see him, but I could *feel* his satisfied smile.

It was a perfect opportunity, and I capitalized on it, running forward and drawing Tyrfin. The power of the Hunt ran through me, carrying with it the speed of a werewolf and the grace of the Sidhe, and I was moving so fast that my thoughts and reactions wouldn't normally have been able to keep up with my movements. But here, now, that wasn't a problem.

At the same time, the more disconnected part of me was acting as well, reaching out through the bonds of the Hunt to the werewolves. They were tied together by pack bonds as well as the connection of the Wild Hunt, and once I got into those bonds it was easy to feel what was happening to them. They were scared, and while that was entirely reasonable, I could feel the external influence pushing them in that direction, making that fear just a little more *compelling*.

If it really got established in them, the pack bonds would become a detriment, amplifying the effect until they were incapable of doing anything other than running mindlessly away from Blind Keith.

But I could feel the magic affecting them, and through the Wild Hunt I could do something about it. First I thinned the connection between my mind and my body, as far as I'd ever gone, until there were almost two completely different people, the me that existed in a physical form and the me that didn't.

Then I reached out to that fear that was threatening to destroy my allies, and did the same thing I'd done before. I couldn't stop Blind Keith's magic, couldn't overpower it, but I *could* redirect it.

Into myself.

The power of the emotion crushed me. Absolutely crushed me. There was enough left to maintain the magic redirecting it away from more vulnerable allies. But that was about it.

Physically, though, I'd reached Blind Keith, and started swinging. He'd fallen from the horse when it toppled, and though he'd done it as gracefully as only one of the fae could, it still left him briefly vulnerable. I followed up on that vulnerability, pressing forward, swinging again and again. He dodged most of the attacks, but on the rare occasions that I did manage to hit him, it *mattered*. He was powerful on a scale that matched Twilight Princes and demigods, but I was using Tyrfing. The sword cut through storm, cloth, flesh and bone without any difficulty.

Other members of the Hunt were charging in now, trying to interrupt, but the werewolves kept them off me, giving me room to fight. Another creature was beside them now, something that looked like a wolf but walked on two legs.

I really ought to learn his name, I thought absently, before going back to being crushed by the fear.

For a moment, I almost thought I would win. Blind Keith was on the defensive, and I was keeping him there, unable to fight back for fear of taking a serious hit from Tyrfing. The rest of the Wild Hunt was either on my side or kept at bay by those who were, and my strength in that realm was growing by the second, as more and more of the Hunters defected. It was the nature of the Wild Hunt to respect competence, and as I continued to hold my own against an enemy that should have destroyed me easily, more and more Hunters found themselves thinking that I was a more worthy leader than they'd anticipated.

And then I slipped.

It was a small mistake. One foot placed ever so slightly wrong, at the same time as a particularly intense surge of fear leaked through from the other side of me, leaving my muscles shaky just when I needed them to be strong.

A small mistake, but it meant that for a second—just one second—Blind Keith could act freely.

He reached up and pulled his blindfold away.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Open my eyes, and the world went away.

Close them, and things were normal again. I couldn't see, but I had an awareness of what was going on, I could hear and smell and feel things.

Open, and the world faded. I lost track of anything that might have been happening. I couldn't see, or hear, or smell, or even think beyond the most basic of concepts. The world was just a blur, passing me by without my really being aware of what was going on.

Okay, I thought, closing my eyes again. I can deal with this.

So what did I know? Well, first off, the Wild Hunt was gone, or more accurately *I* was gone from *it*. There was no way I could have missed the sort of constant sensory input that connection provided, and I wasn't feeling anything of the sort now.

I wasn't in the forest. Again, I would have known that. There were scents associated with that environment, very distinctive scents, and I wasn't smelling them. There was no odor of pine, no rich aroma of decaying humus. Instead I got the scents of clean fabric and soap. I was naked, but I could feel cloth against my skin when I moved, something that felt like flannel. Sheets, most likely.

So I'd been moved, and I was in a bed. That could be a very good or a *very* bad sign, depending upon who'd moved me. I tried to figure that out, and at first I didn't make much, if any, progress. I could hear voices, but they were quiet enough or distant enough that I couldn't make out words or meaning. I tried to reach out and feel for any animals that could give me a glimpse of what was going on, but I accidentally opened my eyes partway through getting the magic together, and dashed my concentration to pieces.

Damn, that was annoying. It struck me suddenly that if this kept up for very long at all, I would need some sort of blindfold to hold my eyelids closed. That made me think of Blind Keith, and *that* reminded me that this might very well not be a temporary problem. He was fae, the most powerful and deadly sort of fae, and a curse from that sort of being had a tendency to be *permanent*.

I tried not to think about that. I needed to focus right now, needed to keep my mind on track, and if there was one thing that was absolutely guaranteed to make me lose that focus, the idea of being permanently blinded was right up there in terms of what it might be.

I took a breath, forcing myself to keep still and calm in case anyone unfriendly was watching and waiting for me to wake up, and started to gather my magic again. Then I paused, noticing another scent, one which was considerably more welcome than anything else I'd experienced since meeting up with Blind Keith. The main tone was werewolf, with hints of olive oil and oregano, familiar and comforting.

"Anna?" I said. My voice came out as a croak, only barely comprehensible as speech.

A moment later, she hugged me, squeezing hard enough that my ribs wanted to scream. Had they been broken recently enough that it was a problem? I couldn't remember offhand, which worried me more than if I'd known for a fact that they had.

I'd been warned by a rustle of cloth, and thus I managed to keep from making any noise in response. But I still made the mistake of opening my eyes again as she hugged me, after which it took a few seconds to get them closed again and get my head in gear.

I could really get to hate this. It wasn't just the blindness, although that was more than bad enough. It was the fact that I had to *choose* blindness. If I'd had any doubts that Blind Keith was fae to the core, this dispelled them. The way it forced me to choose between bad and worse, the way it took something that should have been good and made it instead a devastating weakness, it was all in line with how the fae did things.

I could really get to hate them.

"Oh, my God," Anna said, letting me go. "You're finally awake."

"Finally?" I said, as flippantly as I could. "How long have I been asleep?" My voice still sounded horrid, but I thought it was getting better.

"Around twelve hours," she told me. "We were starting to worry whether you'd wake up. And your eyes."

Anna stopped talking very suddenly at that. I couldn't see her face, obviously, but I would have bet that she had the classic *oh, shit* expression on. She'd said something she hadn't meant to, and she'd very nearly said something that she *really* hadn't meant to. And somehow I was very confident that I wanted to hear the next line even less than she wanted to say it.

But what I wanted didn't have a whole lot to do with what I needed to know. So I took another deep breath and asked, "What's wrong with my eyes?"

There was another long, quiet pause. "I'm not sure," she said at last, and now she didn't sound so happy. "None of us have ever seen anything quite like it before. Not even Edward. It almost makes me think of a broken hollandaise. It's like everything's still there, it's just...not meshing together right."

"Except this is my eyes," I said quietly.

"Yeah," she said. "Except for that."

"I'm blind, by the way. Or as good as. I'll need some kind of blindfold, I think. Actually opening my eyes just makes it worse."

"With how they look, I'm not surprised," she said tartly. "How did this even happen?"

"I'm not entirely sure," I said. Thinking back on it, there was just a gap. I couldn't remember anything of what happened between the moment Blind Keith lifted his blindfold and the moment I woke up. "But if I had to guess, I looked at something I really shouldn't have."

"I thought it was something like that," she said. She reached out and took my hand, holding it tightly. I couldn't deny that I was a little grateful for it. I wasn't normally the type to really express affection physically, but under the circumstances, that connection, that grounding in the rest of the world was very welcome.

"Is the pack all right?" I asked.

There was a pause before she said, "Yeah, we're fine. Some bruises, but nothing serious. A couple of guys probably got a look at the same thing that put you down, but they woke up after a few hours, and their eyes were fine by this morning."

So what was that pause about? I wondered. If things were that good, if everyone was fine, then what had made her hesitate to tell me so?

And then I realized that she *hadn't* hesitated. She'd nodded, before realizing that that wasn't enough, that I couldn't see it. Because I couldn't see.

There had to be some kind of cure, something I could do about this. This was...I was not prepared to go through life like this.

"So," Anna said, and there was a hint of anger to her voice that made me sit up a little straighter. "I heard you asked Kyra for help with something back in Colorado. I heard this from *Edward*, because you specifically told Kyra not to tell me about it."

I made the mistake of opening my eyes to gauge her expression, and lost another few seconds. "Yeah," I said sheepishly once I'd managed to get myself together again. "Yeah, I did." I reached out blindly and grabbed one of the sheets, wrapping it tightly around my face. It wasn't an ideal blindfold, but it would do for the moment.

"*Why?*"

"Because I thought that you'd want to help otherwise," I said quietly. "And you don't have enough experience to handle this."

"How am I going to get experience if you won't let me do anything?" she asked, sounding more exasperated than angry now. "I have to start *somewhere*, Winter."

"This isn't a good place to start. Things are bad right now. Maybe the worst I've ever seen."

"Well, that's what I have to work with," she said. "Or do you think this is going to blow over? You think things are going to magically go back to the way they used to be? Because I don't think that can happen."

I sighed. "You're right," I said reluctantly. "I suppose I could bring you with me when I go back. But you'd have to listen when I tell you to do things."

"No problem! I'll go and get everything I need. You won't regret this, Winter."

I was already regretting it, but I didn't say a thing as she scampered out of the room. I just sat there with a sheet wrapped tightly around my face to keep me from opening my eyes by accident, thinking about just how badly things had gone wrong.

A minute or so later, I heard footsteps approaching, followed by a creak as weight settled into the chair next to the bed. "You're flashing everyone that walks by with how you pulled that blanket off," Edward said a few moments later. "In case you care."

I didn't, really, but I shrugged the blanket back into position on the off chance that someone else would. "What happened after the fight?" I asked. "I sort of lost it there towards the end."

There was a rustle of cloth suggesting that he'd shrugged. "Nothing much," he said. "After you went down, the fighting mostly stopped. The Wild Hunt left after a minute or so. They didn't really care about us, once you were taken out."

Somehow it didn't surprise me that he'd recognized the Wild Hunt. "There were no injuries?"

"Nothing major," he said. "A handful of young wolves tried to handle something they weren't ready for and got themselves beat up a little, but it'll heal. That sort of thing happens when young wolves get themselves into messes they can't handle."

I sighed. "This is about Anna," I stated. "You really aren't good at subtle."

"Nope," he said, and I could almost hear him grinning. "But it's a valid point. You really sure you should take her with you? Might not be doing her any favors, getting her into a fight against these sorts of people."

"Maybe not," I said. "But I don't see what else I can do. She's young, and she thinks she's invincible. So she's going to act like it until she realizes that there are much scarier things out there than werewolves. I've seen it before. I don't really like it, but I figure it's probably better that she work through that when I'm around in case something goes wrong than if she does it on her own."

"Maybe," he said. "God knows I've seen enough younglings that think they're immortal. I don't like it, but...maybe she's right. Things aren't getting better from here, not that I can see. Maybe she does need to learn how to live in the new world." There was a long, heavy silence after that, before he said, "Take care of my pack, Winter."

"I will," I said. "As best I can. Do you know where my stuff is?"

"Right next to you," he said. "Let me help you into it."

"Thanks," I said, sitting up and swinging my legs off the bed. "And...do you have anything I could use for a blindfold? I really don't think leaving without one is a good idea."

"No problem," he said, accompanied by a sound of tearing cloth. "Lean forward so I can tie this on."

I did, and he tied it around my eyes. It was a strip of fabric torn from the sheet, longer than I needed and ragged-edged, but it was a lot more convenient than having the entire sheet trailing behind me, and it would keep me from opening my eyes by mistake.

"Thanks for this," I said, as he handed me the pants and shirt I'd been wearing under the armor. "For the help, I mean. I didn't mean to put your pack in any danger, but I had the Wild Hunt after me and I wasn't sure what to do. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," he said, helping me into the armor. It was fairly involved process, pretty challenging to do by myself even when I could see all the buckles. "You've stuck your neck out for us a few times. As far as I'm concerned you're as good as pack, and the pack looks out for its own."

"Still," I said. "Thanks." A minute or two passed in silence as I finished donning my armor and checked that everything was on and secure. "Cloak?" I asked.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

I frowned, and reached out for it with my magic. I'd made that cloak, and I knew it with an intimacy that was hard to even conceptualize, let alone describe. It wasn't hard for me to feel it, pooled on the floor beside the bed.

I picked it up and draped it around my shoulders, reshaping it from a puddle back into a cloak, and making sure that all the weapons and tools that were supposed to be in it found their way back to the places I wanted them. The result wasn't as pretty as it might have been if I'd been able to see, but I thought it was passable.

"Ah," Edward said. "Cloak. Now I see what you mean." He pressed something into my hand. By the feel of it, it was round, hard, maybe three feet long, and probably wooden. A cane. "This might help while your eyes are out of it," he said.

"Yeah," I said, although I didn't like admitting it. "Thanks for the help."

"Don't mention it. Like I said, pack looks out for its own."

"I know," I said. "I will."

Back in Colorado, the mansion looked like it had been the site of a pitched battle. I was looking at things through Anna's eyes, which made the picture a little blurrier, but I could see enough to recognize that much. The building had taken a fair amount of damage, most of it cosmetic, but some of

it structural. Nothing that concerning, in the immediate sense. The forest around the house hadn't fared so well, with large areas being scarred by bullets, fires, or more exotic defenses.

Anna whined a little at the sight, and I picked up my pace slightly.

Inside, I went straight to the throne, ignoring the hush that fell over the room with my entrance. It wasn't as busy as it had been a few days earlier, just after Loki's pronouncement, but there was still a decently large number of people gathered there, talking, working. People read pages, scribbled on them, and then handed them to runners to be conveyed to the next person in line.

But when I walked in, the quiet hum of activity ceased entirely. It was a brief lull, but very noticeable.

I'd barely been on the throne a second before a trio appeared in front of me. Kyi bowed, Selene nodded, and Aiko hugged me tightly, slapped me across one armored cheek, and then sat down next to me.

"Okay," I said. "What happened here?"

"Newton and his faction of the independents attacked us yesterday," Selene said instantly. "Then Katrin led a raid on this location. Both attacks were rebuffed easily, and without any casualties or serious injuries."

"We have people tracking them back to their hideouts?"

"Yes," Kyi said. "Both groups. The werewolves, Vigdis, and Jackal's people are all working on localizing them."

"Good. Aside from those attacks, has anything of note happened?"

"Not really," Kyi said. "We've been focusing primarily on maintaining our current status while you've been gone. Some minor skirmishes with the vampires and some independents on our borders, but nothing major. The rakshasas appear to be dead or gone, and the military are still sitting tight on the land they claimed. The cops have an alliance with some of the independent factions that look more favorably on us, and their territories are effectively joined together."

"Which, considering our alliance with both parties, effectively brings that part of the city under our control," I noted.

"Yes."

"Very good. And finances?"

"Not great, not terrible," Selene said. "Tindr's managed to keep most of your assets afloat, and he's converted some of them to cash if we need it. But we wiped out a lot of our ready cash hiring those people you sent down here. We're getting by, but if something big comes up, we might not have enough to handle it."

"Okay," I said. "Good work, people. Excellent work. Anna, go with these people. They'll send you to where Kyra is, and you can help her track our targets down. Selene, I want to be notified if anything changes, or the instant that we have a confirmed location for either of the groups that attacked us."

"Got it, Boss," she said. "Where will you be?"

They couldn't see it, but I was confident my expression wasn't a happy one. "I'm going to go see Snowflake," I said.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I never would have guessed it, but in an odd way, I was actually grateful to be blind. I'd picked up a stray cat on the way to the hospital, and I could have been looking through her eyes, but I wasn't even doing that. It was easier to be blind.

Blind meant I couldn't see Snowflake lying in a hospital bed like she was dying.

"She woke up earlier," the attendant said. "Not for long, but she was awake."

"Is that a good sign?"

There was a brief hesitation. "I think so?" he said. "I mean, I think it would be a good sign for a human. But I'm not a veterinarian, so I don't have much experience with animals. I mean, I don't *really* have much experience at all, but what I do have is with people."

That phrasing annoyed me, but it wasn't worth following up on. "You haven't been a nurse long, then?" I asked. I wasn't much good at small talk, typically, but at the moment I'd have done almost anything for a distraction.

"Eight months," he admitted. "But you learn fast."

"I'd imagine." I thought for a moment, weighing and debating various options, and then came to a decision. "Get out, please," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Get out of this room," I repeated. "Far enough away that you can't hear anything going on in here. Go get lunch or something."

"Why?" His tone was just a little belligerent, like he was offended that I would think that he was willing to abandon his patient.

"Because I told you to," I said, with as much patience as I could muster. "And I'm thinking you've heard enough stories about me that you know better than to ignore me. Now hurry up."

There was no reply, but I heard footsteps moving away, followed by the quiet *click* of the door closing. It was a perfectly normal sound, but context gave it an ominous sense of finality.

I dropped into the cat's mind now, looking around. This was in part to check whether there was anyone else hiding quietly in the room, and in part because I really didn't want to be blind for this if it worked, and mostly because it meant that I could put off the next part for a few more seconds.

Empty. There was nothing in the hospital room except for me, Snowflake, and a whole lot of medical equipment. She didn't have quite so many tubes and monitors hooked up as the last time I'd seen her. That was a good sign, I was hoping.

It just wasn't good enough.

"Loki," I said. "Loki Lie-Crafter, Loki Sky-Traveler, Loki Laufeyjarson, I summon you."

There was a long, pregnant pause. Then a voice behind me said, "Howdy. What can I do for ya?"

A voice. *Not* Loki's voice, unless he'd changed it considerably.

I turned around slowly, managing not to jump or show other signs of surprise. I turned to face him more to maintain my image than anything, since I really didn't *need* to. I'd already gotten a look at things through the stray cat's eyes.

The being in the room looked like a man. He had sharp features, darkly tanned skin, and a broad, gap-toothed grin. He was wearing a black cowboy hat and cowboy boots, and a worn, battered leather jacket.

"Coyote," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"You tell me," he said. "Seein' as you're the one that called."

"Not *you*."

"Nope," he agreed. "But Loki's all tied up just now. He's in a meetin' with some of our peers to talk about whether he went too far with his little speech. So I figured I'd step in and see what it is you wanted, since he can't."

I frowned, thinking. Coyote had always, in my few interactions with him, come across as an easygoing, pleasant guy. But there was no way that was genuine, not with how old and powerful he was. If he was here, he wanted something.

But it was the only game in town, so I shrugged. "I was hoping I could get an answer from him," I said. "As per our arrangement."

"I don't recall bein' a part of this arrangement," Coyote said. "But I hear you've done all right by the employee I sent your way. So go ahead and ask your question. Maybe I can help you out."

"At what cost?"

He grinned a little wider. "Well, now, I reckon that's going to depend on what you're asking, don't you? Come on, ask. We both know you're gonna."

I sighed. "What should I do to help her?" I asked, pointing at Snowflake. My aim was off by a few feet at least, but I figured he'd get the idea. "And don't you dare say I should kill her or something like that. I'm not in the mood."

Coyote shut his mouth, looking disappointed. "Well, shoot," he said. "If you know the answer, why'd you ask?" He stood and looked at her for a moment, tapping one finger against his mouth. "I suppose I can handle this for you," he said. "But you'll owe me for this one, kid. You'll owe me a favor, and when I come calling you don't get to argue. Fair?"

It wasn't remotely fair. Owing someone an unspecified favor of their choosing was maybe the single worst position to be in, in a bargaining sense. It was a situation I normally avoided like the plague.

But for Snowflake, it was worth it.

"Fair," I said.

"I thought you'd agree with me," he said. "Get the dog and let's go."

I disconnected Snowflake from the various machines, as carefully as I could, and picked her up. She didn't stir, not even a little bit. I had the cat jump up onto my shoulder as I did, and then the three of us turned back to Coyote.

He was standing next to an Otherside portal, looking bored. "You ready yet?" he asked. If he was feeling any strain from holding the portal open, it didn't show in his voice or posture.

"Yeah," I said. "Where are we going?"

"Where we need to be," he said. "After you, please."

I grimaced and stepped through.

Unexpectedly, the experience sucked. A lot. I didn't pass out, the way I used to, but I felt a similar wave of nausea, and developed an instant headache. I staggered on the other side, almost tripping.

What the hell? I thought, trying to figure out what was different about it, why I should suffer this time, when for quite a while now crossing through a portal hadn't been unpleasant at all.

And then I realized I was blind again, and it became clear. I pulled my mind out of the cat's, and the feeling went away entirely. Of course. I'd figured out a way to get around the blindness, but now it was just making things worse. It was the same as the dilemma I'd noticed when I first woke up. I had the choice, it was just that both choices were terrible.

I could *really* get to hate the fae.

"What do you want?" a female voice snapped. "I mean I'm right in the middle of my lunch right now and now I have *you* here and bloody hell does that dog have a catheter? And that cat just started throwing up on my goddamn floor, do you have any idea how long it took me to get that floor clean?"

I paused. I couldn't see to confirm it, but there was something about this that was...familiar.

"You'll deal," Coyote said. "These two have work for you. On my tab."

"I hate having to deal with him," the female said. I presumed that meant Coyote was gone. "Hey, wait. I know you. You're the one came in a while ago with a kitsune. Poison, right? That was a fucking awful night."

"I remember," I said. "But I'm kind of in a rush here."

"Well let's take a look at this since apparently now I'm a veterinarian, really wish someone had fucking told me that because you know it really isn't my area of expertise. Well, hurry up now, put her on the slab. Can't do a whole hell of a lot just standing here can I?"

I hesitated, but there wasn't much of a way around it. "I'm actually blind right now," I said. *I really hope it's just right now, at least*, I thought grimly.

"Oh of course you are, because this day just wasn't bad enough already. I suppose you want me to take care of that in addition to everything the dog needs done?"

"That'd be nice," I admitted. "But it's a lower priority right now."

She snorted rudely. "Well you're on Coyote's tab, and I don't mind saying that I'm just as pleased to charge him through the nose so let's go ahead and see what we can do while you're here. But for now I need to take a look at the dog so come here."

She grabbed my arm roughly, pulling me forward. I jerked away instinctively, caught by surprise, but her grip was surprisingly strong, and I didn't even come close to shaking her off.

She tugged me on until I walked into the heavy stone slab she used as an operating table, and caught me when I lost my balance at that. I set Snowflake down carefully and backed away, giving her room to work.

"Condition's stable," she said after a minute or so. "Don't know how she'd have done on her own, but I figure I can get her back to shape almost perfectly. Maybe a little brain damage but I'll have to take a closer look to see for sure on that one and it's going to take some time. Now get over here so I can see what's going on with your eyes."

I started to move, but before I could she'd grabbed me again and started pulling me to the side. I stumbled once or twice, but she caught me and held me up easily, despite being maybe half my size at the most.

"Okay," she said. "Now lie down on the slab and let me take this cat, not very hygienic but I suppose that isn't such a problem for you and I can always just splash some disinfectant in your eyes after we're done, you're a tough guy so you can take it."

She snatched the limp weight of the cat off my shoulder, and I felt around for the slab before easing myself onto it. It was hard, and I suspected it would have felt cold to anyone else.

"All right," she said, talking to herself more than me now. "Pull off the helmet, pull off the blindfold, and what do we have here?" My helmet hit the floor with a metallic *clunk*, and I felt her start to prod at my eyes. Her fingers, through the latex gloves, were uncomfortably warm, almost hot. I didn't open them, and she didn't try to make me. "Interesting bruising here," she mused. "And a rather odd coloration. How did this happen?"

"I saw what's under Blind Keith's blindfold," I said.

"Fascinating. What's he look like?"

"I don't remember."

She sighed. "Of course not. I'm going to open your eyes now. Try not to do anything stupid."

She pulled my eyelids up, and once again, the world just sort of...went away. I was drifting, without any real anchor, and I had no idea what was going on. That went on for several seconds as she poked at my eyes. I was aware that I should have found that unpleasant, but I couldn't actually connect that to a feeling of discomfort.

A few seconds later, she let me go. "Well," she said, "the good news is I'm pretty sure this is temporary. The bad news is that it's going to take some time."

"How much time?" I asked.

I could feel her fingers pull away from my face and then return as she shrugged. "Hard to say. A few months, maybe? Probably less than a year."

"Months," I said, with a sinking feeling. "I really can't afford for this to last for months."

She shrugged again. "I don't know what to tell you. I mean I can maybe do something to speed it up but this specific curse isn't one that I'm familiar with so I can't say for sure what will happen. I'm like seventy percent sure it will speed things up at least a little, so it maybe takes a few weeks instead of months, but the other thirty percent I have no idea what happens. Maybe it cures you instantly, or maybe it *makes* this permanent."

I debated for a few seconds, then sighed. As usual, I was borrowing against tomorrow to pay my dues today. But if I didn't live through the next few months, which might well be the case if I were blind at a key moment, this might as well be permanent.

"Do it," I said.

"Cool," she said. "I mean it's up to you and everything, but I really kinda want to see what happens." She disappeared, returning several seconds later. "This will hurt," she said, reaching for my face again.

I didn't fight as she peeled my eyelids back again, taping them against my forehead. Then she dumped something onto my face.

It hurt. More specifically, it hurt the way I imagined having battery acid dumped straight into your eyes might hurt. And then it got *worse*. The battery acid was boiling now.

I screamed, and kept screaming until I lost consciousness.

Waking up was easier than I'd expected. Harder in some ways—I couldn't blink, and that made it feel rather strange—but easier in others. Quicker, if nothing else. I didn't need to think to remember where I was, or how I'd gotten there.

"How'd it work?" I asked, sitting up. I reached out and found the cat a moment later, giving me enough vision to determine that the doctor was standing by Snowflake doing something inexplicable with a syringe. The cat was watching it with a sort of bored amusement. She'd been fed recently.

"Not bad, not bad at all," the doctor replied. "I'm like ninety percent that your eyes are getting better now. Faster than I thought they would, too. You should be good to take the bandages off in about a week, and your eyes should be working within a week or two after that. I mean not working perfectly, there's going to be some sequelae and, you know, side effects and shit like that. But you'll be able to see, sort of."

"You," I muttered, "do not have a comforting bedside manner."

"Slabside," she corrected me. "And you know people tell me that sometimes, but I'm still the best at what I do so they keep coming back. I just figure, you know, fuck it. This deal with the dog is going to take a while you know, maybe a week or two? You might as well go, come back later and pick her up."

"How do I get back here?" I asked, standing up. I was a little dizzy, and my eyes felt like they were the size of tennis balls crammed into sockets that couldn't begin to hold them, but overall I was better off than I'd expected.

"There's a room over there, behind the curtain, for people to show up. Open a portal there. You can open a portal right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I can. Thanks."

"Coyote's paying," she said, shrugging. "Oh, and leave the cat. I haven't had one around in a while. It's kinda nice you know, and it gives the kids something to cuddle with while I'm cutting them up."

"I don't think she's that great at cuddling."

"Neither am I," the doctor said, grabbing a tool off the slab. She pushed a button and it started to spin, something like a tiny buzzsaw.

I decided to leave before I saw what she was planning to do with that. I took the time to study the alcove behind the curtain before I left, making sure I knew it well enough to open a portal there, and I left the cat behind.

"We've got them," Kyi said excitedly. "Both of them, ninety-five percent confidence that we have the location of their headquarters."

I started to look up, remembered, and borrowed a raven outside to do so instead. It was a little while after noon, early enough that it would be several hours before dusk. "Great," I said. "We're hitting Katrin's base, ASAP. Call Kikuchi, Frishberg, Pellegrini, and the independent mages and see if any of them want to participate. Other than that, I want all of the Inquisition mages and about half the housecarls, the werewolves if they want to come. Leave the other housecarls, the ghouls, Jackal's people, Jack, and any of the humans who can fight to defend this house."

"Yes, my jarl," she said, bowing slightly. "Which of the housecarls do you want with us?"

"You know what we're likely to be facing here. Use your best judgment," I said. "Selene!"

"Yes?" the succubus said, from right next to me. Apparently she'd been standing there all along, and I just hadn't noticed.

I tried not to jump, and reminded myself that apologizing wasn't something a jarl did. "Get equipment distributed," I said. "I want everyone going on this raid carrying grenades, light sources, and at least one sharp edge to decapitate a vamp with. Anyone who can reliably use a holy symbol of some kind comes with us, and make sure they're carrying them. Tindr!"

"Here, jarl," Tindr said. He was a distance away, but I heard his footsteps approaching rapidly.

"Call every church and place of worship in town," I said. "Everyone you can get in touch with. I want as much holy water and blessed objects as you can beg, borrow, or steal. Keep it separate, but distribute it out. I want everyone that goes with us to be carrying water balloons, squirt guns, anything you can come up with. Also, figure out a way to get everyone a head of garlic." I looked around—well, turned my head around, at least. "Move, people!"

They ran off in different directions, all three of them shouting orders to their various underlings. I walked over and sat in my throne, smiling a little.

"Wow," Aiko said, hugging me casually. "This is it, huh?"

"Yeah," I said. "This is it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The scene outside the building was a madhouse by the time I got there. There were jötnar running around, a group of werewolves loitering next to a selkie, some mages. To say that it was chaotic would be a spectacular understatement.

I looked for an island of sanity in the midst of the madness, and found it in the form of Kyi. The housecarl was standing on the sidelines, watching. I walked up, and she turned to face me, nodding. "Jarl," she said. "Why is there a raven on your shoulder?"

"Not your problem," I said. "Situation?"

"We're getting into position for the assault," she said. "We've got most of the stuff you asked for distributed."

"What's missing?" I asked, frowning.

"Garlic."

My frown deepened, and I pulled my cell phone out, dialing Tindr. "Garlic," I snapped the second he answered. "Where is it?"

"I'm sorry, jarl," he replied. "I couldn't—"

"No," I said, cutting him off. "I don't want excuses. I want garlic. Make it happen and get it here *now*." I hung up before he could say anything else. "Okay," I said to Kyi. "That's in the works. How many people do we have here?"

"For housecarls there's me, Vigdis, Kjaran, Herjolfr, Thraslaug, Brandulfr, and Nóttolfr. All of the Inquisition mages are here, and the independent factions sent another eight between them. Four werewolves and a selkie."

"Good," I said. "Any word from Pellegrini or Frishberg?"

Kyi hesitated. "Maybe," she said. "There are some humans over there that wanted to talk to you. I didn't want to make any deals or anything without you, so they're still waiting." She pointed.

"Good," I said. "Keep getting everything ready, and look for someone to be showing up with garlic. I'm going to go talk to them."

"Does garlic even do anything to vampires?" Aiko wondered as we walked.

"Beats me," I said. "But I want every advantage I can get. Garlic's cheap."

We passed in front of the Inquisition mages first. There weren't as many as there used to be. All three shapeshifters had survived, oddly enough, which gave me a hawk, a bear, and a wolf. Jimmy

provided very literal firepower, and while Doug's control of plants and plant products was unlikely to be terribly useful here, he had some valuable secondary abilities. Aubrey probably couldn't affect a vampire directly, given how alien and inhuman their mental functions were, but he could keep track of people and maybe handle communications in a pinch. Even Mac was there, to my surprise. I was certain that she wasn't going to be going inside, but as field medics went, we could do a lot worse.

I didn't stop or say anything to them. There were problems that could be fixed, and there were problems that couldn't. My issues with the Inquisition were the second kind. Talking was more likely to make things worse than better, and I couldn't afford that right now.

Next was the werewolves. Here I did stop, taking a hard look at them. It had occurred to me that a certain sort of person might try to slip an infiltrator in among this group, with the assumption that people wouldn't be able to tell one werewolf in fur from another. But I recognized all of them. Kyra was wearing the heavy, custom-made armor I'd given her for her last birthday, giving her a grim, intimidating look. Daniell was smaller and leaner, built for quickness rather than strength, and Anna was somewhere in between. Ryan, back on two feet, and Unna rounded out the group.

"Status?" I asked.

"Ready when you are, sir," Ryan said. I noticed with some amusement that he'd fallen right back into old habits. His posture could have been the picture in a military textbook describing attention, and he was calling me *sir* again.

"You've got holy water?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," Ryan said, touching the squirt gun on one hip, then the water balloons on the other. They looked a little comical next to a submachine gun and a handful of fragmentation grenades, respectively, but Ryan didn't seem at all awkward about it. Unna just smiled, showing small, sharp teeth, and nodded. The motion was a quick bob, something that made me think of a bird more than a human.

"Good," I said. "Be ready."

Anna fell in on my left side as we walked away, butting her head against my thigh as we walked. It felt good, in an odd way. It wasn't the same as having Snowflake there, but I'd gotten used to having Aiko on one side and a canine on the other in situations like this one. Going back to that was strangely comforting.

Next up was the independent faction. If you could even call it that; they were standing together, but it wasn't the same as the other groups. There was none of that sense of solidarity. There was a subtle but noticeable distance between them, a sense of distrust bordering on barely-hidden hostility.

"Status?" I asked them.

"We're ready," one of them asked. He was shorter than I was, and stocky, but there was a solidity about him. I couldn't phrase it any better than that, couldn't even put my finger on what it was.

It was just that I looked at him and got the impression that he was sturdy, like there just wasn't a whole lot that would really phase him.

"How many of you have fought vampires before?" I asked.

There were eight mages there. Seven hands went up, and the only one who didn't raise his hand still looked perfectly confident. He might not have fought *vampires*, but I was guessing he'd done his share of fighting and then some.

It was kind of nice to have some people who really knew what they were doing there. Eight mages who knew what they were fighting and how to deal with it was a significant force, and this group smelled considerably stronger than the Inquisition, overall.

"Good," I said. "Be ready. We're making final preparations for the assault now."

Which, finally, left only the humans. There were two groups, both at a distance from the preparations going on around the building, although they were maintaining a distance from each other. There was definitely no kind of trust between them, judging by the way they treated each other. Both groups were gathered around vehicles, but the vehicles in question didn't have much in common. One was a fleet of anonymous black SUVs, while the other consisted of military-style jeeps.

I went for the SUVs first. A guy in black body armor was lounging against one of them. He didn't have any visible weapons, but I was confident he was carrying something where it couldn't easily be seen.

He wasn't the only one there, but his posture suggested that he was the leader, and that impression was reinforced when he waved at me. So he was the one I walked up to.

"Nice dog," he said casually.

Anna bristled, hackles raising. I rested one hand on her head, reminding her of where she was, and watched the man in armor. He was looking at Anna, but there was no fear or surprise in his cool, flat grey eyes.

"You know better than that," I said, fully confident that I was right. "Next time you go fishing for a reaction from a werewolf, there are probably smarter ways to go about it than that."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. His voice was just as casual as before, blank and dispassionate in the same way his eyes were.

"Why are you here?" I asked, not making an effort to sound polite or friendly.

"Mr. Pellegrini felt you could use some assistance," he said.

"You're here to help with the assault?" I asked.

He smiled. It didn't touch his eyes at all. "That would be illegal. But I'm sure some of us are prepared to defend ourselves in the case of an attack. That would only be reasonable, with how dangerous the roads are recently."

"I expect you to follow my orders while you're here," I said. "You and all your people. Clear?"

"Crystal," he drawled. "We'll follow your orders right up until they contradict our instructions from Mr. Pellegrini."

"Fair enough," I said. "You see the woman over there? Tattoos, carrying a compound bow, telling people what to do? Go tell her I sent you to pick up armaments."

"We've got our own stuff," he said. "No worries."

I stared at him for a long, quiet moment. "That wasn't a request," I said. "Now get over there."

He stiffened and glared at me for a moment, then nodded.

I went to the next group.

This one had a much different vibe to it, much more organized and formal. There were groups of people standing together by each of the vehicles. They talked quietly to each other, moved around a little, but they stayed in their groups, and they were obviously ready to move at a moment's notice. They were all wearing identical uniforms, carrying identical rifles.

They looked uncomfortably military. I hadn't really dealt with the military before.

I didn't have to look for the person in charge here. The hierarchy was pretty obvious, and if it hadn't been, I'd still have known when he walked over to meet me as I approached. He was young, maybe early twenties, with blond hair shaved close to his head and blueish eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked, stopping a short distance away.

"Second Lieutenant William Delaney," he said, saluting. Literally saluting. "Platoon leader, Tenth Special Forces Group."

I bit back a sigh, and resisted the urge to rub my forehead. It wouldn't do any good anyway, given that I was wearing a helmet. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Sir, it is our understanding that you are preparing to lead an assault upon a fortified enemy location. I have been assigned to support you."

"Okay," I said. "And why exactly is the Army supporting me over her?"

"Sir, I am not privy to that information."

"Oh, come off it," I said wearily. "You might not have been there for the meeting, but you know the gist of what they decided. Give."

"If I had to guess, sir? You don't have the authority to do what you're doing, but at least there will still be a city when you're done."

I nodded. "Fair enough," I said. "How much support, exactly?"

"Anything within reason, sir."

"Cool," I said, eyeing the building we were here to assault. It was a big, old house, the sort that probably dated back a hundred and fifty years or more. It had been remodeled a few times since then, but the basic structure was the same. "I don't suppose you have any explosives?"

About half an hour later, I was standing a little less than two hundred feet away, surrounded by a small group of very, very scary people. Each of the major groups involved in the assault had a person there to coordinate things. Kyi was representing the housecarls, and Kyra was there for the werewolves. Those two were the closest to me, literally and metaphorically.

The rest were a little further away. Pellegrini's chief thug and Lieutenant Delaney were standing on opposite sides of the group, very carefully ignoring each other. Aubrey was there for the Inquisition, more because he didn't have a place in the thick of things and I could tolerate his presence reasonably well than because he had any kind of leadership role. The independent mages, after considerable discussion, had settled on a tall, slender woman I didn't know as their representative.

Aiko was there as well, as was Anna. But that was different. They were with *me*, not just acting as liaisons.

"The evacuation is complete?" I asked. "We're sure?"

"Absolutely, jarl," Kyi said.

"Good. Everyone is equipped and briefed on their role?"

There was a chorus of responses from that, all of which were some flavor of affirmative.

"Good," I said again. "Lieutenant, I believe that's your cue."

He nodded and lifted a radio to his mouth, muttering into it. I didn't bother trying to parse what he was saying. I didn't know military jargon, and all that really mattered was that he was giving the order to begin.

A few seconds later, the explosives went off.

This was nothing like the last time we'd blown up a vampire's lair. Those had been demolition explosives repurposed as weapons, and they'd been deployed with the intention of damaging the building rather than destroying it.

These were military-grade, and they'd been set out by someone who knew what they were doing with the specific intent of leveling the place. It was a whole different ballgame.

Two hundred feet away, the noise was still something painful. I had to make a considerable effort to keep the raven on my shoulder, acting as my eyes, when it wanted to fly away from the blast.

The effect on the house, though, was considerably more pronounced. It shattered, and the whole thing started to collapse in on itself in a cloud of dust and smoke.

"Be ready," I said quietly. Well, quietly compared to the explosion, anyway. "It isn't over."

For several long seconds, nothing happened, and I almost thought it really was going to be that easy.

Then monsters started pouring out of the wreckage. Some of them looked like humans, at least superficially. But they didn't move like humans, not in the slightest. They picked up timbers that must have weighed fifty or a hundred pounds and tossed them aside like nothing, just flicked them out of the way. Behind them came creatures that instead mocked dogs, but too large, too fast, and apparently unfazed by the building being blown up around them. After *them* came ghouls.

Most of the creatures were injured, some of them grievously. But they didn't seem to care, didn't hesitate, showed no signs of pain.

I had to admit, I was impressed by how smooth the reaction was. I'd expected Pellegrini's men and the soldiers to hesitate, unable to deal with something so far outside of their comfort zone. And, to a certain extent, they did.

But after only a few seconds, they lifted weapons and started shooting.

There were about forty soldiers, and a comparable number of gangsters. Most of them were using automatic weapons, and while they were firing in short, controlled bursts, it still translated to a whole lot of bullets flying downrange.

But they'd gotten the orders I passed on. They shot long past the point where they would have stopped if they were shooting at humans. They shot until they were out of ammo, and then they started reloading to shoot some more.

It did some good. Some of the creatures, mostly those in the leading ranks, fell and didn't stand back up. They were tough and they didn't feel pain, but there was a certain degree of damage where that didn't matter anymore. Once enough muscles and bones have been destroyed, you can't stand up, period.

I wasn't sure how many of them were actually *dead*, of course. The ghouls could probably recover given the opportunity, and if the other creatures were comparably sturdy the gunfire might have barely killed any of them. But it slowed them down, and it took some of them out of the fight. That was worth something.

But they couldn't keep up constant fire. They had to reload. And these things were crazy enough to just keep charging right through the bullets, running towards us at full speed even as their fellows fell to the ground around them.

It only took a short time for them to reach us.

Our front line consisted of the housecarls, with the werewolves and shapeshifters mixed in for support. As the enemy got closer Kyra and Anna ran down to join in, providing a bit of much-needed bulk to the line.

There was a big part of me that wanted to do the same. I could contribute, maybe more than anyone else right now. This was the kind of fight that I excelled at.

But I was more valuable here, watching and coordinating, and waiting in case something nastier came out of the ruins of the house next.

They reached our front line, and the jötnar went to work, cutting them down and pushing them back. They'd heard my orders as well, and they followed them, focusing on defense more than doing lots of damage. They pushed the attackers away, picked them up and threw them bodily backwards. Here and there an axe or sword connected and took off limbs or heads. Decapitation was enough to finish most of them, but hard to manage. Taking off limbs didn't put them down, and the wounds didn't bleed nearly as much as they should, but once a creature had lost two or three they weren't nearly as much of a threat.

Again, tactics had to be adapted based on the enemy's capabilities. With foes like this, you had to assume that they'd keep fighting no matter what you did. Bleeding wounds, painful wounds, scary wounds, these things didn't *mean* anything. You had to either kill them quickly or else just focus on making it so they weren't physically capable of continuing the fight.

Where the fighting got particularly intense, or the enemy looked like they might break through, a werewolf or a shapeshifter was quick to jump in, tearing the creatures to pieces and throwing them away. They were the shock troops, not as good on defense, but when they hit back it was devastating. I'd expected Kris to play more of a scouting role, but I'd been forgetting just how much she'd practiced with her abilities. She got right into the thick of things, tearing at warped men and dogs with massive claws, knocking ghouls over and tossing them around.

And the whole while, the soldiers and gangsters kept right on shooting. They had to be more careful now, keeping their shots well away from the front, but still did plenty of damage. More and more creatures were falling now.

Then one of the mages stepped in, lashing out with raw invisible force. These blasts did more damage than anything yet, shattering creatures and tossing them through the air, leaving them lying on the ground like broken toys. One of them hit a ghouls straight-on, and the thing flew into the air. It didn't land for a solid thirty seconds, and when it did it *splattered*.

All things considered, we were doing almost ridiculously well. We'd weathered their initial assault without a single casualty, and we'd almost wiped them out. And that wasn't even considering how many of them we'd killed with the first explosion, taking the house down. I had a strong suspicion that the reason everything we were fighting was so tough was because anything else hadn't made it through the demolition.

And then, just like I'd guessed, something nastier came out.

Chapter Thirty

At first the difference between the latest arrival and the previous monstrosities wasn't obvious. It looked a great deal like the humanoid monsters, bipedal and generally human in shape, but with a twistedness to its body and a speed to its movement that no human could match. No one really noticed it at first. They were too busy with the creatures that had already reached us, keeping things under control.

But I noticed. I was watching the wreckage more than the fight, for this specific reason.

"Watch out!" I shouted. "Vampire incoming!"

Apparently said vampire heard me, because it stopped pretending to be even remotely close to human. It had been maybe a hundred and fifty feet when I shouted, far enough away to give us a comfortable amount of time before it reached us at its current pace.

It covered that distance in all of three seconds, and jumped over our front line entirely, landing somewhere behind our entire group.

I spun to face it, reaching for weapons and snarling curses.

I was just in time to see it land, a few feet behind the ranks of gunmen. They'd heard my warning, and some of them managed to turn and start shooting before it could move from where it landed.

It didn't seem to matter. The vampire rushed forward into their midst, and I thought most of them missed, unable to compensate for the sheer *speed* with which the thing moved. The handful of rounds that did hit it didn't have a noticeable effect. Gaping holes appeared in its flesh, but it didn't slow, didn't even seem inconvenienced by the damage.

The same could not be said for the gunmen. The vampire moved forward into their midst, laying about itself with all four limbs as it ran forward, and every blow sent a person sprawling, if not *flying*. It wasn't using a weapon, but I couldn't really think of anything that would have helped it anyway. As fast as it was moving, a gun would have just gotten in the way, slowed it down. As hard as it hit, a knife or sword would have just slowed it down for no reason.

Within a handful of seconds, it had cleared a large area around itself. Gangsters and soldiers, it didn't seem to make a difference; everything it hit went down, and the ones that were standing back up weren't doing so quickly.

And then it stopped, and looked at me. I'd gotten to within the area it had cleared for itself, and I was holding Tyrfing.

"Ah," it said. "And the jarl stands for himself at last. It took you long enough."

I didn't say a word, just threw myself at it, slashing straight for its center of mass. It tried to dodge out of the way, but I'd aimed where I did for a reason. It had to move half its body sideways to avoid the sword.

Normally, it could probably have done it. Normally.

But it was still broad daylight out here. While this vamp was apparently old and powerful enough to function in the sunlight, I had no doubt that it was functioning at less than its best. It was barely faster than I was, where before when I'd fought vampires they'd left me so far behind that it wasn't even close to being a fight.

The end result was that it dodged the worst of the blow. I didn't cut it in half, the way I would have liked to.

But it lost its right arm from the elbow down, and I cut halfway through its thigh on that side as well. Blood gushed out of its body momentarily from the stump, before slowing to a trickle. It took another few steps to the side, stumbling a little, and then stopped and stared at me.

I lifted the sword to a ready position and smiled at it behind my helmet. The vamp hesitated only a moment before rushing forward again, one hand snapping out at my face.

I dodged aside, only to realize at the last moment that it hadn't been aiming for me.

It snatched the raven off my shoulder, and crushed it between its fingers in a heartbeat.

Instantly, I was blind again, and reeling from the pain I felt transmitted from the raven's mind in the last instants of its life. I scrambled for other ways to piece together an image of my surroundings, focusing my magic to find another animal to look through, or enough awareness of air currents to track motion.

The pain made me slow and clumsy. I hadn't gotten anything together when I felt a heavy impact to my abdomen. It didn't penetrate the armor, but it picked me up and threw me backward. I landed hard on something soft.

I laid there for a few seconds, getting my head in gear and figuring out how to see. After a couple of seconds I managed to get a solid connection to the werewolves.

It gave me an odd, kaleidoscopic view of the battle. I was connected to the *pack*, rather than any individual, and the difference was incredible. I was simultaneously processing input from Kyra, Anna, Ryan, and Daniell, and they were all looking in different directions. I'd never have been able to manage it if I hadn't been practicing handling multiple inputs, information from multiple animals at once, and even as it was it was a little dizzying.

Ryan was still watching the battle below. He'd been one of the ranged combatants this time around, using his submachine gun, and he had the ingrained discipline to keep to his role even when there was a fight with a vampire raging behind him.

Through his eyes, I could see that the mass of ghouls and monsters was still contained. They weren't being shot nearly as much now that most of the soldiers and gangsters were down, but the barrage of gunfire had done enough to slow them down and weaken them that the housecarls could keep things under control. Some of them were injured, but I didn't think any were down entirely.

Kyra, on the other hand, was in the thick of things, fighting beside the jötnar. In the moment I made contact, she was biting a ghoul's shin. She bit down hard enough to crack the bone, then *twisted*, pulling the bone to pieces. When she let go her teeth pulled chunks of flesh loose, and the ghoul had barely been free for half a second when she lunged upward, catching it a little higher on the leg. She repeated the process three more times over the next couple seconds, pulling the monster down and leaving its leg as little more than shredded meat.

I didn't see as much from her angle. But I did gain a renewed appreciation for what a werewolf was capable of in a melee.

Next was Anna. She'd been hanging back a little, taking a breather, at the moment that the vampire had attacked, and as a result she'd been free to turn and watch. At the moment she was mostly watching *me*, so I could see myself from the outside. It was a little strange, but it let me figure out where I was. I'd landed a short distance away from where I'd been standing, on top of a pair of downed gangsters. It was hard to say whether they were alive or dead at a distance and I didn't have time to check myself, but they weren't moving.

And last of the werewolves was Daniell. Like Anna, she'd been watching what happened behind the lines, but her focus was more on the vampire than me. She was running up to it now, running even faster than it had. Smart choice, given that she was one of the very few people quick enough to pose a meaningful threat to it.

I was still trying to stand when she jumped on it, biting and tearing. It tried to swat her away with its remaining arm, but she twisted aside with almost unbelievable agility, falling to the ground and then lunging forward again. She caught its already-wounded leg and bit deeply, tearing away another large chunk of meat.

Apparently the vampire had had enough of *that*, because it jumped again, a freakish fifteen-foot-high leap that carried it right over Daniell's head.

The werewolf spun just in time to watch it come down in the midst of the mages. Once again, it didn't hesitate a moment before lashing out. It caught the independent mage who'd been providing the force magic with its sole remaining hand and ripped his throat open to the spine, then swung its fist into the side of Doug's head hard enough to cave the man's skull in.

The force mage was dying, obviously and rapidly. But his face was locked in an expression of grim determination, something almost frightening to behold, and he was still standing. He threw his magic at the vampire, and I could smell it from here, disinfectant touched with the scents of blood and

death. He landed only a glancing blow, I was pretty sure, but it still smashed the monster to the ground hard. The next hit visibly shattered most of its bones.

Some part of me was aware that this was magic on a scale I'd seldom seen. His attacks on the ghouls had been powerful, but nothing like this, and he should have been getting tired, not building up steam. He was using blood magic, had to be, throwing his life behind his magic. Made sense, I supposed; he was dying anyway.

The rest of me was too busy staring at Doug as he crumpled to the ground. I'd never been too close to him; he was nice, and a genuinely good person, while I could claim neither. But I'd gotten to know him fairly well while we were working together, and I'd liked the big guy. He was a decent sort.

And now he was dead, as fast as that. That kind of brain damage was the sort of thing that killed almost instantly, and there wasn't anything much I could do about it. Not even magic was going to fix this. He was gone.

The force mage let out a final gasp and then collapsed. He'd bought some time with his life, but the vampire was still moving. Even with most of its bones broken, it was still trying to stand.

Mac was the next closest mage. She watched the force mage die. She spent a long moment staring at Doug, or rather at Doug's corpse.

And then I saw something I'd never expected to see.

I saw Mac use her magic offensively.

She stretched out one hand towards the vampire, her mouth set in a hard line. A gentle white light glowed around her hand, twining between her fingers like streamers of luminescent cloud. I smelled her magic as well as I started to jog towards the scene—I wasn't quite up to running just yet, not without risking an embarrassing fall.

There was something odd about it, though. The normally mild scent of her magic was touched with something darker this time, something very much akin to blood.

In fact, it smelled uncomfortably similar to the tone that had been in the force mage's magic in the instants before he died. It smelled an awful lot like blood magic.

The vampire slowed dramatically. It was still moving, but there was less purpose to it now, less *focus*. It started to stand, then slipped and fell again.

I was moving as quickly as I could, but Aiko was closer, faster on her feet, and not blind. She reached the vampire before I was even close, and thrust her katana squarely through its neck.

It collapsed back to the ground as she severed the spinal cord. A moment later she pulled the blade out and thrust again, stabbing it through the heart this time.

It took only a few seconds for the last of the ghouls to be mopped up. A handful of the jötnar were injured, none of them seriously. The werewolves and shapeshifters were untouched by the battle, to all appearances.

I took the time to decapitate the vampire completely, and doused the body in holy water just to be careful.

Lieutenant Delaney found me there. Anna was standing beside me, providing me with eyes. She turned to watch as he got close. I didn't bother. I didn't need to with her watching him, and this would help my image.

"That was a vampire?" he asked quietly, watching me.

"Yep," I said, dumping the last of the holy water on the body. I couldn't have said whether it was working, but it probably didn't matter. It was decapitated, and the heart was completely destroyed and removed. That was enough to kill even a vampire.

"Are they always that tough?"

I snorted. "Usually they're a hell of a lot worse than that," I said dryly. "That's why we're doing this in the daytime. It makes it easy."

He stared. "Jesus motherfucking Christ," he said. "That thing killed half my men. That was it being *easy*?"

"Yep," I said. "I know it's hard to believe, but it was. Now, if you'll excuse me, there are some people I need to talk to. Preparations to make." I started walking away.

"Preparations for what?" he asked, hurrying to keep up.

I didn't glance back, although Anna did, giving me a look at him anyway. "You didn't think this was over, did you?" I asked. "We're going to finish the job. I'll understand if you don't want to participate any more."

He paused, then nodded. "There are more of those things here," he said. "This city won't be safe until they're dead."

"Good," I said. "Glad to have you with us. Go and take care of your people, get ready. We'll be going in in about fifteen minutes."

He left, and we kept walking. Aiko found us within a few moments, and we walked up to the mages together.

They were gathered in a clump around the bodies of Doug and the force mage. It looked like half of them were in mourning, and the other half were *pissed*.

I was pleased to see that second group. It was selfish of me, maybe, but I couldn't help but think that pissed was good. I could *use* pissed.

"Hey," I said. "Who here's good with fire?"

Jimmy raised his hand without looking away from Doug. A moment later, so did another mage, one of the independents.

"Good," I said. "Come with me." I walked away without waiting for an answer.

At the wreckage of the house, the housecarls were dousing things in accelerant under Kyi's direction, while the werewolves stood guard. They carried jugs of gasoline and kerosene from the cars and splashed them generously on the building. Kjaran set a crate on the ground and then started pulling out water balloons full of gasoline and holy water. He tossed them onto the wreckage in places that the housecarls couldn't get, or threw them through windows.

"We're going to torch the building," I said needlessly. "I want you two to make sure it burns fast, and it burns *completely*. In fifteen minutes, I don't want there to be anything here but ashes. Are we clear?"

Jimmy nodded, a wide pyromaniac's grin on his face. After a moment, the independent mage followed suit.

Chapter Thirty-One

The house burned hot and fast. When a section looked like it was dying out, the housecarls chucked a little more gasoline into the area, and the two fire mages focused their attentions on it.

I tried to ignore the fact that I could hear screaming coming from inside the fire. It wasn't exactly a surprise. I'd known that the explosion couldn't have killed everything, and I'd known that not everyone would have gotten out either to flee or attack. There would be people trapped inside where the exits were blocked, people who were crippled by their injuries, people who were just too scared to move.

I'd known all of that. And I'd given the order to burn it anyway.

It was the same problem I'd run into when attacking vampires before. I knew that not everyone in there deserved to burn. I *knew* that some of them were completely innocent victims.

But I also knew that some were monsters. Even the humans might be a risk I couldn't afford. I knew that some of them willingly made themselves victims of the vampires for one reason or another. At worst, they collaborated with them, actively assisting them in hunting and killing other people.

And I had no way to tell the one group from the other. Not really. I could hope to catch them in a lie, but there was no guarantee it would work. I could try to quarantine them all, innocent and guilty, but I wasn't sure what kind of quarantine measures I might need to take, and it would be a serious risk to try and search the house to take them in safely.

So I'd given the order to burn it. And them.

I stood and watched in grim silence as the screams slowly died out, until the only sound was the crackling of the flames. Anna seemed distinctly uncomfortable by my side; on the other side, Aiko showed no such signs of discomfort.

As for Jimmy and the other fire mage, they both looked dispassionate, caught up in the effort of their magic. A third mage had figured out what they were doing and walked up beside them. From what I could smell of his magic, and what I could feel in the air around me, he was directing the wind to keep a constant stream of fresh air flowing into the blaze. Smart; that would keep the fire healthy, keep it burning bright and hot.

Soon, the wreckage began to collapse further into itself. Key structural elements had been eaten away by the flames, and what was left was falling into pieces, being consumed by fire.

Jimmy paused and glanced back at me, apparently wondering whether they were done. I said nothing, gave no indication that I'd noticed, and he turned back to the fire, stoking it higher. All three of them were getting visibly tired, and I doubted they'd be good for much after this, but that was all right. I had plenty of metaphorical firepower without needing the literal stuff.

In the end, it took closer to twenty-five minutes than fifteen for me to be satisfied. There were still handful of timbers smoldering, sticking up from the ashes like the bones of a beached whale from the sand, but the house itself was gone.

It had been a tightly controlled demolition, I noted with some satisfaction. There had been a little bit of property damage from the explosion, and a few buildings were scarred by the fire, but nothing that would require a large amount of reconstruction.

"Good work," I said, walking briskly up to the group of arsonists. "Now put it out." I stumbled over my own feet when Anna looked away and left me blind, and she hurried to catch up to me. I hadn't actually *told* any of the werewolves what was going on with my vision, but I was pretty sure they'd all noticed.

"Put it out?" Jimmy asked me, turning and staring. He was swaying on his feet a little, and I thought he'd pushed himself just about to the limit. It was gratifying, in a way, to know that he'd exerted himself that much to make something I wanted happen. I mean, it was probably more that he liked burning things than any actual obedience, but still.

"Yeah," I said. "We're moving through there. Don't tell me you can't put fires *out*?"

He flushed and looked away. "I never really practiced that," he muttered.

The other fire mage rolled his eyes and closed one hand into a fist. The fires died out in a few seconds, even the coals turning from red to black. "There you go," he said.

"Great," I said. "You three coming with or staying out here?"

"I think we could all use a chance to rest before another fight," the same man said.

"No time," I said. "Wait out here with anyone else who isn't coming."

I turned, and saw that the housecarls had already started to gather by the edge of the ash field, holding their weapons and smiling eagerly. I supposed that in a lot of ways they'd been waiting for this day as long as I had. They were the first on the scene, but others were already starting to join them there. The shapeshifters were there, the werewolves, Unna. The lieutenant was standing a short distance away with a dozen soldiers, and the leader of Pellegrini's gangsters had a similar number of his own people.

"Okay," I said, as much to myself as the mages. "It's time. Let's go."

I led the way through the ashes, drawing on the jotun in me to bring the temperature down. The fire was out, but things were still hot. I cooled it down a little, and the housecarls following in a broad arc behind me cooled it down further, until it was almost comfortable by the time the rest got there.

As we walked, I catalogued what forces I still had available. There was me, obviously, and Aiko was there as well. All seven of the housecarls with me were still in shape to fight, as were all four werewolves. The three shapeshifters were the only members of the Inquisition who were still ready to fight, but there were five independent mages still standing, and they looked ready for blood. The lieutenant and the gangsters, after some rather tense and awkward discussion, had settled on bringing four men each and leaving the rest to guard the wounded and make sure nobody followed us down.

A sizable force, at least by my standards. I was honestly more concerned that we'd be getting in each other's way than anything. Not much that I could do about it, though; I couldn't exactly tell people that they weren't welcome, not without losing a lot of goodwill.

The entrance to the basement was easy to find, although I suspected it hadn't been when the house was still standing. The hole in the ground was large enough to drive a car through, the trapdoor little more than a memory.

The stairs leading down were marble, cracked and crazed by the heat. I doubted any traps would have survived that, if there had even been any traps to begin, but I went first just in case. I was probably the toughest person here by a considerable margin.

And besides, it fit the image.

Downstairs, I was surprised at how spacious it was. The hallway was wide enough to walk four abreast with enough space to move. I was still leading, with Aiko and Anna beside me. After that came the housecarls, then the soldiers, the mages, the gangsters, and the werewolves and shapeshifters bringing up the rear.

Theoretically, the formation would give the mages the most possible time to hit back before an attacker reached them. It wasn't perfect—I was concerned about being attacked from above, or below, or the sides—but it was the best I could do on short notice.

And short notice was what we had. At most, it would be an hour before it ceased to be unambiguously daytime. If we were still down here when that happened, if we hadn't killed the vampires yet, I wouldn't lay money on any of us getting out alive.

The hallway was maybe forty feet long, all marble, unlit. Several people started digging for flashlights once we were out of the light, but one of the mages beat them to it, producing a golden light bright enough to hurt my eyes a little.

At the end of the hallway it forked, one path continuing straight while another split off to either side. The light didn't show the end of any of the three paths.

"We should split up," the lieutenant said behind me. "Send a group to clear each direction."

I snorted. "Have you never watched a horror movie?" I asked. "We stick together and check each path in order. Follow me."

Nobody argued, and I led us down the left-hand path first. I walked about fifty feet before stopping in front of a heavy oak door. It was locked, and not just casually. I counted two combination pad locks and three deadbolts, and I was guessing it was also barred from the inside.

"I can probably get that open," someone said behind me.

I ignored them, summoning and drawing Tyrfin instead. It took three swings to cut through all the locks, and another two to get rid of the hinges, at which point the only thing keeping the door standing was inertia. I sheathed the sword and stepped up, pushing the door up and back. It slammed to the ground with an almost deafening crash.

"Or you could do that," the person acknowledged.

I was grinning as I stepped inside.

That grin faded as soon as I was inside the room. It looked a lot like the last room I'd seen where vampires hid from the day. There were some beds scattered around, each of which had a single occupant. The vampires looked more dead than asleep.

There was one obvious difference, though. There was another person in the room, a girl sitting by the opposite wall. She looked human, maybe eighteen to twenty, dirty and disheveled, dressed in something like a hospital gown. She had a heavy steel collar around her neck, which in turn connected to a heavy steel chain that was bolted to the wall. From where she was chained, she couldn't reach the door, or any of the beds.

"Oh, thank God," she said breathlessly when I stepped in. "Let me out, please!"

"Don't go near her," I said, ignoring her and walking up to one of the beds. There were fifteen of them in this room alone.

Fifteen more vampires. Bloody hell, I'd underestimated Katrin's forces.

"What?" the lieutenant asked. "We can't leave her like that. Johnson, Pepper, go get her out of that thing." Two of the soldiers started forward.

"Don't go near her," I said again. Tyrfin came down and took the first vampire's head off. Around me, Aiko and the housecarls were moving through the room, going to the other beds.

The soldiers ignored me, walking up to the woman. One of them reached out towards her neck, apparently to try and get the collar off.

I was watching the whole thing, and it was still hard to say quite what had happened. One moment, she was just sitting there motionless while the man reached for her neck.

The next, she had her hand around his wrist, pulling him forward. He stumbled towards her and she stood, one hand wrapping around the man's head, pulling him down to meet her as she rose.

It still looked almost innocent. It could have passed for a kiss, with the mouth just a little lower than just usual, on the bottom corner of the soldier's jaw rather than his mouth. It could have, and likely it did to the other soldier, who stepped forward and reached out to separate them.

She reached out and caught him as well, grabbing the front of his vest. Then she lifted her head from the other man's neck, and it became horribly apparent what had actually been happening. Her mouth was stained crimson, and more blood poured from the bite in his neck when she moved her mouth away. He crumpled to the ground without her holding him up, and lay on the ground in a heap.

The other soldier panicked and tried to push her away. He might as well have been pushing the wall for all the good it did him. She picked him up and swung him into the wall easily, although he must have been twice her size. She pinned him there against the wall with her hand on his throat as she leaned in and whispered something in his ear.

She dropped him a moment later. He collapsed to the ground, and even at this distance I could see that his throat was crushed. A rapid enough tracheotomy could conceivably save him, I supposed, but I doubted the opportunity would arise.

"Not very polite," I said, watching her carefully. "Killing the people who wanted to let you out."

She smiled, showing very red teeth. "They disobeyed an order," she said sweetly. "That must be punished."

I shook my head. "No. Don't try to put this off on me. You were going to kill them whether I'd said anything or not."

"Yes," she admitted. "But that does not change the truth of what I said."

I nodded. "Fair enough. So why are you in here? I'm guessing you're fae, and I can't imagine one of the fae would be wearing that collar willingly. But if you wanted out, you could have just let them unlock that collar."

"Or maybe I couldn't," she said with a coy smile.

"Maybe not," I said. "I don't suppose you could tell me the exact terms of the oath you swore?"

The smile got a little wider, until she was showing white teeth behind the bloody ones. "Oh, someone's clever," she said. "I swore that I would protect these vampires as they slept, keep them safe in their refuge from the sun's rays."

I glanced around, and saw that all of the vampires were already done for. The housecarls had made quick, efficient work of it. "It seems to me that they're rather beyond any protection you can offer," I said. "Which means that your oath is completed."

"Clever, clever," she said happily. "I always find it so delightful when a human takes the time to think before he speaks."

I didn't bother correcting her on the human bit, mostly because I was pretty sure she already knew. The way she'd phrased that had pretty clearly been meant to *imply* that I was human without *stating* it. She was doing me a favor, in a way, keeping my secrets from the actual humans present, while also subtly threatening me with the possibility that she could *stop* keeping those secrets.

Or maybe I was just reading too much into it. But considering that this was one of the fae, I didn't think that was terribly likely.

"I'm going to come over there and let you out now," I said. "If you try to cause problems for me while I do, I swear that you'll regret it."

"I'll be good this time," she said. "Promise."

I walked over, ignoring the people staring on me, and hoping that none of them would notice that Anna was still following at my heel and put two and two together.

It was a forlorn hope. I'd just put my hands on the collar when the fae gripped them and leaned forward a little to whisper in my ear. "Someone's eyes don't shine half so bright as they ought to," she said, so quietly that I doubted Anna could understand her with lycanthropic hearing from five feet away. "Would the puppy like me to fix them for him? I could give him a new pair, if he liked."

"I'll keep my own," I said, just as quietly. "I have it on excellent authority that this is a temporary condition." I started probing the collar, looking for the lock. It only took a few seconds to find it, and a couple more to open it with a twist of hardened air. I could damn near have picked the thing with my fingers, it was so clumsy. She'd been kept bound by her own word, not the lock.

She looked at me with a disappointed moue on her face as the collar fell to the floor beside her. "Very well," she murmured. "I'll simply have to find another way to repay you, then. Goodbye for now, dear puppy."

She stalked to the door, and her posture, her movements were so confident that everyone got out of her way without even quite seeming to realize what they'd done.

I bent down to look at the soldiers, and confirmed that they were both quite dead. A moment later someone else stepped up beside me. I glanced up, expecting to see Aiko there, but it was the lieutenant.

Not that I could see that. It was a reflex to look up, an instinct, the same as it had been a reflex to bend down to look at the soldiers. In both cases, the actual visual was coming from Anna.

"How'd you know what was going to happen?" he asked me quietly.

"I didn't," I said, straightening and turning to the door. "I hadn't even really looked at her. My priority was making sure that none of the vampires were going to wake up. This is a war," I said to the lieutenant, not looking back. "And it's one where you don't know the enemy, and you don't know the rules. Keep ignoring the people who do, and those two won't be the last people you lose today."

The next hallway we checked was the one directly across from us. It was basically a mirror image of the first, and we treated it the same way. There was no fae chained to the wall this time, but that didn't make me feel any less suspicious.

That suspicion turned out to be justified. We'd killed two vampires when suddenly one of them got up and threw itself at us. It killed three of the gangsters and threw Ryan into the wall hard enough to break bones before the woman the independent mages had chosen as their representative earlier got to it.

I wasn't entirely sure what kind of magic she threw at it. It was something exotic, a more abstract sort of magic. But there wasn't much vampire left when she was finished with it.

I kept watch as the housecarls finished the job. I was breathing hard, though I hadn't had time to actually get involved the fight. In a way, that was what made it so stressful—what made every fight with a vampire so terrifying. They were just so *fast*. They could kill people before I could even react.

That one could have killed people I knew and cared about rather than gangsters I hadn't even met, and there wouldn't have been much I could do about it.

No wonder I was feeling a bit stressed by it.

As we got ready to move on to the third branch of the hallway, I glanced over the group, then paused. The headcount was off.

I looked again, and again after that, with an increasing sense of desperation, but my first impression had been correct. At some point during that last fight, Kyra had disappeared.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Someone had taken Kyra, without any noise or struggle, and without anyone noticing, from the middle of the group, with three members of her pack right next to her.

That shouldn't have been possible. There were so many ways that shouldn't have been possible.

Apparently, someone didn't care so much about that.

I cursed under my breath as we moved on to the final branch of the hallway, moving faster now. Attacking in the daytime, starting off by demolishing the building, it had all been intended to limit the danger. But I'd known that there was nothing I could do that would actually *eliminate* it.

In a fight like this, there were casualties. There was no way around it.

That didn't make it any easier to face when it struck so close to home.

Down the last hallway, a little longer than the other two. I was walking faster now, the people behind me almost running to keep up. The world seemed to fade and blur around me, warping in the corner of my eye. I felt disconnected, almost more an observer than a participant in my own actions. I became aware of a discordant, staccato laughter, and realized it was my own.

Inside the door, a vampire fell from the ceiling towards me with hands outstretched, curled into claws. Almost before I was aware of its presence Tyrfin cleared the sheath and leapt through the air towards it. It was a once-in-a-lifetime sort of stroke, the slash perfectly timed and aimed.

The vampire hit the ground in two sizes of roughly equal size, and I kept walking at the same pace, not even breaking stride. I became aware, in a distant and detached sort of way, that the people following me were hanging back a little now, watching me. There was no meaning attached to the thought, no reaction. It was just an observation.

Next door, another slab of oak. I didn't bother cutting it this time. I just slammed one booted foot into it. The door cracked; the second kick snapped it in half and I kept walking, pushing it out of my way.

The next room was another large dormitory, though the beds were unoccupied. Instead the room was filled with more of the twisted shapes that had formed the first wave when we assaulted the house. Some of them looked human, others were based on canine chassis. This close I could see the madness in their eyes, the same look in the eyes of men and dogs. Their bodies were warped and twisted, and their minds were even worse, broken in ways that went past fixing.

They threw themselves at me in a wave, scrabbling and kicking each other out of the way to be first. It was like watching a swarm of ants, any semblance of the individual subsumed into the horde.

As they got closer to me, they started to slip and stumble, their footing uncertain on the ice around me. I ignored it, cutting them down mercilessly as I kept walking forward. I didn't bother aiming my slashes to target vital areas, didn't bother with precision or care. I just cut in broad strokes, dropping several of the creatures to the ground with each stroke. A dog-thing bit my leg and clung there, its teeth scratching at my armor. I ignored it utterly, continuing to walk forward, the same as I ignored all of the twisted creatures that were outside of my immediate reach on the way across the room. They were beneath my notice.

Behind me, I heard gunfire, raised voices, screaming. I smelled smoke, firearm propellant, blood, strange magics that I couldn't recognize or place. I kept moving, one foot in front of the other.

Another door, this one heavy steel locked into the surrounding walls, sunk into the floor. It was less a door than a wall, something meant to be closed once and never reopened. I considered it as I approached, and paused before it, though it made me feel strange, restless and frustrated.

It was more difficult to cut through than wood, actually presenting a certain amount of resistance to the cutting edge. But Tyrfing cut through it all the same, carving the steel the way a lesser blade might cut pine. Three strokes made a rough, ragged triangle in the wall. I kicked the section I'd cut out and it fell through, slamming against the floor.

Step through, ducking slightly. It felt better again now that I was moving, the restlessness fading. There was an acrid smell in the air now, somewhere between smoke and sulfuric acid. The next room was larger, more open. The ceiling was higher, almost twenty feet above my head. I tried to decide whether there was a hill overhead or I had been descending as I walked. I couldn't remember, couldn't focus, and a moment later the question faded.

There were vampires in the room, quite a few of them. They lurked in the shadows by the edges of the room, clung to the ceiling. Had we taken too long, so that the sun set outside? Or were all of these vampires strong enough to be up and active during the day?

The question really didn't matter. Regardless, I was outnumbered, and the things outnumbering me were each killing machines unto themselves.

That didn't really matter either. My attention was reserved primarily for the vampire in the middle of the room.

Katrin looked much the same as usual, tall and blonde, dressed all in black. A faint, twisted smile danced around the edges of her lips. It was an expression of amusement, in a sense, but there was a taint in it, something twisted and broken. There was an element of despair to it, a bleakness that went far beyond mere sorrow.

She held Kyra casually in her arms. One arm snaked between her legs to her abdomen, holding her back against the vampire's chest. The other wrapped across her chest, holding her foreleg to the side. She had her hand jammed into the werewolf's mouth, deep enough to be profoundly

uncomfortable, muzzling, gagging, and choking her all at once. Katrin was bleeding where the teeth had cut her hand and arm, but didn't seem to care, or even notice.

Kyra was still moving, struggling, but there wasn't much she could do. Her spine was twisted sideways, two of her limbs were pulled out of alignment almost to the point of dislocation, and with how far the vampire had her arm shoved down her mouth, it would be a struggle to breathe, to keep from vomiting. In that position, held by someone vastly stronger than she was, all she could do was squirm feebly.

"Good evening, jarl," Katrin said. Her voice was dry and rasping, a mockery of human speech. "How good of you to join us."

"What do you want?" I asked quietly. My voice sounded more alien than hers, in a very different way. It was slurred, hard to understand, and there were overtones to it that didn't belong in speech, sounds of snarls and growls, howls and barks, and above it all the endless scream of a raging storm.

She smiled, a fixed expression without any humor to it, showing teeth that were considerably longer than they'd ever been when I saw her smile in the past. "Mind your manners, my dear jarl," she said. "Lest I grow offended. Or have you no care for your friends for your friends lives these days?"

"If you were going to kill her you'd have done it already," I said. The storm had quieted now, a whisper rather than a scream, but still there was the hint of danger, the promise of a slow, freezing death. "Which means there's a reason you haven't. So, again, what do you want?"

The vampire looked at me for a moment. Then, faster than a snake striking, her hand shifted, sliding from Kyra's abdomen down to her ankle. She seized it and twisted, pulling.

Bones snapped and crunched, twisting. I could see Kyra's hind leg breaking under the strain, bones splitting in long spiral fractures, joints popping. Her hip dislocated, visibly distending to the side. She writhed, bucking hard against the vampire's grip, but couldn't move her arm so much as an inch. I could see her sides, her abdomen heaving as she threw up, *chewing* on the vampire's arm reflexively, and still Katrin didn't so much as flinch.

"She can heal that," Katrin said. Her voice was still flat and dead, utterly lacking in any emotion. "Eventually. But how well will she fare if I keep pulling, do you think?" She smiled again, and it was maybe the single creepiest expression I'd ever seen. There was an *absence* there more terrifying than any amount of rage could ever be. "Werewolves can't heal amputations, can they?"

I bit back my first response, and forced myself to stand still. "Good evening, Katrin," I said instead. My voice was choked, and I was almost shaking with rage, but I managed it. "I'm pleased that we finally have a chance to catch up."

"Ah," she said. "As always you learn quickly." She moved her hand back to Kyra's torso, leaving the broken leg to dangle, and pulled her other arm out of the werewolf's mouth, resting it under her

chin instead. The limb dripped with blood, saliva, and vomit, but Katrin didn't seem to care about that either.

Kyra whined quietly, as much of an expression of pain as she could manage right now. I looked at her for a long moment, then met Katrin's eyes. "You know what this means," I said. "Everything else, it was business. I didn't like it, but there was nothing personal there. But this is...it crosses a line."

"Yes," she said simply. "I fully expect you to kill me for it someday. Maybe even today. But I'm hoping we can have a conversation first."

"Why?" I demanded. "Why are you doing this? What the fuck are you getting out of this?"

"Ah," she said. "Manners, remember?"

I gritted my teeth. "My apologies," I said, my voice a growl now, almost unrecognizable. "But I would greatly appreciate an answer to my question."

"In due time, I expect that you'll receive one," she said. "But right now, I want to talk about you. What next? That, right there, is the question you need to ask yourself. What next? What do you want more than anything else in the world? What would you do anything, sacrifice anything, to make happen?"

"Right now, I mostly want you to let my friend go," I said.

Katrin sighed. "Do your ambitions extend no further than that?" she asked. "No further than the moment? Is this the life you want for yourself? This half-life, always struggling without ever accomplishing anything meaningful, living at the whim of another? Do you aim no higher than *this*?"

"I really find it difficult to focus on long term ambitions with this going on right in front of me," I said.

"Stop trying to change the subject," Katrin said. Her voice showed a hint of emotion now, touched with just the faintest trace of frustration. "These questions are important. Answer them."

I took a deep breath and let it out. My hands were clenched, I noticed. "I don't really know," I said. "You asked what I would sacrifice anything for. That's a loaded question. I know what *anything* can mean, and that's not a commitment to make lightly."

"Quite true," Katrina agreed. "But that lack of dedication, of commitment, it's holding you back. You could be so much more than you are. You could be a force to dwarf anything I've ever done. But you hold back. You refuse to really commit."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "What's the purpose?"

"I want you to think about it," she said. "That's what's holding you back, you see. It's not a lack of power. It's a lack of vision. You could be so much more, but you refuse to really see. You're trapped

by the immediate, never making it past reaction to what's in front of you. How can you expect to get what you want if you never look further than the day after tomorrow?"

"It's hard to look to the future when the present is more than I can stand," I said. "That's not a change of topic, by the way. It's a relevant answer to your question. Recently it feels like just living day-to-day is the only way I can take the pressure. Things are bad, and they're getting worse, and when I think about the future I can't see it getting *better*. And everything I try to do, every time I try to fix things, I end up just making it worse."

"Exactly!" she said. Again, there was a hint of emotion to that dead voice, but this time it was excitement, not exasperation. "But the reason for that, the *reason* nothing seems to work, is precisely that your focus is so stubbornly on the immediate and obvious. Right now, for example, you're fixated on this moment, this situation. Tell me, jarl, who is to blame for what is happening right now?"

"Well," I said dryly, "given that you're the one doing this, that would seem to be the obvious answer."

"Oh, granted the immediate responsibility is mine," she said. "That's a given. I know what I am. I won't deny that I'm a monster. I won't say that I haven't earned your hate. I deserve to die, no question about that. But think about it. How do you think I got to *be* a monster? I wasn't born this way, I can tell you that. I was a vampire for twenty years before I could kill someone and not feel terrible about it."

"It's still a choice," I said. "You could always have gone a different route."

I didn't sound convinced, though, not even to myself. There was no conviction in my voice. I'd seen too many times when the only choices were bad ones.

"Perhaps," Katrin said. "But even so, do you truly imagine that the blame falls on me alone? Do you think that no one, in all these years, had the chance to prevent me from becoming a monster? That no one could have acted to prevent this from coming to pass?" She smiled again. "I think not. *Res ipsa loquitur*, jarl. The guilt is there. How many people had to stand by to allow this to happen? How many people chose to allow it, because it was easier than the alternative?"

"Plenty," I said. "But only one chose to actually do it."

She snorted. "That's an illusion," she said, almost gently. "The idea that you can point to a person and say that they are wholly responsible for their own actions. The idea that a single person is responsible for *anything*. It's a lie that we tell ourselves because it's more comfortable than the truth. The idea that the world is black and white, that there are good men and evil men and you can parcel out guilt without getting your own hands dirty is a *myth*."

"I've had some doubts about good and evil," I said quietly. "I've had reason to question whether there are any real absolutes. But when I see something like this, it settles that question for me. You can't do the things you're doing and tell me that there's no such thing as evil."

"Oh, I don't deny that evil exists," she said. "There's no doubt in my mind that genuine good and genuine evil are real. My contention is that you'll never find the one without the other. The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And that, my dear jarl, is why you have found no success with your efforts. It is a lack of *vision*."

I took a deep breath and let it out. I no longer had that disconnected feeling, I noticed. I no longer felt like an observer. I must have caught my metaphorical breath, somewhere along the way.

I was acutely aware of my surroundings. There were so many pieces in play. The people I had brought with me were close behind me, just inside the door. The vampires lurked in the darkness all around, in front, above, to the sides. All were silent, watching as though Katrin and I were actors on a stage, all else forgotten.

The situation was ugly. I couldn't so much as move without Katrin maiming or killing Kyra, and the stalemate could only last so long. Sooner or later the tension would break, and when it did, unless it broke in *exactly* the right way, one of my best friends was going to die. All the rest of us might, too, but Kyra *definitely* would.

Oddly enough, I found myself thinking about what Katrin was saying. It was important, I thought, although not quite in the way she meant it.

Vision. That was what was lacking. I had to look past my surroundings, past the immediate.

I thought about pieces again. This was a bit like chess, when I thought about it. Both sides controlled certain pieces. This wasn't a fight between vampires and vampire hunters, not really. It was a fight between me and Katrin. Everyone else here was...more a playing piece than an actual player.

In that context, vision was simple. My pieces were surrounded, probably outnumbered. They weren't in a position where I could use their abilities for all they were worth. Katrin's pieces had better position, and they were more powerful, on the whole. Many of my pieces were pawns, whereas all of hers were rooks or queens. And to top it off, Katrin herself was in a position to take a piece that I wasn't willing to sacrifice.

Seen through that lens, it was easy to observe that the game was lost. My position was cramped, and obviously unsound. Katrin had the advantage in both position and material. The only way I could even aim for a draw would be if she messed up badly, and even then it would be Pyrrhic in nature, requiring me to make sacrifices I couldn't afford in the long term.

So. The game wasn't winnable. That clarified things completely. It meant that what I had to think about now was how I could change the nature of the game.

And then I saw it. Bizarrely enough, it was Katrin's own words that gave me the hint I needed. It was about vision.

Or more specifically, the *lack* of vision.

"You know," I said, quietly slipping my hands into my cloak. I doubted she'd notice, not while I was talking. "You know, the funny thing is that you aren't wrong. You aren't wrong about people being responsible, and you aren't wrong about *me*. About me lacking vision. But you are mistaken on one topic, I think."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"You said that the only way to accomplish your goals was to focus on them," I said. "To focus on them *entirely*, to the exclusion of everything else. But that's not right. If you focus that tightly, you're really giving yourself tunnel vision. You're making yourself blind to everything outside of your obsession."

And then I pulled out what I'd been carrying, and threw it at the ceiling.

One of the objects was a grenade, plain and simple. A modified grenade, a special model, but still basically just an explosive. The other was a glass sphere with a spark of blue light captured within it.

The glass was reinforced, and it would take a great deal to break it. Normally I primed those stored spells with blood before using them, removing the protections, but this time I hadn't had the chance. I would just have to hope that the grenade would be enough to do the job.

The two objects reached the apex of their arc together and started to fall before the grenade went off. It was shockingly loud, in the relative silence of the room. A concussion grenade this time, rather than fragmentation; I didn't want to deal with shrapnel in this environment.

For a second I thought even that hadn't been enough. Then I saw a flicker of blue light expanding out, and grinned.

Kinetic force poured out from the broken sphere, pushing everything *away*. Where it hit air, the effect was minimal, almost nonexistent. Somewhere along the lines of a stiff breeze.

But the stone of the ceiling was less flexible, less able to move without damage. It started to break, cracks appearing, damage done by the grenade being exacerbated by the magic. Chunks of rock started falling.

For a moment I thought even *that* wouldn't be enough, and I =d just signed all of our death warrants. Then one of the mages, an independent I knew nothing about, raised one hand and started blasting at it with what looked like greyish lightning. Another, the woman who was apparently their unofficial leader, was exercising her will as well, although it wasn't nearly so visible. All I knew about that was that I smelled magic, and then there were parts of the ceiling that were just *missing*.

The hole was small at first, just a pinprick. Then more magic started tearing at the edges of that hole, and Aiko threw another grenade.

Clean Slate (Winter's Tale)

Katrin looked up, and I was close enough to see her expression when she realized what was happening. I'd expected horror, or wrath, but instead I saw a broad, beatific smile, maybe the first real smile I'd ever seen from her, as the sunlight fell on her face.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The vampire didn't burst into flame at the touch of the sunlight, sadly. Nothing that dramatic.

But suddenly Kyra's struggles actually *meant* something. Crippled, in pain, unable to coordinate or direct her efforts to their best effect, she could still actually break Katrin's grip. She fell to the ground a moment later, collapsing and whining in pain as her weight fell on her shattered leg.

Before any of the vampires could react, Daniell darted forward and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, her teeth set on Kyra's neck. Kyra was larger by a considerable margin, but that didn't necessarily mean as much to a werewolf; Daniell was easily able to drag the larger werewolf back to our position.

Meanwhile, the other vampires were edging away and hissing, an odd, eerie sound when multiplied across so many mouths. Apparently sunlight wasn't instantly lethal to vampires, as I'd always suspected, but they still didn't seem to want to be in it.

Which, in turn, made it exactly where I wanted to be.

I charged forward, straight at Katrin. She looked at me the whole time, still with that broad, mad smile. She had plenty of time to dodge, to escape, or fight back, but she didn't even try. She just stood there and smiled as Tyrfin came around in a broad arc, reflecting the sunlight so brightly that it almost seemed to be giving off a brilliant light itself.

I heard shouts of surprise and pain from the periphery of the room as Katrin fell, as that beam of reflected sunlight swept through the darkness which still lingered at the edges of the room. I roared, brandishing Tyrfin in front of me, trying to buy time for the others to catch up.

It didn't take more than a few seconds for them to realize what had just happened and start moving forward to join me in the pool of sunlight. The vampires caught on moments later and pounced on them, trying to bring them down before they could.

But they were disorganized, still off balance from the way things had changed in the last few moments. And the people they were attacking were ready for it. It was a close call, but in the end everyone made it into the light.

We quickly shifted into a defensive position again. Kyra was at the center—not even a werewolf could keep fighting on that leg—with the mages and soldiers around her. The outer ring consisted of me, Aiko, the jötnar, the other werewolves, and the shapeshifters.

The vampires were recovering now, but it was too late; they'd already lost the critical advantages which had made this fight so one-sided. They threw themselves at us, but now we were in a good position to defend ourselves, and they didn't have the leadership to organize or coordinate their attack effectively.

I found myself fighting between Aiko and Ryan. She was holding her blade in both hands, warding off attacks. She couldn't really *kill* a vampire with it, not even in the weakened state these ones were in, but she could keep them at bay, slashing at them when they got too close. She focused on crippling rather than killing, taking off limbs when they overextended.

Ryan, on the other hand, was holding a crucifix in one hand and a gun in the other, presenting both of them against the vampires. It was hard to shoot accurately in the chaos, the press of the fight, but he was good at it. He made it work.

He wasn't the only one holding a religious symbol. A couple of the mages had various objects held high, a mix of crosses and more interesting, unusual choices. One woman had a dagger held high that shone with something a little bit more than reflected sunlight; vampires hesitated throughout that entire quadrant of the circle, and actively flinched away from the light. The man next to her was presenting a pipe, of all things. Another man had an actual scroll in his hands, and was chanting something in what sounded like Hebrew. It would not have surprised me to see someone pull out a pasta strainer and start reciting from the *Loose Canon*.

The nonhumans had their own symbols held high, as well. Anna's collar had a large cross hanging from it. Vigdis had a silver chain in her hand, with a pendant in the shape of a wolf's head. Appropriate for a shapeshifter, I supposed, and it might explain something of why she had signed up with me to begin with. It had never occurred to me that she might view the Fenris Wolf in a religious light, but it wasn't that strange for a jotun, I supposed. Kyi had the runes tattooed on her arms, hands, and collarbone prominently displayed, and I knew that they had a religious connotation to them. Even Unna was holding a seashell overhead with an attitude that made it more than just an object.

For my part, I held nothing but Tyrfing. Appropriate enough in a way, I supposed. Certainly it would be reasonable to assume from my actions that I worshipped the sword.

The vampires attacked, but there was no real strength, no *authority* to it. They were slowed and weakened by the sun, by the wide array of holy symbols presented against them. I didn't know much about vampires beyond the most practical level, I didn't know *why* symbols of faith were such a hindrance to them, but they were.

I cut them down as fast as they came, having to consciously hold back to keep from advancing and breaking the defensive line. Ryan was shooting them, not able to kill them, but wounding, pushing them away. Anna and Daniell and Matthew were all able to trip them up and pull them down, keeping them still until one of the housecarls could finish the job. Similarly, Chuck was a force unto himself. A vampire was not stronger than a magically enhanced polar bear, not in the sunlight. A casual swat from him was enough to fling a vampire across the room, or tear its head from its shoulders outright.

Protected behind that wall of flesh, the mages were able to focus in relative safety. Some, too exhausted to use their magic, or lacking abilities that were applicable here, had to rely on other methods to make themselves useful. These mages focused on presenting the symbols of their various beliefs, or used the tools I'd provided, bombarding the vampires with holy water, with prayer beads and

heads of garlic. Others were still able to contribute more directly, blasting the enemy with electricity or force, setting them on fire and locking them in place. The woman with the dagger just *removed* pieces of them before turning her attention back to the ceiling, widening the gap and letting in more light from the setting sun.

The soldiers were less useful here. Their weapons weren't as effective, overall. But they also had the holy symbols and objects, and they did have *some* weapons that worked. They threw flashbangs into the crowd, further disorienting and debilitating them. Bullets weren't particularly useful, but they did at least weaken and slow the vampires, leaving them more open to attacks that could actually *hurt* them. One of the gangsters threw a grenade that burst into incredibly intense flames, setting several vampires on fire. It was across the room from me, and I still felt the heat for the few seconds it was burning.

It only took moments before the vampires turned to run. But there were only two exits from the room. One was the hole in the roof, which led to an environment almost as hostile as what they were leaving. The other was the door we'd come in through, and it was there that the vampires ran.

They were brought up short when Unna gestured with that shell and crooned gently. The holy water on the ground swirled and then rushed over to the door, flowing up off the ground to form a thin barrier. One of the vampires tentatively reached through it, only to stop, apparently unable to move through it. I wasn't sure whether it was that the aversion to the holy water was *that* strong, or if it was Unna's doing, or if one of the mages was doing something.

The end result was the same. All of the vampires were crowded together for a moment, backed against the wall.

A hail of bullets, spells, grenades, and holy water rained down on them, and ended my war with Katrin once and for all.

"Neutral ground," I said, walking into the shopping mall. "*This* is your idea of neutral ground."

Newton smirked at me. I couldn't see him, since this meeting was just the two of us, and I was guessing he was wearing the mask anyway, but I was confident he was smirking. "It's neutral," he said. "Unless you're going to accuse me of owning it."

"It's public," I said sourly. "Any moron could walk in and overhear this."

"Yeah," he said. "Consider it an incentive not to do something stupid. You pick a fight here and people get hurt."

"We agreed to a truce," I reminded him. "Until the discussion was over."

"That's fine," he said. "I get it, you know, you're old-school. Whatever. I'll take my security my way."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Under any other circumstances, something that close to an accusation that I would break a truce would require a response. Jötnar took that sort of thing seriously, and allowing it to pass uncontested was as good as an admission.

But there *were* mitigating factors. I thought I could get away with letting this one slide without comment.

"I don't like you," I said. "I don't like what you stand for. I don't like what you do. But I'm trying to be as fair as possible. So I'm going to give you one chance here. Stop the nonsense, stop picking fights with me, and swear that you'll follow my rules and support me against outside threats. You do that, and I'll leave you be. One chance, and once chance only."

"Like hell," he said, with a clearly audible sneer. "You're a scared little bitch. We both know you can't back it up. If you could take us on you'd have done it already."

"Okay."

He hesitated, obviously thrown by that. "Okay? That's it?"

"Yep," I said. "I don't think we have anything else to discuss. Do you?"

"No," he said after a moment. "No, I guess we don't."

I nodded, and pushed the button on the remote control I was holding in my cloak pocket. I couldn't see them, but I knew that two lights would have turned on the moment I pressed it.

A few seconds later, I hear two almost-simultaneous cracks of gunfire as Aiko and Kyi pulled their respective triggers.

Newton never had a chance to scream. I couldn't see, but I could feel the motion in the air as various *things* were propelled out of his body by the impact. One of the bullets had hit him in the head, while the other struck dead-center in his chest.

A force mage could stop bullets. But you had to *know* about the bullet to raise a shield against it. There were ways around it, of course. This tactic would never have worked against someone like Alexander, or even most of the Watchers I'd met.

But Newton was a cocksure, arrogant man. It had never occurred to him just how rapidly he could die.

Once again, I found myself oddly grateful for blindness. It meant that I couldn't see exactly what I'd just been splattered with, although I could imagine it well enough. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before. It wasn't the first time I'd stood close enough to someone to be covered in blood and brains and chunks of organs when they got shot.

There was a half-beat of silence before people began running away and screaming. I ignored that, focusing on the handful of other people I could feel.

The people who were running *towards* the scene.

I picked one at random and turned to face them. "You," I said, pointing. "I'll give you one chance, and one chance only."

They froze, head turned towards the corpse of their former leader. It didn't take long for them to get the message. "I swear," they said, with audible reluctance. "I'll follow the rules."

I pointed at each of the rest in turn. None of them refused to swear the oath.

"Okay," I said, once that was done with. "Now get out."

I waited for them to leave, then turned and walked the other way. Herjolfr rose from his seat on the bench nearby and fell in beside me before I'd taken ten steps. Aiko and Kyi would meet us outside, where Kjaran should already have the car running.

"You know," the skald said to me, "that people will say this was a violation of truce. They'll call you an oathbreaker."

I smiled a little inside my helmet. "The truce was explicitly limited to the duration of the discussion," I said. "With no leeway afterwards. And you heard me tell him that the discussion was over. It isn't my fault that he failed to realize what happened."

"True," he agreed. "But people will question it."

"That's why I had you here to witness it," I told him. "You're a skald. Your word is trusted, even if you are my housecarl. If you tell them that it was properly done, that I didn't break the oath, then they'll believe you." I paused. "Unless *you're* saying that you question the validity of my actions."

He made an interested noise. "No," he said slowly. "I can't find anything in your actions that violates the terms of your truce. Although I do recall that you made an oath to Shadow, and several of the other independent mages, that you would treat them fairly and mercifully in your power. When they swore fealty to you last night, you made that oath."

"I was very fair," I said calmly. "I offered him a chance to avoid his fate, and told him in advance that it was his one and only chance. And death is merciful."

"Is it?"

"Sure," I said. "Some prisoners in Italy actually lobbied for the death penalty, because life imprisonment was too cruel. And I made his death as quick and painless as possible."

"A *coup de main* is not the same as a *coup de grâce*," he said dryly. "But I take your point." We walked in silence for several seconds. "Your actions were within the bounds of the acceptable," he said at last. "But they will be noted. Your reputation is already fearsome, jarl. What you have done today will make it more so."

"Fearsome is good," I said quietly as we stepped out into the morning sunlight. "Fearsome means nobody causes trouble."

"Perhaps. I only ask that you take care, jarl. *Oderint dum metuant* is a fine idea, but Accius was a playwright, not a politician. It worked rather less well when Caligula put it into practice."

I stopped and turned to face him. "Okay," I said. "What is with the Latin? Do you have something against English?"

"When I was young, if you did not speak Latin, you might as well not speak," he said, a little stiffly. "Norse could carry you through the north, but if you went south, or east, Latin was the only language that truly mattered. The words may be old, my jarl, but the ideas are timeless." For a second I was worried that I'd actually offended him, but his next sentence was much more relaxed. "And it is the nature of a skald to make allusions to great thinkers of the past," he said. "The preservation of wisdom is a great task."

"Fair enough," I said, continuing towards the car. "But for the record, I'm aiming for Machiavelli here, not Caligula. Keep in mind that the people I'm applying these fearsome tactics to are already pretty hated themselves. Nobody much is going to miss Newton."

"You have a point," he said. "Just take care. You are walking a narrow path, jarl, and a misstep could end in tragedy. As could a push." For a moment I thought he was going to say something else, but then Aiko and Kyi reached us, and he fell silent.

Epilogue

Aiko and I sat and looked out over the city as the setting sun painted the city in amber and vermillion. Or, rather, Aiko sat and looked out over the city. I was sitting, but my vision was focused elsewhere, scattered through the eyes of a hundred ravens, hawks, gulls, and pigeons, giving me a literally birds'-eye view of the streets.

The scars were visible. Unmistakable, when the city was viewed on this scale, when the whole of the picture could be seen. There were gaps in the structure of the city, where buildings had been destroyed. There were gaps in the flow of the city, where the traffic was detouring around streets that were blocked or worse.

But there was traffic to stop. There was structure to interrupt.

It wasn't nothing.

"My city," I said, returning my consciousness to my own body and walking forward to stand by Aiko at the edge of the roof, my hands folded behind my back. It was a striking image, one that I could appreciate even if I couldn't see it.

Theoretically this building was closed. About as close as Colorado Springs got to a real skyscraper, it was corporate offices all the way up. At the moment it was shut down, since nobody was going to the office just now anyway.

But I'd been in a melodramatic mood, and my name had been enough to open the door.

There weren't many doors that were closed to me around here anymore. It was funny, in a way. Every door was open, and yet my choice of path was narrower than ever.

"Your city," Aiko echoed. "How does it feel?"

"Odd," I admitted. "This is...it isn't something I wanted." Then I frowned. "It's funny, actually. I can say that, but...I did it, didn't I? If I really don't want this kind of power, why do I keep seeking it out?"

"Sometimes what we do has very little to do with what we want," Aiko said. She sounded a little said, and a little thoughtful, almost meditative.

"I guess so," I said. "It's just...is it worth it? So many people dead. Snowflake still hasn't woken up, and Kyra might never walk right again. All this, for what? Who gets to wear the biggest hat?" I shook my head. "I don't understand."

She turned to face me and leaned in for a hug. For once I wasn't wearing armor, so it was more satisfying than most of our hugs had been recently.

Apparently she felt similarly, because she held me tight for almost a minute. It was more actual contact than we'd had since I'd started my campaign for control over Colorado Springs.

"I don't know if it will all be worth it," she said, letting me go. "I hope so, but I don't know. Ask me after this is over."

"Yeah," I said. "I hope so too."

We stood there and looked over the city as the shadows lengthened and the brilliant hues of evening faded into the muted greys and blues of a night without streetlights.