

"We have to get him out," Kyi said. The jotun was on edge, as she had been for the past day; she paced a lot, and fidgeted when she wasn't pacing.

"He doesn't want out," I said patiently. "Or he would be out."

"I know that," she snapped. "But we *need* him. This whole thing will fall apart without him."

Not for the first time, I wondered whether Winter had been entirely wise to place Kyi in command of the other housecarls. She wasn't suited for it; too impulsive, too accustomed to working alone. And she didn't have much of a relationship with her fellow jötnar; she was too far removed from their cultural ideals. Their society emphasized honor in battle, and while Kyi Greyfell was a hardened and practiced killer, she had never laid claim to honor.

It would be so easy to show her how to fix that. Kyi was assertive, independent—but also socially anxious, and inexperienced with interpersonal relationships. I'd seen that pattern before, more times than I could remember. Given a week I could be her trusted confidante. Given two I would be in charge of the housecarls in all but name.

I started to move my hand to touch her shoulder, then paused and lowered it again, smiling a little. That wasn't my job anymore. It was sort of funny how often I had to remind myself of that, but then the habits of a lifetime were hard to break.

And besides, Winter *did* give her the position. It might seem like a bizarre decision to me, but that was par for the course. He had a tendency to do things that seemed utterly batshit at the time, but somehow ended up being good ideas. Crazy just *worked* for him.

"Kyi," I said instead. "Relax. We can keep things going until he gets bored of being in jail. Trust me."

She looked at me, and I knew she wanted to tell me I was wrong. But I smiled at her, a warm, purely *friendly* smile, and she didn't say a thing.

"You don't get it," Jimmy said. "We owed Winter. And honestly I still think that was ridiculous, but even if believed him about it, we owed *him*, personally. Not this 'organization,' whatever the hell that means."

I kept my smile, though inwardly I was certainly not enjoying myself. It had only taken me about ten minutes to understand Winter's complaints about dealing with Jimmy, and then some. He was the kind of guy who had a massive inferiority complex and a tiny dick, and ended up in charge mostly because nobody gave enough of a crap to fight him for it.

I'd dealt with his type more often than I liked to remember. I was good at it. Playing a guy like Jimmy was all about attitude. You had to play to his insecurity, make him feel big and important.

So, while I wanted nothing in that moment more than to tell Vigdis to knee him in the crotch until he stopped moaning, I smiled a little wider and leaned forward, hunching my back a little to look just a tiny bit smaller. "I know," I said, keeping my voice a little bit on the quiet side. "But I don't want to have to tell him I let you leave?" I let my voice rise at the end of the phrase, making it a question.

"Winter's in jail," he said. "He might never get out."

I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair, using the motion to catch Vigdis's eye. She was already stepping up behind Jimmy and I knew that she was planning to hit him in the head from behind and maybe go a little bit further. She stopped when I glared at her, though, and Jimmy didn't know a thing.

Not good, for Vigdis to be here for this meeting. But I had to have some kind of muscle with me for the sake of both safety and respect, and I had to cycle the housecarls through it or the one stuck with the job would go crazy with boredom.

"I know," I said, sitting still again. "But I have to hope he's coming back, you know? And if you go, I'm worried that people will think he's not going to? And I don't want to have to explain that to him if he *does* come back."

He opened his mouth, then paused and glanced me over. I was keeping my posture open and inviting, and between that and the kind of guy he was, I knew *exactly* what was going through Jimmy's mind. "Okay," he said, in what was probably meant to be a gallant tone but mostly came across as ridiculous. "I guess I can stay a little longer, then. For you."

I kept my face and posture steady until he left, then sat up and took a long drink of water. "Pompous asshole," I muttered.

"How do you do that?" Vigdis asked. She sounded mildly curious, nothing more. "Make them do what you want like that."

"It's all about making them want to make you happy," I said, shrugging. "With a guy like Jimmy, that means pretending you think he's as important as he does. Piece of cake."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

I snorted. "It can be. Tragically, we can't all just turn into a wolf and eat the people that annoy us." It would be easier if I could, but I didn't even have enough of a talent for shapechanging to adjust my features. A lot of succubi did—it was a helpful sort of thing, in that line of work—but my talents had always been in...other realms.

Pryce's was bustling, people carrying food and drink back and forth, money changing hands. It was rather pleasant to just sit back and watch it all, almost meditative.

"What can I get for you?" the waitress asked, sounding somewhere between bored and harried.

I met her eye and smiled, keeping the expression gentle. "I'd like a fried chicken sandwich, very spicy, and a glass of cola, please."

A couple of moments passed, then I nudged Tindr with my elbow. He scribbled down a few more numbers, then said, "Porterhouse steak, rare, side of fries, coffee." He didn't even look up from his notebook.

I rolled my eyes. Some people are hopeless.

I kept watching the crowd while we waited. The mood in the restaurant was pleasant, upbeat. No real worry that I could see, not much tension. People were willing to sit where they couldn't see the door. In the back Rachel Brown was winning a game of pool, as usual.

Tindr kept writing, occasionally referencing another notebook or a printed sheet. I wasn't sure what he was doing exactly. Calculating the likely return from investing in a bar in Texas, I thought, or at least that had been his pet project yesterday. Tindr was always working on something or other.

The waitress came back in just a couple minutes, carrying a tray. She dropped plates and glasses in front of us. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

I picked up my soda and wrapped my lips around the straw, holding her gaze the whole time. "No, thanks," I said a few seconds later. "I think we're good."

She walked away, a little flushed, and I smirked and picked up my sandwich. It was good. I didn't know how Pryce's kitchen always knew *exactly* how to cook the food, but it was always perfectly spiced, just hot enough to burn without getting in the way of the flavor.

"You're ridiculous," Tindr said, closing the notebook and setting it on another chair. "Don't you ever get tired of flirting?"

I shrugged. "Not really. It's fun, and it's good to keep my hand in."

"You don't even do that kind of work anymore."

"Maybe not, but I spent twenty years in the business, and I've been out of it for what, not quite three? Some things are still habit."

We ate in silence for a while, then Tindr suddenly asked, "Did you like it? Being a succubus, I mean."

I considered the question for a few seconds, then shrugged. "It's got its ups and downs, like anything else. The first job's the hardest. Once I was past that it wasn't bad."

"Your first wasn't good, then?"

"No," I said. "No, he wasn't good."

He'd been one of the more twisted motherfuckers it had been my displeasure to know, was more like it, but I didn't want to get into that with Tindr. At least it had been a short job. It barely took me a month to get him solidly in our camp, then I put a spike in his ear one night and that was that. It was a bit of a clumsy job, but I was a rookie. I'd gotten much smoother since then.

"I've never done anything like that," Tindr said, cutting his steak meticulously into bite-size pieces.

I tried to figure out what he was talking about—it could be hard sometimes, since at least a quarter of any conversation involving Tindr never made it out of his head—then turned to stare at him. "You've never had sex?" I asked, somewhat incredulous.

He kept cutting his meat. "No," he said. "I'm not exactly good with people."

I nodded. "You want to?"

He paused. "Is that a serious offer?" he asked after a moment. "I can't tell with you."

I shrugged. "Sure. I'm busy for the rest of the day, but tomorrow should be fine."

He resumed cutting his steak, but it had clearly cost him something to do so. "Why on earth would you do that?" he asked, not looking at me. *Pointedly* not looking at me.

"It'd be good for you," I said, smirking a little. "And it might be fun. Sex doesn't always have to be a big deal, you know."

There was a long, long pause. "Thanks," he said at last, about as gladly as someone pulling out his own intestines. "But no thanks. You'd find a way to use it against me. No offense."

I almost laughed at that. It had been a while since I got offended about that sort of thing. I mean, when you're literally a demon tasked with seducing people into evil so that you could take their souls to Hell, it's hard to get worked up about people treating you with a little mistrust. Not that I really knew *why* Hell *wanted* souls, since they didn't get anything much out of it. I supposed it was good for a certain amount of influence with the people in charge, since they'd built the place with the intention that it do so.

That raised the question of *why* they'd built it, but I knew better than to ask that question. My grandfather and his cronies had thought it was funny. End of the day, that was all the reason they really needed.

"That's not what this is about," I said to Tindr, making sure to keep my voice in exactly the same casual tone as before. "Like you said, I'm not in that line of work anymore. I've cut ties with Hell. I really don't have an ulterior motive here; it's just to keep my hand in, have a bit of fun, and do you a favor because I like you. Don't make it more than it is, and we'll both walk away happy. I give you my word."

He wanted to think I was lying, I could tell, but he didn't. I'd given my word, after all, and that carried weight in his world. A bit naive of him to think it also carried weight in *my* native culture, but that didn't matter, since I was actually being honest. Even if I *hadn't* cut ties with my old bosses, I wouldn't have gone after Tindr. He belonged to Winter, which meant that taking him would be both poaching and a betrayal of my employer's trust, and neither one was my style.

"Okay," he said at last, looking at me again for the first time since the conversation took this turn. "Tomorrow?"

I grinned and took another bite of my sandwich, a slow bite, dragging my teeth through the meat. I chewed slowly and then swallowed, still grinning. "Tomorrow," I agreed.

He hesitated, then nodded. "Okay," he said again. "But we still have a meeting to think about."

I sighed, and the smile went away. "Yeah," I said. "We do."

Nothing more was said as we finished eating, then walked over to another table, a small one tucked away in the darkest corner of the room. The woman sitting there watched us approach. Her features were bland, the sort that wouldn't stand out in any crowd, but there was a calculating hardness to her gaze that betrayed the lie, if you knew how to look.

"Miss Kuzmak," I said as we reached the table. I didn't bother flirting with this one; she was the type to appreciate a purely businesslike approach. She was not asexual, I thought, just the sort that didn't mix business and pleasure. I could be wrong about that—my ability to read people was the result of practice rather than magic, after all, and it wasn't infallible—but I was fairly confident. "I'm here on behalf of Winter Wolf."

Her eyes flicked from me to Tindr, and she nodded, once. "I know who you are. Sit down." We did so, and she leaned back a little, relaxing. Her hand was still under the table, though, and I was guessing she was holding a weapon of one sort or another. "What do you want?"

"You know my boss is in prison right now," I said. "I'm concerned that people might think that means they don't have to honor their commitments to him."

"I don't pay tribute to Winter," she said, which was true. He'd always preferred to just have an *understanding* with Luna, rather than take money. "And I'm not stupid enough to think he's out of the picture."

"But you know people who are," I said. "Yes? In this town, if someone's in the community and they want something done on the sly, they talk to you. You're good at your job. You know what's happening in this city."

"I know things," she agreed. "What's it to you?"

"We'd like it very much if you could tell us where to find these people," I said with a smile. "So that we could take care of any misunderstandings. How much would we like it again, Tindr?"

The jotun opened another notebook and started reading from it. I ignored that part of the conversation; I was familiar with human economics, generally, but my knowledge was vague and not particularly tied to this region. Tindr was much better with it, which was why he was here for this meeting.

Luna listened to it, then looked back at me. "You're asking me to betray my clients," she said, her voice quiet and hard. "Money isn't worth taking that kind of hit to my reputation."

I smiled broadly at her, keeping my own eyes as hard as hers. It was challenging to control that, a matter of posture and fine muscle control in my face, but I'd practiced every day in a mirror for *years* when I was younger. "Winter isn't going to be in that prison forever," I said, calmly and quietly. "We both know that. And when he gets out, he's going to know who stayed on his side while he was gone. And he's going to know who *didn't*. Which one do you want to be?"

She looked at me for a few seconds longer, then nodded once, tightly.

I had a mole in the audience for Winter's hearing. Of course I did; it wasn't hard to arrange, and it might be critically important. I couldn't go myself for fear of being recognized, but I wasn't going to let it go completely unobserved.

Which was just as well, since he sent me a text message the second Loki walked in the door. A few moments later I got another message suggesting that he was televising something important, so I rushed downstairs. The television in the kitchen didn't get much use, but I made sure it functioned.

I watched the whole thing, then shut it off and went downstairs, muttering curses in the language of my childhood as I went. The language of demons was good for cursing in; it sounded like a snarling animal crossed with a chainsaw when you were being *pleasant*.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but I knew it would be big, so I immediately alerted Kyi, who in turn would alert the housecarls. Then I went to the phone to contact our various other assets. I hadn't called on the mages since I talked Jimmy around, not wanting to push the boundaries of their loyalty, but if there was ever a time to risk it, it was now. I also called Luna and the various informants we'd contracted ourselves, telling all of them that we wanted to know what was happening in town before it finished happening.

Other than that, there wasn't much I could do beyond sit tight and wait for Winter to give us more specific directions. I was confident we'd be seeing him again soon, at this point. Calling Loki into things like that was an act of desperation—calling on *Loki* was an act of desperation, period, as anyone who knew the first thing about him could say. Winter wouldn't have done so if he weren't pushed to the limit, which meant he wasn't going back to jail.

It ended up being almost five days before he came back to Colorado from wherever he lived—he hadn't even told me where that was, which seemed like a bit of excessive paranoia, but I wasn't going

to argue with my boss on that topic. Tempers were wearing thin by that point, as people got tired and irritated from days on end of being on high alert, but the reaction when he walked in the door was still instant and respectful.

I felt a bit of pride at that. It hadn't been easy, but I'd managed to keep the ship running tight while he was gone.

Winter ignored the whole thing, walking straight across the room, his hound and his girlfriend beside him. Aiko was walking a little closer to him than normal, which was reasonable enough under the circumstances. I was just surprised she hadn't tried to break him out of jail.

Winter walked up and sat down in his throne, which had been kept scrupulously empty since he left it. A kind of sigh went through the room at that, as everyone let go of a tension they hadn't realized they'd been holding.

It was good to have a jarl again. Even those of us who would never admit it were glad to have that feeling of leadership, of there being someone at the helm of the metaphorical ship.

"Jarl," I said, approaching him and his retinue. Kyi was next to me, representing the *other* side of the middle-management in this arrangement. "We've kept things going in your absence." I didn't mention how godawful *hard* that had been. It wouldn't have been appropriate.

"Thank you," he said, and Kyi straightened up a little, standing with more pride in her bearing. Just two words, but even that much recognition got a reaction out of her.

"It's good to have you back, sir," she said.

He smiled, and if the expression was a bit vacant, a bit warped, I was probably the only one who noticed. "It's good to be back," he said, and I knew that things were going to be all right.