

A woman got off the train in Chicago, as she had for almost every day of every week of the past month at this hour. In London I could have called it the Tube or the Underground, but I didn't know any fancy terms for it in Chicago, so it was just the train.

She went to the bank, where she cashed a pair of checks. In the laundry next door she paid a few dollars for the clothing she had left to be dry cleaned, and in the restaurant three doors past that she bought a small vegetarian pizza. Carrying her purchases carefully in her arms, she walked east, not looking back.

She walked for perhaps ten minutes passed neatly mown lawns and neatly washed cars. Then she turned down a narrow alley leading between a bank of houses and a shopping center that had seen better days, many of its buildings sitting empty, many of the rest occupied only by their own employees and a collection of vermin seven days in ten. The only really thriving businesses in that shopping center were a mob-owned bowling alley where all one's problems could find solutions at the right rates, a liquor store for the drowning of sorrows and a bookie to help one make some more, and a pawn shop that promised reasonable returns in the event that it all went wrong.

Halfway down this alleyway, which she walked nearly every day, she hesitated.

Did she hear a step behind her?

Did her heart skip and stutter at the thought that she might be being watched?

Of course not.

It was just her imagination.

She kept walking.

So I met my daughter for drinks and she told me she'd met someone.

I snorted. "You've met more than a few, yeah?"

"Well, yeah," she said. "But I think this one is different. I think he might be for real."

I asked whether she was joking and she asked whether it looked like she was smiling and I told her it sort of did and she punched me in the face. From there on out the night was more or less par for the course for our little get-togethers, and no more mention was made of whether this one might in fact be *the* one, or whether that concept even made sense for someone like her. And then I went back home, and told her mother all about it.

As usual she hung on every word, desperate to hear about a child she no longer had any real contact with. But somehow I forgot about those few seconds of the conversation, and then afterwards it would have been awkward to go back to the topic. I figured it didn't matter, that it would soon pass.

That was the first time I heard of Winter Wolf. It wasn't going to be the last one.

At the end of the alley she turned onto a quiet street of detached houses, each as akin to the next as cookies made from the same mold, fronted with uniformly perfect lawns. Here and there was a hint of personality, a suggestion of individuality, but they were easily overlooked and lost in the endless succession of uniform homes.

She walked along until she reached one of them, distinguished from the rest by a small Zen garden of raked gravel providing an accent to the lawn, a few more locks on the front door, and a slightly more sophisticated security system. A light came on automatically at her approach and she walked up to the door, humming tunelessly under her breath as she retrieved a ring of keys from her pocket. She unlocked each of the locks and passed through the front door. The interior of the house was calmer, warmer than the windswept streets beyond its walls. There, in a dark and windowless room, she removed her coat and her shoes, exchanging them for a soft robe and a pair of bunny slippers. She moved with the ease of familiarity so great that it does not need eyes to see.

She turned on a few lights as she continued into the house. They illuminated an austere domicile, the home of someone with little need for luxury. The few pictures on the wall were simple, drawn in a minimalistic style that left much to the imagination. There were no images of people, nor were there any photographs.

She walked straight through into the kitchen, with its white tile floors and white walls, its granite countertops and black cabinets and stainless steel appliances. She set the pizza on the counter and continued into the bedroom, where she hung her dry cleaning in the closet.

Back in the front room, she collected the few bills that were waiting on the floor, stacking them into a neat, tidy pile on the table. There was no other mail. There was never any other mail.

The mundane tasks of homecoming thus resolved, she returned to the kitchen. She took a piece of pizza from the box and placed it on a pristine white paper plate. It was eminently disposable. All of the dishes in this house were disposable.

She did not turn the light on as she carried the food into the study. This was a home where things were not left on the floor to be tripped over, where all things were returned to their places after being used.

She set the plate down on the desk and sat. Now that her hands were free, she turned on the lamp. Its soft warm light illuminated a set of folders stacked neatly one atop the next, a notebook written in code, and a pair of sociology textbooks.

It also, quite deliberately, illuminated my boots, crossed at the ankle and resting on the desk.

Once the light turned on I let the rest of myself become visible, sitting in a chair across the desk from her. "Good evening," I said. "Let's have a chat."

A while later we went to a concert and the topic came up again. There might have been a couple of years in between; I sort of lost track for a while there on account of being busy with other things. Travel and the like. I might have accidentally introduced a backwater Otherside domain to organized crime and pizza, in two completely unrelated incidents. That sort of thing. Not important right now.

Anyway, the next time I talked to Aiko was at a concert. Weird AI was playing live and I was eating a really nice dish of escargot when she said, "I'm serious."

I ate another snail and said, "You're never serious."

She elbowed me and I had to juggle a little to not drop my food. "No, I'm really serious."

"You're a very violent person, you know," I said. "What are you so serious about, then?"

She stared at me. "You weren't listening?"

I sighed. "Aiko, there's music," I pointed out. "You think I'm even paying attention to you right now?"

She sighed. "Not really," she said. "Yet I remain perpetually optimistic. Look, I think this is for real."

"You know how many times you've told me that?"

"Twenty-three," she said.

I nodded. "You know how many of those people turned out to be for real?"

"None," she said. "I'm aware. Although I did stab seven of them."

"Which is certainly real," I admitted. "But not quite what you mean here, I think."

"Gosh, you think? But this guy's different than any of them."

"How so?"

"Well," she said, "for one thing he's as crazy as I am. Maybe more so, depending on how you score it."

"I doubt that," I said. "Very much. Unless you managed to chase down old Jack the Ripper or something like that, I'm guessing you're crazier than this mystery man."

"You might be surprised," she said. "But it's the good kind of crazy, you know? The kind that makes me think he might be able to put up with me. Hell, he actually gets in *more* scraps than I do. I've barely even had to pick fights to keep myself entertained, he does such a nice job of it. He isn't into all the shit I am, but he's at least willing to play along with me. And the stuff he *is* into is pretty intense. Keeps it interesting, you know?"

"Aiko," I said, interrupting her. "You remember my rule about your bedroom activities?"

"I can do whatever the fuck I want, so long as I don't tell you about it?" she guessed.

"That's the one. If you say he's fun, I believe you. More than that is really not my business." I thought a moment. "You really think this guy's something special?"

She shrugged. "I think he might be," she said. "If nothing else, I still want to find out, which is a hell of a lot longer than most people manage to hold my interest. That's a promising sign."

I nodded. "Well, in that case, you certainly have my blessing to continue pursuing it. If he breaks your heart, I'll gladly stab him for you."

"If it comes to that, I'll do it," she said with startling fierceness. "I like him too much to let anyone else kill him."

"The surest sign of true love," I said dryly. "Would you like me to tell your mother, then?"

She hesitated. "Maybe," she said. "But...not yet?"

"Fair enough," I replied. "In the meantime, I think the next song's starting. We've already missed out on this one, but I would *rather* hear the rest of the concert."

The woman sitting across the desk from me looked confused. Not surprised or frightened to have found someone waiting for her in her study; merely confused at the direction the encounter had taken.

"Why are you telling me this story?" she asked.

I leaned back in the chair. "Well, that's an interesting question," I said. "See, I try not to really do much. I don't like people thinking I'm a hero. They start expecting things from me, right? But I figure tying up the odd loose end in the background can't hurt too much."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you know considerably more than you're letting on," I said. "You've heard of the whole thing with the Gáe Bolg? Of course you have, it's the story of the year. But the funny thing is that the versions I've heard talk a whole lot about how it happened, and don't really seem to mention the *why* of

it at all. When I looked into it I couldn't seem to trace it much farther than a certain pawn shop. You have any idea what happened to the person who *owned* that pawn shop?"

"She was murdered," the woman said.

"Is that so," I said with a faint smile. "You're sure of that?"

"Very much so," she said. "I was there when she died."

"I imagine you were," I said. "But there's an interesting thing here. I couldn't really come up with much of a reason for anyone to have killed her. Hell, if anything she was worth more alive. She might have known something useful, and I'm sure there were all kinds of people who would have *loved* the chance to ask her some questions. In fact, it seems like the only person who really benefited from everyone thinking she was dead was...her."

She stared at me and said nothing.

I grinned. "So that got me thinking, yeah? I've got this friend, name of Jacques. Great guy, I've never seen him sober but he knows his stuff. Guy's got a lot of connections, you know, fingers in every pie. I told him I was curious about it and he turned up some interesting things. The kind of thing that made me think, hey, what if she wasn't dead after all?"

The woman was surprisingly quick, for a human. It took about a second for her to open a drawer, produce a revolver, and point it at me.

"So my friend," I said. "He knows everybody, pretty much. Man's got a gift, is the truth. He managed to track this hypothetical shop owner down. Surprisingly easy, as I hear it, once he got past the idea that she was dead. Apparently she had a couple of houses already bought and paid for in other cities under other names. Almost the sort of thing that would make a person think that she was *expecting* some trouble, don't you think?"

"You can't prove anything," she said.

"Prove?" I asked, with a smirk. "You don't seem to get how this works. I don't need to *prove* a thing. All I have to do is ask the question. If people even start to suspect, your mask won't last long."

"Are you trying to threaten me?" she asked, pulling back the hammer of the revolver. "Because that's not a very good idea. Even disregarding the gun pointed at your head, what are you really accusing me of? Faking my own death and running away when my life was in danger? That's not a crime, that's just good sense."

"If that's the worst you did, it might not matter," I agreed. "But like I said, it almost seems like you were expecting some trouble. That's a little suspicious, don't you think? And if people start to think that you started this whole mess on purpose, death is the least of what you can expect."

She pulled the trigger.

The gun clicked. Nothing much happened.

"My buddy Jacques," I said. "You remember him? He knows all sorts of people. He knows where they live, where they make their homes away from home. He knows their habits and their hobbies, their hours of work and their days of rest. And hey, he even knows where they keep their guns. Isn't that *nifty*?"

She pulled the trigger again. Nothing happened.

She nodded and set the gun down on the desk. She looked at me with hatred, but it was the hatred of resentment, the hatred of the beaten. "What do you want?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing much," I said. "I actually respect you a lot. I'm guessing you have a beef with the Courts, right?"

"They murdered my brother," she spat.

"See? Like, respect. You actually managed to play the Courts, and so far they haven't even caught you at it. That takes skills. And I have to admire anyone vengeful enough to go to this kind of length to get even. So yeah, I've got nothing against you personally. Which is why I told you that little story."

"I don't get it."

"Well," I drawled, "here's the thing. My daughter, she lives in that town. So does this Winter fellow she's so hot and bothered about, and your little game caused him some serious problems. Now, I don't give much of a damn about him, but she doesn't want him killed yet, so I would prefer that he stay alive. Those problems *also* spilled over onto her, which I take much more seriously."

She stared at me. "I'm getting some mixed messages here," she said.

"Yeah, I don't actually care. The point is this. I don't want you going back there. As far as anyone is concerned, you really did die. I find out otherwise, and you and I, we're going to be having another little chat. One that won't be half so friendly as this, you understand me?"

She kept staring, but now there was an element of belligerence to her expression. "I think you're bluffing," she said. "I don't think you could really go through with it. You aren't mean enough."

I smiled at her. Still smiling, I reached out faster than the eye could follow and grabbed the pistol off the table. I lifted it, cocked the hammer, and fired in a single motion, too quickly to have aimed.

Or that was what she would think, at least. You can actually aim very quickly with about four hundred years of practice. The bullet went exactly where I wanted it to.

She stared at the hole in her knee. "I thought the gun wasn't loaded," she said. Her voice sounded shocked. She hadn't had enough time for the pain to set in yet.

"Only the first two chambers," I said. "That won't heal properly, by the way. I don't care how good the surgeon is. You're never going to run properly again. Consider it an affirmation of intent."

"But the gun was loaded," she said numbly. "Why would you leave me with a loaded gun?"

"You couldn't hit me on the best day you ever had," I said, letting her hear the simple truth in what I said. "I only did it this way for the sake of the dramatic scene." I set the gun back on the desk with a smile and turned to leave.

She didn't try for the shot as I walked away.