

Breaking Point

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This book is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and locations herein are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual locales, events, and persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. I'm legitimately having a hard time coming up with vaguely humorous filler text to put after this disclaimer now. Is anyone even reading these things? Like, anyone? At all?

Emrys Vaughn

This book is dedicated to John, Dave, and Peaches, for their remarkable talent and admirable willingness to donate their time and expertise. You're great people. Unless you're a different John and Dave than the ones I'm talking about, in which case I don't really know. Peaches is probably okay, if only because someone who seriously goes by Peaches can't be all bad.

Chapter One

The hospital room was almost entirely silent. The occupants were both asleep, not producing a sound beyond quiet breathing and the slow, steady thumping of two heartbeats. I could hear hurried footsteps and hushed voices in the halls, but nobody ventured too close to this room. Not while I was visiting. Occasionally a nurse would come in for the regular checks on them, doing it quickly while watching me carefully out of the corners of their eyes. I thought they would have avoided even that, if they weren't afraid of incurring my anger.

I sat in the corner of the room and stared at nothing. Almost two weeks since I'd been blinded, and still my vision hadn't recovered properly. I could open my eyes without collapsing now, and I could even make out shape and motion a little, but that was about it.

Recovery was slow. For me and everything else in this city.

The people in front of me were no exceptions. Kyra's leg was in traction, broken so badly that it would likely be a month or more before she could put weight on it. For the moment it was held in place with an arrangement of straps and pins that wouldn't have looked out of place in the Marquis de Sade's bedroom. The assortment of fractures and dislocations in her leg was so painful that she was on a sufentanil drip that might have killed a human, and she still hurt every time she woke up.

Snowflake was better off, in some ways, but even worse in others. She wasn't in serious pain. Physically, she was largely recovered. But she had the kind of brain damage that was effectively crippling. Her memory was spotty; some days she was as clear as ever, and others she couldn't remember a conversation she'd had five minutes earlier. Her coordination was shot so badly that walking was a serious struggle. Sometimes when we talked she had to struggle for over a minute to figure out what she was trying to say. Given how we communicated, this wasn't just her forgetting a word, though that would have been frightening enough. No, this was more that she couldn't organize or sort her thoughts, and she struggled to remember the basic *concepts* she was trying to convey.

Still, she was recovering. Like Kyra, she was more resilient than any mortal had a right to be. It probably helped that I'd gotten a demigod with a talent for healing to start her off. Before that, she hadn't been making much progress. Things had improved considerably afterward.

It would just take time. Time for bones to heal. Time for brains to recover. Time for trust to be rebuilt.

Time was a resource in short supply, these days. For every minute I had, there were five minutes' worth of work to do. There was always a task clamoring for my attention. I hadn't slept in three days.

It almost bothered me how much that didn't seem to matter. I was tired, but it wasn't the sort of bone-deep fatigue I used to feel after going without sleep for that long. It was almost more cerebral

than visceral. The constant stress wore on me, making me irritable and snappish. But I didn't get weak or clumsy. I didn't fumble. I didn't have to work to keep my eyes open. Physically, I was almost *less* tired than when I'd been sleeping regularly.

It was disturbing, another step away from being a mostly normal person into being...whatever it was I was turning into. Another step away from humanity, for sure. But having the extra time was so useful right now that it was hard not to be grateful even though I was scared out of my mind whenever I took the time to think of it.

But still, even with how pressed I was with every minute, I spent an hour in that room with Kyra and Snowflake, listening to them breathe and not even coming close to dozing.

I closed the door quietly behind myself, so as not to wake them, and walked out of the hospital. Times being what they were, there were armed guards watching the exterior doors, standing at many of the key locations within the hospital, and occasionally patrolling the halls. They were hard, grim men and women, the sort of people that could put a bullet in a toddler and walk away whistling.

I ought to know. I was the one that hired them. Pellegrini had turned out to be more willing to contribute to keeping order than I'd expected, and he'd loaned me some of his troubleshooters at cut rates. Add in some freelancers that I knew, and it wasn't all that difficult to come up with a security force to protect the hospital.

I liked to think that I'd have done it even if I didn't know people who were staying there.

I'd had to expand my operation somewhat, setting up other locations, just to house my newly expanded army of minions. But the center of my organization was still very much the throne room in the old pack house, and it was there that I went after I left the hospital.

I imagined that the location of the building was something of an open secret at this point. Technically I was still a highly wanted man, and the police were probably supposed to consider apprehending me their highest priority. But they also knew that I was doing more to stabilize the situation right now than anyone else in this city. I was guessing that they were telling anyone that asked that I was just a bloody hard target to find, and politely ignoring the fact that I had a massive organization running right under their noses and they knew exactly where to go to find me.

It was a situation I'd seen a few times before. Usually I'd been the one to violate the unofficial truce and attack the bad guy in spite of all the reasons not to.

The comparison was not exactly a comfortable one.

Inside the building, the throne room was full of activity. There were a dozen or so guards standing around, a roughly even mix of jötunn and ghouls. The rest of the people were mostly humans in my employ, some of whom knew who they were working for, some of whom didn't. There were

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accountants in there, lawyers, mages, mercenaries, and all kinds of other useful people. I didn't even know who all was working for me at this point. A lot of them had been recruited in the past few weeks, while I was way too busy to keep track of them all.

At this point, I was paying more in wages every *week* than I'd been worth for most of my life. But there was also an incredible amount of money pouring in, from all kinds of sources. It wasn't just the magical community paying me protection money at this point. Legitimate businesses were paying me out of gratitude for having *anyone* to call for help, and Frishberg was funneling some cash from the police's budget into mine, as well. I had the investments that Tindr made and managed on my behalf, including multiple companies.

And then there were the less legitimate sources of income, as well. When I brought Luna into my fold, I also brought her entire black market network. She dealt in arms, drugs, and secrets, and I made a cut on every transaction. Not only was I giving my tacit approval by taking the money, I was lending the support of my influence and talents to make the deals happen. Pellegrini's local operations now paid me tribute for the privilege of operating in my territory, and even a small portion of the money they made was significant. Then there were payments for assassinations, payments coming from the Watchers, from the Pack, bribes from people hoping to buy my favor...money was coming in from *everywhere*.

It had gotten to such a scope that not even Tindr could manage it all on his own. For the time being he'd hired an entire accounting firm to help manage it.

Walking through the throne room, I was only seeing a small fraction of the people working for me. Mostly, there were *representatives* here. The heavyset man in the nice suit, for example, was just one of the accountants, here to drop off numbers with Tindr. The woman with a tattoo of a snake on her cheek was a gangster, dropping off the weekly payment for her business.

I passed through the bustle, and where I walked, the activity stopped. People turned to watch me pass. Many of those who were actually in my employ saluted me, in one way or another. The others mostly just watched.

I sat in the throne, and was almost immediately surrounded by my inner circle. Aiko was there, of course, and then there was Anna, who had flat-out refused to go back to Wyoming with Ryan and Daniell. I couldn't be too upset by that, since she was basically the oldest friend I had at this point. Plus her presence was the only thing that let me see the room clearly.

Other than those two, most of the people were there for a reason. Kyi was my field commander, in charge of the jötnar, and also in charge of information gathering and scouting. Selene was the more general second-in-command, who coordinated all of my enterprises and kept me up to date on them. Tindr handled the financial aspects. Of the more recent additions, Luna was more up to date on local gossip and attitudes than maybe anyone else in the city. Jibril was there to represent the ghouls, and Shadow was there to represent the mages.

There was enough sheer firepower in that group to eradicate a small city, and it was only a *fraction* of the total forces available to me. It was a little scary, actually.

"Okay," I said, sitting down in the throne and looking out over the room, through my own eyes and Anna's. The activity continued, money and files changing hands. "Situation?"

"Financially, we're sitting well," Tindr said. "I've got access to about all of the accounts again, and your investments are doing well. I actually made a fair profit short selling stocks right before a company went under."

"Spare me the details," I said dryly. "I won't understand them anyway. What's the bottom line?"

He cleared his throat and said, "At the moment, we're actually in the black. Net profit for this week is two thousand. I can't predict where things will be soon, though. Things are too unstable."

"Okay," I said. "How much is in the accounts?"

"In your personal accounts, slightly over ten million," he said. "In the operational account, three million. In investments, stocks, and real estates, an additional nineteen million."

"Sounds good. Next?"

"No attacks today," Selene said. "We're getting reports of a group of vampires moving into the area, though. Apparently they're looking to take over the territory now that Katrin is done. Kikuchi said that there's a group of oni that might want a piece of the pie, but he thought he could handle them. We got a message from the pack in Denver congratulating you and asking for a public show of solidarity. There's a message from a group of apsaras asking permission to visit the city."

"Send a group to talk to the vampires," I said. "No promises yet, just feeling them out. Send Kikuchi a message offering my formal support if he wants it; make sure it doesn't suggest that he can't handle it on his own. Tentatively agree to the pack's request, depending on what they have in mind for the display. Tell the apsaras I need to know what they want, and they would have to agree to some ground rules. Next?"

Selene cleared her throat. "You have a visitor, jarl."

"Who and when?" I snapped. "And why didn't you already mention it?"

"She's talking about me," Brick said dryly.

I blinked and looked around. I hadn't noticed him, even though he'd walked straight up to the throne I was sitting in.

Or, more accurately, I hadn't *recognized* him. It was always a little tricky trying to translate from another body's senses, and Brick looked different enough that I might not have known it was him if I were using my *own* eyes.

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More specifically, he looked like shit. His face was burned, *badly*, almost half of it covered in blisters and blackened skin. His grey robes were also burned and torn, though I knew they were as strong as most armor. His left arm was in a sling made out of what looked like burlap, and he walked with a limp, leaning heavily on his staff.

"Brick," I said. "What the hell happened to you?"

He grinned weakly. "You remember the situation in Russia I told you about, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "The all-hands-on-deck thing, right? Did that lighten up enough that you could come back?"

"Not exactly. You remember I told you we might need to call everyone that might help if things got much worse?"

"Yes," I said slowly. I thought I knew where this was going, and I was *not* liking it.

"Well, it's worse." He started to rub his eyes, leaning the staff against his chest, then remembered the burns and lowered his hand again. "We need help. We need all the help we can get."

"Oh," I said. "You want me to come, then?"

"Yeah," he said. "You and anyone you can bring. I mean *anyone*. We're taking all comers at this point." He then paused. "What time is it, local?"

"Just before noon," I said. "Why?"

"Shit," he muttered, dropping the staff again and reaching into his cloak. He pulled out four unlabeled pill bottles. "You got something to drink?"

"Somebody get me some water!" I shouted, not watching to see who ran for it. Someone would. I was more interested in what Brick was doing. "What are those?" I asked him quietly.

"Broad-spectrum antibiotic," he said, pulling one pill out of the first bottle. "Painkiller. Modafinil. Amphetamine."

I blinked. "They're handing out amphetamine?"

He smiled grimly. "They're handing out anything that might keep people in the fight a little longer," he said. "And I mean anything."

"It's that bad?"

"Let me put it this way," he said. "You remember that one-to-twenty scale I told you about? We're sitting at a fifteen right now. If it goes one step higher, we start dropping strategic nukes on this thing."

I took a second to process that. "Okay," I said. "Let me get some people together."

Chapter Two

Having never been to Russia before, I was a little disappointed by how little difference there was between it and Colorado. Brick's portal dumped us out onto an open plain near a river, with a conifer forest to the other side. The environment was actually quite a lot like the subalpine forests outside of town.

There was a small cluster of tents by the river, and it was towards these that Brick headed, not checking to see whether we were following him. I did, because there wasn't really much point in doing otherwise at this point, and everyone else followed me.

Aiko was there, of course—I hadn't even tried to suggest that she might stay behind—and Anna had come along to provide me with vision. Kyi had to stay behind to manage things, but I'd brought several of the other housecarls, especially those who weren't that well suited to city fighting. They were more useful here, I thought.

No mages, though. If the Conclave's entire force couldn't deal with this, the handful I could convince to come with me weren't likely to manage it.

Anna could smell smoke well before we reached the small camp, thick with the smell of the pines and spruces it had come from. Moving closer, I could see the small details that hinted at how serious the situation was. The tents were the highest-quality models money could buy, but all were soiled, and many were torn, or set up improperly. People were eating, but they were eating what looked like old MREs, the sort of food that could keep you alive for a while, but didn't have much else to recommend it. Most of them were injured, and almost all were downing pills as they ate. The few who weren't eating were either tending to injuries or unconscious in the tents.

Everywhere, there was an air of urgency. There was no conversation, and everyone was moving quickly, like they couldn't afford to waste even a second.

Brick walked through the midst of it all without even looking. The rest of us attracted a few curious looks from various people, but they went back to what they were doing after only a couple of seconds. These people were just too exhausted to work up much interest.

We made our way to a slightly larger open tent near the river, almost a pavilion. There were people running back and forth from this tent, holding scraps of paper or carrying bags. These people, too, looked worn and broken down.

Watcher was sitting at a small table within the tent, her cane leaning against her chair. As each person came in, she took the paper they handed to her or listened to spoken messages, considered each for no more than five seconds, then replied.

Brick made his way to her through the press without any evidence of concern for the people he displaced. I followed in his wake, feeling a little overwhelmed. I had seen some fairly large conflicts in the past, but nothing this long-term. Normally, by the time I was anywhere near to as worn out as these people were, the fight had been over for a while.

"Wolf," Watcher said, not looking up from the paper in her hand. I wasn't sure how she could read it, considering that her eyes were very much blind and she used magic to compensate, but apparently she could. "This is all you brought?"

"I had to leave people behind to keep my territory secure," I said defensively. "And besides, I don't know what you're fighting out here. How am I supposed to know who's useful?"

She grunted. "Everyone's useful right now," she said darkly. "But I take your point. Your associates are physical fighters, I take it?"

"Primarily, although one of them is a shapechanger and another has some magical ability. We've got quite a few weapons, too—guns, explosives, stored spells, that sort of thing."

"Right," she said. "We'll want them on the front lines then." She scrawled a quick note on a piece of paper and handed it to the runner who she'd been dealing with when we walked up. "Take that to Raven," she ordered him. "Then go to Jäger and ask him where he wants a squad of skilled and equipped physical combatants."

The runner nodded and sprinted off, stumbling a little before he hit his stride. I was guessing he was also functioning only due to massive amounts of chemical assistance. Take away his stimulants, and he'd probably be down for the count.

"I notice you aren't fighting," I said. "Why? You're one of the strongest mages in the world, right?"

Watcher smiled grimly. "We're trading off," she said. "I fought yesterday and the day before. Today is my rest day before I go in again. Right now Guard and Prophet are keeping him busy. Keeper, Arbiter, and Maker are trying to establish a wall to keep him from getting any closer to Saint Petersburg. We haven't been able to lock him down yet, but hopefully we can keep him going the path of least resistance, and he won't make it to the city. If he does, we might not be able to bring him down at all."

"Okay," I said. "Overlooking the fact that it apparently takes five members of the Conclave just to keep him contained...who is this guy? Why's he such a problem?"

She reached under the table and pulled out a paperback book. It looked like it had been manufactured in a hurry, with smeared ink on the cover and the binding applied at a wonky angle. "Viktor Samsonov," she said, handing the book to me. "Here's the dossier. Don't waste time reading it right now."

"All right," I said, taking it. "What should I be doing instead?"

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"We need people to pick up less mobile assets and bring them here," she said. "You and anyone with you who can open a portal should report to Celina Cateye. Brick can show you where to go." Watcher waved another messenger up, and we walked away.

"She's pretty energetic for someone who's been working for three days straight," Aiko commented.

Brick snorted. "She's on modafinil and amphetamine," he said. "And magic. We don't have enough witches who can mitigate sleep deprivation for them to work on everyone, but she's important enough to get the treatment. Now hurry up."

Celina turned out to be a short, heavily tanned woman standing near the edge of the camp. She was pacing restlessly back and forth, and she was wearing a heavy winter coat, although I hadn't noticed any particular chill in the air.

"Celina," Brick said. "Got another two for you. They both do Otherside portals."

She stopped pacing and turned to face us, staring intently with sunken blue eyes. "You," she said, pointing at me. Her finger shook slightly. "Where can you go?"

"Colorado," I said. "Wyoming, Oregon, and North Dakota. London. Romania. Singapore. Should I list the Otherside locations?"

"No," she said. "Still working on agreements with them. Good. American, but good. You?"

"Colorado," Aiko said. "Milan. Leipzig. Bremen. Seville. Tokyo. Cape Town."

"Very good," Celina said. "And the rest of these people? What do they want, Brick?"

"They're going to one of the fortifications the Jäger clan is defending," he said. "Don't know which one."

"Someone will be making a trip in that direction within an hour," she said. "They wait here until then. Now. Where in Colorado? Denver?" This last was clearly directed at me.

"Colorado Springs," I replied.

She thought for a moment, then nodded. "Close enough. Go there, go to Denver. Your pickup will meet you at the coffeehouse on...Colfax?" She dug a scrap of paper out of her pocket, glanced at it, and nodded. "Colfax. Downtown. Go there, get them, and bring them here. Then you talk to me and I will tell you where to go next." She then turned to Aiko. "Go to Tokyo," she said. "Akihabara. Your pickup will meet you at the AKB48 theater."

"I know where it is," Aiko replied.

"Good," she said. "Now go."

I had a surprisingly easy time getting to where I was supposed to be. The highway between Colorado Springs and Denver was usually congested and miserable, but at the moment it was more or less deserted. In Aiko's Lamborghini, I managed to do triple digits most of the way. It was probably unsafe, but at this point, who really cared?

Finding the rendezvous points was a little harder, since I wasn't familiar with the city and it had the same problems as Colorado Springs, or worse. The roads were bad, and many of the major ones weren't even functional. But I managed it after only a little struggling, and pulled into the parking lot.

I didn't like leaving the car there, but it wasn't the biggest issue right now. And besides, it wasn't likely that someone would steal it. Not after I powered up the defenses.

I stepped inside the building, Anna sticking close to my side.

It wasn't hard to find the group I was looking for. They were damn near the only people in the building. There were maybe fifteen to twenty of them gathered around a couple of tables they'd pushed together in the corner. Most of them were holding cups of coffee that they weren't drinking, and staring at each other distrustfully.

"I'm here to pick you up," I said, walking up to them. "For the fight in Russia?"

One of them, a big guy with dark skin and muscles on his muscles, glowered at me. "What is that werewolf doing in my territory?" he asked, rising halfway to his feet.

"You're the Alpha of this town?" I asked, more out of curiosity than anything. I'd spent a lot of years practically next door to him, and I'd talked to more than a few of his wolves in the past, but I didn't remember having actually met him.

"That's right," he said. "Now answer my question."

"Guess you'll get that show of solidarity after all," I muttered, smiling a little. Then, louder, "We're just here to do the pickup. Not moving in on your turf. Now, do you *really* want to start problems about it? Because I think we've both got bigger problems right now."

"He's right, Thomas," another man said. This one was shorter and a lot thinner, although still in decent shape. He was also most definitely *not* a werewolf; there were a lot of magical signatures around that table to sift through, but if there was one scent I could pick out of a crowd, it was werewolf, and he didn't have that. "I'm Steve, by the way. Blake clan, mental specialist."

"Don't really care, honestly," I admitted. "Although...if you're that good, why are you still here?"

"I'm not much of a fighter, frankly," he said. "Not one of the first people you'd call for something like this. And I don't know anywhere in Russia well enough to open a portal there."

"Fair enough. Now come on, we don't have time to waste."

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The portal from downtown Denver to the forest of Faerie was a pretty major difference in terms of the conceptual and atmospheric difference between the two. That made it harder to bridge the gap, and it took me almost ten minutes to get the portal up, even with the focus I'd designed to help with that sort of magic. A couple of people tried to rush me, but Steve and another two mages shushed them.

The amount of distance being covered would also make the experience of crossing it particularly unpleasant, but that didn't really matter to me. I got a little bit of vomit on my boots from one of the other werewolves, but I'd stepped in worse things. It also meant that I was almost done with the next portal when people started waking up, which was a nice perk.

Back in Russia, I walked up to Celina with the people from Denver following me. "Got these guys," I said to her. "Don't know what to do with them from here."

"I'll handle it," she told me. "Werewolves, over there!" she shouted after that, loud enough to make me and most of the werewolves wince a little. "Everyone else, that way! Ask for Watcher, do what she tells you, don't cause trouble!"

People started breaking up into groups and moving where she'd pointed. No one questioned what they'd been told, not even the Alpha. Celina Cateye had a considerable amount of *presence*, when she chose to exert it.

"All right," she said to me, more quietly. "Next up, Romania. There're two groups, one in Bucharest and one in a village outside Sibiu."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. "I can do that. What are the details?"

The second trip was harder than the first. The only place I knew to put a portal in Romania was right outside our castle, which was in the northwestern portion of the country. I shifted into fur, and Anna and I just ran southeast towards Sibiu. It wasn't a run I'd made often, since normally if we wanted to go to the city we just took a portal somewhere, but I knew the way.

We made decent time. Not spectacular, but decent; it was relatively rough terrain, forested and fairly steep, and even werewolves could only go so fast. It didn't help that this was my first time trying to run at full speed as a wolf while looking through someone else's eyes. It took us a bit to coordinate that, and there were a few accidents on the learning curve, including one particularly exciting tumble off a sizable cliff.

But we managed, and it only took us two hours and change to get there. The village we were looking for was small, barely a thousand people, not far from Sibiu. I didn't get a chance to see much more than that, because this time the people we were there to pick up found *us* before we'd even made it into town.

There were three of them, two male and one female. All three were very obviously vampires; the blood-and-spice scent of their magic was clear, as was the absolute stillness they had when they weren't moving.

They didn't say a word, just walked up and nodded to us. When we started running again, they ran beside us with no evidence of difficulty or complaint. One of the males actually turned into a wolf, a massive beast with jet black fur and glowing red eyes; the other two stayed human in shape, but they still kept our pace easily. I got the impression they could have outdistanced us if they wanted to.

We could have stolen a car and driven, but I didn't think it would really be any faster. We'd have to stop for me to change, since driving in fur was awkward in the extreme and there was no way I was getting in a car driven by a vampire right now. Then the highway took a rather circuitous route, and we'd have to deal with any problems that the road had right now, which might be serious. Simpler to just run it.

So that's what we did. Following the road would have been easier, but it went well out of the way, and we were all capable of handling harsh terrain, so we went straight cross-country. That took another three hours or so.

When we got to about the right neighborhood of Bucharest, the humanoid male vampire looked at me. "We can go in and get them," he offered. "You stay here and start the portal."

The three of them walked further into the city without waiting for a response, the wolfish one melting back into a humanoid form. Although, now that I looked at him in that context, there *was* something about him that was less human than the other two. He moved with a sort of predatory grace that was subtly but noticeably inhuman.

Once they were gone, I started by shifting back to human, and then opened the next portal. It was a bit of a struggle—I was already pretty tired from the running—but by the time the vampires returned with my pickup from this location, I was ready to go.

Back in Russia, the vampires moved off toward the command tent without waiting for instruction from me or Celina, pulling the rest of the group with them by sheer charisma.

"Where next?" I asked Celina, leaning on the table a little. I was more fatigued than I'd realized, and, now that I thought about it, hungrier. Almost starving, really.

She shook her head. "There is no more time for this," she said. "The necromancer has broken through the defenses. You are needed to help hold him back from Saint Petersburg. Go and talk to Watcher. Your transport will arrive soon."

"Okay," I said, turning and walking back towards Watcher's tent. I wasn't in the best of shape for a world-class fight right now, but I couldn't deny a certain excitement at the thought. I'd been hearing about how bad this situation was for a while now; actually *seeing* it couldn't be worse than the vague, formless fear I had felt.

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"Wait," she said.

I paused and looked over my shoulder. "Yes?"

"In Italy," she said, "I would say *in bocca al lupo* now, to wish you luck. It means 'in the mouth of the wolf.' Now, to wish for the death of wolves now is not a good thing to say. But I think there is another meaning that is not so bad to ask for."

"I often like to have my enemies in my mouth," I said dryly. "If that's what you mean."

"Yes," she said, nodding. "*In bocca al lupo*, then. And may God have mercy on us all."

Chapter Three

As it turned out, I was wrong.

The reality could be a *lot* worse than vague fears.

It had taken almost an hour for the person we were waiting for to arrive. I wanted to call them a man, but I wasn't entirely sure the term applied; they looked like an anorexic teenager who was way too fond of body modification. Not just a little bit, either; their face was warped out of shape until it was as close to a cat as a human, one of their ears was completely gone and the other had a hole in it I could fit two fingers through, and one cheek had gaping holes in it, letting me see their jaw moving up and down as they chewed bubblegum. They wore their trench coat open, the better to show the mass of scars, piercings, and subdermal implants covering their torso.

Calling someone human who so enthusiastically left humanity behind seemed almost rude. To pin them down to one gender or another was an assumption I couldn't confidently make.

"Hey," they said, walking up to us. "Guessing you two are the pickup I'm supposed to get to the front?"

"That's us," I confirmed.

"Cool," they said. "Gotta fag? I haven't had anything to smoke all day."

"Sorry," I said. "No."

They grunted and turned to Aiko. "What about you? Anything?"

She shook her head. "I don't smoke," she said.

They frowned, the expression made darkly comic by the way I could see their muscles moving *inside* their face. "That's not an answer," they chided. "Don't like it when people dodge around questions."

"Sorry," she said, sounding somewhat exasperated. "Didn't realize it was such a touchy subject for you. I don't have anything to offer you."

They grunted again. "Damn. Ran out yesterday, and the pills they're handing out just don't cut it. Come here, then. Let's get this over with."

They moved us into a domain I'd never seen before, a vast dim space that stank of smoke and gasoline fumes, filled with the noise of constantly grinding machines half-seen in the darkness. It was so loud that it was hard to think, impossible to talk, the noise a physical pressure against me. The acrid stench of the place was offensive, nearly toxic; I started coughing with the first breath I took, and didn't stop. Worse than all the rest, though, was the inexplicable certainty that this place was *alive*, that the

domain itself was aware and, if not precisely malicious, certainly *alien*, hostile simply by being so very far removed from anything we had ever been designed for.

Our escort seemed quite at home there. I tried not to think too hard about that.

And then we stepped out of that mechanical hell, onto the highway south of Saint Petersburg.

On the whole, I thought I might have preferred the Otherside.

My first impression was one of madness. It was the middle of the night, and while the moon was full, the cloud cover got in the way, made it darker than it might have been. It smelled like smoke, a mix of woodsmoke and nastier things, scorched rubber and burning hair. The noise of battle was quieter than the Otherside had been, but still distracting, confusing and disorienting.

The instant we appeared, we were attacked. The creatures attacking us were humanoid, sort of, but they looked even less *human* than our escort. Their limbs were too long, twisted in odd directions and tipped with claws, their skin an ashen grey that looked unnatural even in the darkness. They had glowing red eyes, literally.

Two of them jumped me, one swinging a crowbar, another just clawing at me. Another one tackled Aiko to the ground and started trying to bite her. The last of the group rammed what looked like a sharpened golf club into our escort's chest. It was placed for a lung shot, and given that they were wearing their coat open, there was nothing stopping it from punching into their flesh.

They looked down at it and sighed. "Bastard," they said. "You're supposed to still be a quarter mile back."

Then they reached up and pulled the piece of metal out of their torso. No blood emerged from the hole it left behind. A fluid *did* dribble out, but it was thick and black, more like oil than blood, and there was no real pressure behind it.

They slammed the golf club into the pavement we were standing on, accompanying it with a burst of magic, scented with car exhaust and gasoline, burning rubber and hot asphalt, and just a hint, a touch, of motor oil. The typical human scent of disinfectant was all but lost in that.

And the asphalt reacted to the magic, moving to their will. It lashed out at our attackers, moving with a speed and fluidity that startled, and pulled them to the ground, even pulling the one off Aiko without actually touching her. Once they were lying on the road they were pulled down *into* the pavement and crushed.

"Not in the forest anymore," the mage muttered. "Bloody stupid bastard. This is *my* kind of place."

I looked at them with new respect. "That," I said, "is one of the stranger pieces of magic I've seen."

They grinned, a lopsided sort of grin that showed teeth only through the hole in their face. "You should spend more time with urban druids," they said. "You might learn some things. Now come on, our command post is this way."

They led us up a nearby hill to where another tent had been set up, along with some floodlights. People were spaced regularly around the perimeter of the lighted area, maybe eighty percent of them carrying assault rifles, the last twenty armed with more exotic weaponry.

They didn't challenge us. I wasn't sure whether we were expected, or it was our escort that got us by the defensive line. Or maybe it was just that, for maybe the first time I'd ever seen, everyone was on the same side here.

A small table was set up within the tent, a large map spread across it. The map was marked with a mixture of colored pins and tape; I wasn't sure what any of it meant. The only person in the tent was a man in a plain white robe, carrying a long wooden staff.

"Prophet," I said, eyeing him. I'd only met him once before, and it hadn't left the best impression. When people vote for your execution, it tends to have that effect.

"Jarl," he replied. "A moment. Metro, do you have anything to report?"

"Not really," our escort said. "Things are getting pretty close, though. My input point was overrun."

"I know," he said. "They're traveling faster on the road than we anticipated. Try to slow them down if you can."

They nodded to him and walked away, spitting their gum out on the ground and pulling another stick out of their pocket.

"Not terribly useful at the moment," Prophet said, watching them go with cool grey eyes. "But she'll be key to our defenses if the fighting reaches Saint Petersburg."

"Is her name seriously Metro?" I asked. "Because that seems like a ridiculous name."

Prophet smiled thinly. "I would think it would be easy to recognize that Metro would not keep the name she was born with." He then looked back to the map on the table. "Watcher has great confidence in your ability to contribute in this battle," he said. "I do not. I will not bother giving you instructions, as it is a waste of my time and you will not listen anyway."

"Great," I said dryly. "You mind at least telling me what we're fighting?"

He pointed behind me without looking up. I turned around to look where he was pointing, and then gulped.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

The funny thing was that I'd already seen it. I just hadn't quite grasped what it meant.

The cloud was hard to see in the dark; there wasn't much light to begin with, so the area where there was *none* was harder to distinguish. But once he'd pointed it out to me, I realized what I was looking at.

The effect was maybe a mile across and half that in height, a broad dome shape through which light simply didn't pass. Anna couldn't see the ground on the other side, or the skyline. Even the moon was blocked, invisible when the supernatural darkness got between her and it. The leading edge of the effect was still over a mile away, but it was moving steadily towards our position.

I frowned, and shifted my consciousness out, into my surroundings. I skipped over a handful of wolves, a dormant brown bear, and what felt like some kind of seal before settling on an owl. I asked her to swoop in and take a look, and found a surprising amount of resistance. I might not know what was going on, but she had an idea, and she wanted nothing to do with it.

Eventually I managed to convince her, although she wouldn't go close to it, let alone *into* the area of darkness. It didn't matter. I was still able to get a decent look at things.

The edge of the darkness was the site of maybe the most intense fighting I'd ever seen. Most of the combatants were the same warped humanoids Metro had taken out, although there were quite a few things that had four legs but were otherwise similar in appearance. There were a lot of them, more than I could really grasp. I could only see a small section of the fight, and I still estimated that there were probably more than a *hundred thousand* of them there.

Fighting them was a force that would have been terrifying under almost any other circumstances, but which was simply overshadowed by the sheer numbers being brought to bear against them. I could see werewolves, whole *packs* of werewolves fighting as a unit to hold down a section of the line. In another spot, the three vampires I'd brought in from Romania were crushing the twisted creatures like they were made of cardboard, sometimes felling a dozen of them with a single blow. It didn't seem to matter. There was always another dozen ready to go.

Further back, away from the close-quarters combat, were all manner of ranged attacker. There were mages, of course, using every kind of power imaginable and quite a few that I couldn't identify at all. In another location what looked like an entire battalion of soldiers were shooting into the thick of things without apparent concern for friend and foe. This wasn't small arms fire, or sniper rifles; far from it. They were spraying indiscriminately with assault rifles, and when the guns ran empty, they reloaded and kept shooting. I saw at least one truck-mounted machine gun.

After a moment, though, I realized there was something *odd* about the fight. No one went into that area of unnatural darkness. The most blood-mad werewolf, chasing his prey beneath the light of a full moon, turned away when it ran under the cover of that darkness. When it moved forward and buried one of the few close-range mages, his comrades abandoned him without a second thought, fleeing at full speed.

That was about all I could get before the owl got absolutely fed up with me and went back to her nest, a safe distance from the warzone.

I frowned and tried to move to something within the area of the darkness.

Nothing. Not just nothing I could use. I literally couldn't feel *anything*, not so much as a rodent in the whole of the area.

I returned to my body and opened my eyes, then frowned and shifted part of my attention back to Anna's senses. Blindness was *really* getting old.

Prophet was still looking at the map. I was pretty sure he was doing something important, but I needed more information, so I decided to interrupt him.

"Where are the monsters coming from?" I asked.

He didn't look up. "The first thing he did after the gods lifted their restrictions was go to the mass graves from the Battle of Stalingrad. He's added some more since, but we think most of them are still from there."

"Wait," I said. "He raised the dead? We're talking about a literal necromancer?"

"Not precisely," Prophet said. "Raising the dead is impossible. We call them necromancers, but that isn't entirely accurate. Mages such as this have power over *life*, not death. There just happens to be enough lingering life in corpses to provide them with something to work with."

I opened my mouth, then paused as I realized something. There had been no animals in the area of darkness. What if that was because there was *nothing* alive in that area, except Viktor?

"Blood magic," I said. "He's using blood magic. Taking the life from everything near him and using it to power his magic."

Prophet looked up at me like I'd done something interesting for the first time. "Correct," he said. "Right down to the bacteria. That's why this is so problematic. He's got enough stolen life to recover from anything we can do to him. His creatures aren't much threat, but he can bring them back as fast as we can put them down. Everyone he takes makes him that much stronger. Now, if you don't mind I *do* have work to do here, so if you can't be useful, at least be silent."

I thought for about ten seconds, trying to find something I could do. I wasn't coming up with much. He was almost invincible, insanely powerful, and surrounded by a cloud of death that would probably wipe me out within a couple of seconds. I only had a couple of weapons that could plausibly even hit him, and none of those was likely to do any good when everything they'd thrown at him thus far had failed.

I reached a decision, and then hesitated a few seconds more, trying to talk myself out of it.

Fuck it. This wasn't a time for small guns.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"Loki," I said. "Loki, Loki, Loki. I have a question for you."

"Yes?" he said to me. I'd turned around the instant after I spoke, so naturally this time he showed up in *front* of me.

I turned back to face him, scowling. "You know what's happening here," I stated.

"Of course," he said. "It's quite interesting. I really thought this was over when the military carpet bombed him. Evidently he was further along in his ascension at the time than I realized. An odd miscalculation on my part. I wonder whether he's drawing power from another source as well, something to supplement the lives he steals?"

"Whatever," I said. "Priorities. How do I stop him?"

"Is that your question?" he asked, pacing around me. Aiko was watching warily, standing at a safe distance. Anna didn't seem to realize the danger, and stood right next to me.

"You said I didn't have to worry about exact phrasing," I reminded him. "So yeah. Tell me what I need to do to deal with this."

"The obvious answer is that you need to kill him," Loki said, circling a little closer now. "But that would be unsporting. The next answer is that you need to kill him quickly enough that he can't heal. That's slightly more informative, but doesn't really provide a useful how-to guide. While I could tell you what the most efficient ways to solve the problem are, I know for a fact that you won't pursue any of them, which makes the suggestion somewhat disingenuous. So instead, I think I'll say this."

He then stepped forward, quick as lightning, his hand reaching out to my arm. He reached through my armor and the clothing beneath it like they weren't even there, and opened a long, shallow cut in my arm with nothing more than the touch of his finger.

When he pulled his hand out again, it was dripping with my blood. "My name is Winter Wolf-Born, jarl of the Peak," he said. His voice was a perfect mimicry of my own, right down to the sound of wolves and wind hidden beneath the surface, replacing the mad laughter that usually lurked under his voice. "By this offering of my blood, I call on the Wild Hunt to ride beside me. I call myself the Lord of the Hunt this night, and let my life be forfeit if I am not so great a hunter as this."

I opened my mouth to ask what that was supposed to mean, then felt an odd, familiar sort of tickling sensation. I looked down and saw pale fog forming around my armor, bringing with it a dusting of frost.

"You asked how to stop him," Loki whispered in my ear, leaning close as a lover beside me. "My answer? Think hungry thoughts."

Chapter Four

I started to curse Loki, but stopped myself. Getting a reaction out of me would just encourage him. Besides, he was already gone.

And I had bigger issues to worry about. The wintry storm of the Hunt, of *my* Hunt, was gathering rapidly about me, wreathing my hands and feet, climbing up to surround me completely. It would only be a minute or two before I was entirely shrouded in the freezing fog, and I somehow knew that once that happened, the Wild Hunt would begin in earnest.

Then I felt something else, and my eyes widened. It was the full moon, and I'd been feeling the urge to change into fur for quite a while, but I'd been able to keep it under control. It helped that I'd been in and out of the Otherside so much. Then I'd changed to run across Romania. Running was the next best thing to hunting, and it had done a lot to satisfy the wolf in me.

But now that primal, basic urge was intensifying, the *need* to change swelling in time with the fog that wrapped itself around me. My hands started to change, twisting into paws, drawing a scream from me as the changing shape came into conflict with the gauntlets I was wearing.

I tried to choke it back down, and I managed it, but the urge was still getting stronger, and for all my discipline, I didn't think I could keep the change away once the Hunt was here for real. It just wasn't possible.

I started stripping the armor off with hasty, near-panicked movements, throwing it on the ground carelessly. I thought about keeping my foci, adjusting them to my new skin the way I sometimes did for a fight, but there was no time. By the time my armor was off, I was panting, my fingers fumbling and clumsy. The fog was starting to spread across my chest now, over my face.

With shaking hands I pulled off my clothing, dropping it on the ground in a heap. The jewelry went next, leaving me naked in the moonlight, hidden only by the storm of the Wild Hunt gathered around me.

Naked in Russia on an autumn night, and I wasn't freezing. I wasn't even uncomfortable. On the contrary, it felt right, felt natural. This was good.

I stopped resisting and the change hit me like a ton of bricks, smashing me to the ground. I was already starting to twist by the time I hit the ground, limbs warping and shifting, my skin splitting and reforming as the flesh underneath moved around. Joints popped in and out of socket as the bones snapped and then knit themselves back together.

Unusually, there was no pain. Normally the change was agony from start to finish, and while the influence of the full moon eased the pain, there was still *pain*. This time, there was still sensation, but it was altered, transmuted by the storm and moonlight and the thundering rush of blood in my ears into

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something entirely less straightforward. I knew what I was feeling was *supposed* to be painful, but the actual sensation wasn't there. On the contrary, all I could feel was pleasure, mad, overwhelming, almost orgasmic pleasure, wiping everything else away.

I stood, and I was shaking a little, panting, hyperaware of everything around me. The breeze hit me with the scents of blood and death and I shuddered, barely able to stand, my attention narrowing down to nothing more than that scent and my own intense, overwhelming hunger.

Changing under the full moon was always like a drug, but it was a drug that I knew. This was entirely different, the Wild Hunt's influence pushing it *far* beyond what I'd been prepared for. It was like giving someone crack when they were expecting coffee. I couldn't even think.

This is what it feels like to go moon-crazy, I thought distantly. *This is how werewolves go mad*.

And then, when I was just beginning to come to grips with the feelings, the mantle of the Wild Hunt finished wrapping itself around me, and added another layer to the madness.

I'd been in the Hunt before, but being the center of it, being the seed crystal that the Hunt *grew* from, was an entirely different experience. As it finished engulfing me, I felt it snap into place and reach out, trying to make connections with other Hunters.

I couldn't say why, but somehow I was convinced this was an important moment, a *definitional* moment. This was my first time as the leader of the Wild Hunt in truth, and in some ways it was when the Wild Hunt decided what that meant. Who it brought to me, who it felt belonged in my Hunt, would in large part decide what that Hunt became.

And there was nothing I could do to influence it. At this point, there was nothing for me to do but sit and watch.

The first person it found was Anna, sitting nearby and watching me curiously. The fog started at her feet and climbed rapidly up her body, first in thin streamers, then coming in heavier, until her fur was completely hidden. I could feel it as she was brought into the Hunt, could feel her excitement and anticipation not quite covering a thin edge of fear. She'd been a part of the Hunt in the past, and while I could feel that she was looking forward to feeling that way again, looking forward to it enough to be a little disturbing, there was also an element of dread. The loss of personal identity, the loss of individual choice, was a frightening prospect even to someone who was otherwise entirely on board with the concept.

After that, it began reaching farther afield. I could feel the Hunt reaching out in directions that didn't quite make sense, and after a few moments holes opened in the world, somewhere between Otherside portals and tunnels leading sideways from the world.

A wolf on two legs stepped out of the first one, accompanied by half a dozen faerie hounds. He watched me with an odd, knowing smile as the storm began to wrap itself around him. The next produced four Sidhe on large black horses, wearing dark, delicate-looking armor. Their eyes gleamed

with fey light, and their half-smiles were sharp enough to slit a throat. More hounds accompanied them, huge lean animals with blazing eyes. A third, after a few moments, dropped Kyra and Snowflake beside me. Neither one should have been capable of getting there, but the influence of the Wild Hunt changed all that. If Snowflake's brain wasn't in shape to direct her movements, the Hunt could do it for her; if Kyra's leg couldn't bear her weight, the storm could carry her along.

The next three openings all dropped jötnar onto the hill. Some I recognized as my housecarls, but many were strangers to me. A handful rode horses, and one trio were seated upon unimaginably huge wolves, but most walked. More wolves followed them, easily the size of werewolves if nowhere close to as large as the creatures the other jötnar rode.

The freezing cloud closed around all of them, and I felt the accumulated powers of the Wild Hunt flowing into me. I was stronger, faster, more graceful. There were enough werewolves in the mix that I could smell everything for miles around, enough *Hunters* that I could feel and see everything in the vicinity.

I debated saying something, decided against it. I could have gotten around my current body easily—if nothing else, the other Hunters would probably understand exactly what I meant even if all I did was snarl a little—but there was nothing to say, nothing that *needed* said.

I started down the hill towards the fighting, moving at top speed. I was running flat out, and it made our run across Romania look *slow*. I started at around forty or fifty miles an hour, and sped up from there, until we must have been doing something like seventy through the trees. It should have been suicide, even if I could have managed it, but just now it didn't matter. I had the grace of the Sidhe, ensuring that every footstep was perfectly placed. Even more, the storm of the Wild Hunt extended close to ten feet from my skin now, painting the world in a thick coat of frost and ice. I could feel everything that fell within that space, and the ice provided exactly the footing I needed from one step to the next.

I was running through a forest without a trail, going at a pace that would have normally been frightening to maintain on an open highway, and it was *easy*. The rest of the Hunt was following me, but not a one of them could pass me, not even the Sidhe horses.

At such a ridiculous pace, it took only a few moments to reach the beginning of the fighting. Twisted creatures stood in front of me, things that used to be people, but had left that behind *long* ago. Death had claimed them, but even in death they couldn't rest.

Something about that made me angry. Not that it mattered—I would have killed them again just for the joy of it, just to taste the blood and feel the moon singing in my ears. But it was good. This was a good hunt.

They fell within my storm and they died. It was as simple as that. They couldn't see, blinded by fog and frost, but my vision was as clear as it had ever been. They couldn't move, slipping and stumbling on the ice, but to my feet it was as smooth and certain as an open field.

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The rest of the Wild Hunt came behind me, spreading out now into a broad arc, and we swung around, encircling the group of creatures. Trapped, blind, and surrounded, it was only moments before the group was torn to pieces.

Moving on, just as fast. I ran through the midst of the Hunt to reclaim my rightful position at the front, panting and laughing. Bloody drool, tainted with decay and ugly magics, dripped onto my fur, and I didn't give a damn. I couldn't stop laughing.

Further, faster. I could hear the sound of fighting now, screaming and gunfire, explosions, the sharp *crack* of thunder.

The main body of the enemy is in front of us now, hundreds of thousands of walking corpses, monsters with no conception of fear, or pain, or self-preservation. If what Prophet said was true, there might have been *millions*, everyone who died in the bloodiest battle in history, along with who knew how many people killed between there and here.

I grinned wider at the thought, mad and hungry. Millions of them was good. It meant I wouldn't run out of prey any time soon.

I hit them and, again, they died as they came near me. There were far more of them now, and I was surrounded almost instantly, but it didn't really matter. They couldn't touch me. They were slipping and stumbling now, falling before I could even pull them down, and it disappointed me but I didn't allow that to prevent me from biting them while they were down. There was no purpose to targeting vital areas here, but a hard bite to the neck could remove the head, and that was enough to end them.

The other werewolves, the hounds, the wolves, they were all beside me now, running into the crowd and bringing the enemy down. Behind us came the Sidhe and the jötnar, moving through the storm and the snow with the same smooth assurance I felt. They killed many of the fallen dead without even trying, as the hooves of horses crushed skulls and spines, left their victims broken on the ground. Axes and swords and long sharp knives flickered in the moonlight and more of them fell.

One of the mages miscalculated, deliberately or otherwise, and a bolt of lightning fell from the sky onto me. I smelled it coming and reached out through the Wild Hunt on instinct, reaching for the defenses to shield myself. They came in the form of wards spun by the Sidhe to protect themselves from mortal magic. Any one of the wards might not have held against the blast, but all of them together were more than adequate. The lightning ran over me into the ground like water off a fish's scales.

In the moment of distraction several of the dead struck at me, lashing out with hands, with stones, with ancient rusted guns rendered into makeshift clubs. None of them meant a thing to me. The storm protected me, slowing them, taking much of the force away. The ice on my fur did the rest of the work, absorbing the blow, as good as armor and a hundred times lighter, moving with me.

I didn't fall down, didn't so much as hesitate, and all of the prey that struck at me died again within moments. We continued moving, dancing through the ranks of the enemy, cutting a broad swath through them, and they couldn't touch us.

There were more werewolves beside me, I realized at some point, and they were slipping on the ice, they were slow and clumsy and blind. Not a part of my Hunt, though the Wild Hunt was aware of them. I could feel it reaching out to taste them, could feel the tendrils of the storm gliding over their fur. Without even thinking I stretched out into their minds, feeling the touch from both sides, the gentle, almost insubstantial chill. I shivered in pleasure at the sensation, though that might also have been from the spine I was crushing between my teeth at the time.

It was my choice whether they might hunt beside me, I knew. I was hesitant to share this glorious joy with anyone more than was already here, but there was prey enough for all of us and more here tonight, and so I brought them in, the icy winter storm wrapping around them entirely.

There were more after that, mages of various sorts. Some few I accepted, but most were too alien, too far removed from what it meant to be a Hunter. They were prey, not predator. Most I left alone, there being more than enough prey here to be discriminating in my hunting, but some refused to listen, and these the Wild Hunt fell upon with abandon. I enjoyed the dry, decayed flavor of the dead prey, but the taste of life and fresh blood was beyond compare, a thrill unlike any other.

And there were others as well. Some were things that had no names, so strange that even the Wild Hunt couldn't begin to grasp their nature. That group walked beside us without joining the Hunt, without *needing* to join, and where they went strange and terrible things happened to the dead prey, things so horrid and incomprehensible that it hurt to look at them. A group of kitsune joined the Hunt, and a handful of raiju that had been nearby, their lightning lighting the storm from within.

Last of all were a trio of vampires, one that looked like a massive wolf, one that was wrapped in shadow and seemed almost incorporeal, and a third that was human in appearance but killed the dead again with no more than a touch, or even a glance. There was a reluctance in me to accept the vampires, but I could not think of why, and there was no doubt that they were predators and not prey. They joined the storm, and a new element entered the Wild Hunt, a hunger and a profound awareness of the creatures around us.

We kept moving, kept killing, and now we sprawled across the land, a spearhead almost a mile across with me at the very tip. I continued running forward, laughing all the way, and the storm around me laughed with me in a voice of wind and ice and death. Nothing could stand against me, or stand before me and hope to live.

And then there were no more of the dead to kill. Instead, there was a wall of darkness in front of me, the leading edge of the aura of death around the necromancer. From what I'd heard nothing and no one could survive that magic; it would tear the life right out of you just to touch it.

I laughed and ran inside.

Chapter Five

The darkness instantly started pulling at me. It was the strangest feeling, somewhere between being tickled and having my fur pulled. I got the strong impression that it would probably have felt a great deal less pleasant without the combined influence of the full moon and the Wild Hunt running through me. Someone could probably have skinned me alive right then and I'd have been giggling and getting off the whole time.

I knew that it was a bad thing, though, so I reached out to the Wild Hunt, trying to find something that would protect us from the danger.

There was nothing that quite fit. I'd always had a bit of a knack for blood magic, nothing like *this* kind of scale, but enough that I understood the principles at work here. I could use that to work against it. The Sidhe weren't alive in quite the same way humans approached the concept, and that alien nature gave them a certain protection, a certain resistance to the magic. The vampires were *very* alive, absolutely brimming with life, but they'd been designed to take that energy in, not to give it back out. It was hard to take what they didn't want to give. Two of the mages who'd joined the Hunt had talents that could do something to block this draining effect, although neither was quite suited to the task.

A lot of kinds of defense, none of which was really sufficient. Taken all together and spread out through the medium of the Wild Hunt, they could do something to protect people.

I gathered up the protections, and through the Hunt I could feel as the others did so as well, instinctively reaching for the right powers to shield them from this threat.

The pulling sensation slowed, though it didn't stop. We weren't in danger of dying immediately, I thought, but this environment was still hostile. We could only spend so long here before people started dropping.

I grinned. That was good. A hunt with no challenge and no threat was a boring hunt. Having a time limit added some spice to the chase.

It was impossible to see here, and I fell back on other senses. I could feel everything that fell within my winter storm, and with that storm blanketing *miles* now, sight was unnecessary, more a distraction than a help. I could hear every movement, I could smell every breath of air, and there were stranger senses as well, things that I couldn't possibly have known how to process without the Hunt. The vampires could feel the life around them with an intimacy that defied description, and the Sidhe could sense the currents of magic with a precision that put my senses to shame.

There were more of the dead here, packed in shoulder-to-shoulder, tight as lemmings on parade. They marched forward in a tight crowd, almost like a sifafu swarm, but without any of the discipline or coordination the ants would display.

We hit them and kept going, even as I was wrapping what protection from the blood magic I could around myself. They fell, and were trampled by the ranks behind them before the other Hunters could even reach them.

The hard part now was just finding a way to advance. They were crowded together so tightly that there wasn't *room* for me to fit between their legs, and killing them again didn't do much good. They fell to the ground, the next rank moved forward, and then in just a handful of seconds they were standing again, the necromantic energy getting them back on their feet almost before they hit the ground.

I growled and renewed my assault, lashing out, faster and harder. My jaws and paws were coated in ice now, sharp as razors, tearing large chunks of flesh out of their bodies with every movement but it didn't matter and they kept coming. They were slipping on the ice upon the ground and when they fell the ice clutched at them, piercing them; when they stood pieces were left behind and they stood anyway, hideous and grotesque. The wind flowed over their bodies, simultaneously giving me another way to feel them and tearing at them, a windstorm blasting them with tiny slivers of ice like a sandblaster.

The Sidhe lashed out with their weapons, impossibly graceful, dancing through the darkness with utter confidence and terrible beauty. Their steeds broke the dead, sending them flying through the air as they were kicked. When those fae blades met dead flesh they passed through like it was air, flicking casually through them and dropping them to the ground in pieces.

Hounds and wolves bit and tore, crushing bones and pulling the prey down, mobbing them on the ground, and they were pulled to pieces that still, horribly, moved. The enemy kicked them, striking at them with fists and stones and ancient weapons, but nothing could penetrate the storm around them.

The mages had turned to broad attacks now, crushing whole crowds of the dead with their powers. A column of fire twenty feet across roared down out of the sky, leaving little more than ash, and the ground steamed for a few moments before the storm swept in and blanketed it in ice again. A blast of force swept through the crowd like a bulldozer moving as fast as I could run, pushing the mangled corpses along before it and leaving an open trail behind it, until the press of the dead filled the space again.

And still, in spite of all of this, they pressed in tight around us on all sides. It was nothing like a fight, not really. In a fight there was something you could do to *win*, and no matter what we did here, they just kept coming. There were too many of them, and it was too hard to put them down beyond the necromancer's ability to pick them back up again.

It was, in many ways, more like dealing with a flood. There was a constant press, threatening to overwhelm us if it was ignored for even a moment. You could create a temporary reprieve, essentially bailing out some of the water, but it only took moments for it to return.

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On some level, I recognized all that.

The rest of me was entirely focused around the joy of the fight. I kept pressing forward, tearing the dead apart and tossing them aside, pulling them down and stepping over them without pause, ignoring their feeble attempts to hurt me.

I had not forgotten my aim here. This was a hunt, not a battle. These pitiful creatures were not my quarry, not truly. They were a distraction, an obstacle, a pleasant diversion on the way to my true goal.

The spear had narrowed now, our formation tightening to present less area to the exterior. I was still at the cutting tip, with Snowflake on one side, Kyra on the other, Anna directly behind. I could feel the husky exulting in the battle, the thrill, the joyous madness of the hunt. The werewolves were only slightly more reserved, if at all. The moon was singing in their veins the same as mine, the Hunt was driving them on, and any hint of fear or hesitation was buried beyond recognition.

We kept moving forward, slowly but surely, and I knew that the center of this vast aura of death was moving towards us as well, every step bringing us closer to the grand culmination of this hunt. I shuddered with pleasure at the mere thought, throwing back my head and letting out a howl of thanks to the unseen moon. The Wild Hunt took up the call, a chorus of howls and yips that rang out in the night. The Sidhe called out in voices high and sweet as silver bells, a sharp ululating battle cry that seemed to shiver in the air. The jötnar roared their approval, screaming threats and praises to their gods.

And everywhere, running over and under and through the sound, was the call of the Wild Hunt, thunderclaps and howling winds, an avalanche pouring down the mountainside, wolves racing along the snow and the prey screaming beneath the sharp teeth.

Even the dead seemed to draw back at the sound.

With a wide, mad grin I lowered my head and bit down again. This corpse was fresher, its blood only slightly tainted with the flavor of decay, and its sweet taste was a balm in my throat. It spurred me on to greater and greater heights as we moved forward.

Time was a meaningless concept in the embrace of the Hunt. I understood that, on a level that went beyond rational thought. The Wild Hunt was timeless. This Hunt was at once *my* hunt and all hunts, the very *concept* of hunting distilled down to its purest essence. This was nature, red in tooth and claw, an idea as old as time and one that would never really die.

Could I hunt forever, wrapped in the endless storm and mad joy of the Wild Hunt? I thought I could. It was a frightening prospect, in a way, but there was also a sick temptation to it. It was the feeling you got when you stood at the edge of the building and thought, *I could jump*. It was seeing a

stranger in the night and thinking, for just a heartbeat, of blood and sex and laughter in the dark without thought for morning.

This is how werewolves go mad, I thought again, but this time there was no fear. On the contrary, there was that same sick edge of *hunger*.

I could jump, and I would fall forever.

I shook my head, trying to drive that thought out. It wasn't hard. Here, now, not to think was the easiest thing in the world. Another of the dead was in front of me and my teeth closed around its leg, pulled it down within my reach, and then I bit into its torso and ripped it almost in half.

And then, suddenly, the night was clear. I could feel my storm around me, and there were no more of the dead in front of me. I looked, and though there was no light to see, I did not need to see to *see now*.

And then I grinned and howled again, shuddering with joy. At last, we had reached our true prey.

At a glance, I wouldn't have known him for a man. He was taller, close to ten feet tall, as though he'd been stretched. His movements left a trail in the air, a lingering darkness that went beyond the mere absence of light. He couldn't see, but there was no hesitation in his movements, not even a momentary doubt.

More than anything else, though, what struck me about him, what told me just how far behind he'd left any pretense of humanity, was his scent. He reeked of death and decay, stank of maggots and worms, rotting meat and corruption. He breathed out and I would have flinched, but for the influence of the Wild Hunt that made the stench of rot and decay on my prey's breath as sweet as blood and honey.

Another night, in another mind, I would have hesitated to attack someone like that. He was powerful enough to make an army of Watchers hesitate, and that meant he operated in an entirely different world than I did.

But here, tonight, with the moon singing in my blood and the Wild Hunt wrapping me in an arctic storm, there was no thought for that. He was my prey, and that was all that mattered.

Running forward, I leapt at him, jaws open. He swatted me out of the air with one arm, moving with a speed that left me breathless, but my teeth closed on his hand as he did, and the force of his own blow tore the flesh. I flew away with a mouthful of black blood and foul-smelling meat, and I gulped it down hungrily, and it tasted delightful, an explosion of flavor on my tongue that left me breathless.

His body repaired itself almost instantly, and he was whole as the rest of the Wild Hunt followed me in, circling around him. He kept walking forward at the same pace, uncaring for the forces that had enclosed him.

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Hounds and wolves leapt at him, and he knocked them aside without breaking stride. The storm protected from the worst of it and they didn't die, but neither had they accomplished anything much. The Sidhe were shooting at him now, long arrows that gleamed brightly in the darkness though there was no light to reflect. Most of them glanced off his skin, and those that struck did little. He kept walking, disregarding them though they stood out from his flesh on both sides.

Jötnar charged him, screaming and roaring almost incoherently, chopping at him with axes and swords, and again, they simply didn't have an effect. He dodged the worst of the blows, his skin was tough enough to mitigate many of the others, and when he was cut the wound sealed itself within instants. It was like cutting water.

Then he reached out and grabbed one of them. The giant was as large as he was, but still the necromancer lifted him off the ground easily, as though he weighed nothing at all. He broke the jotun over his knee and tossed him aside, the storm already fading from around him when he hit the ground.

The other jötnar faded back warily. There was no fear—there couldn't be fear, in the midst of the Wild Hunt—but there was a reasonable caution, an awareness of tactics.

I picked myself up and rushed forward again, and this time I did not try to kill him. I bit down on his ankle instead, tugging it backward with all my strength just as he lifted his other foot. The ground was slick with ice and the wind was pushing him and my teeth were deep enough in him to crunch bones, and in that moment he was still strong enough, he was *still* strong enough to stay standing.

Until Snowflake threw herself at his face, moving at a speed that put even the other hounds to shame, her white fur fading into the white storm, nothing visible of her but iron teeth glinting in the moonlight that wasn't there.

Finally he overbalanced and fell, and I slid out of the way just in time for him to land on a spike of ice rather than me. The ice shattered, but sharp edges dug into his skin, helping to hold him down.

The pack fell on him while he was down, biting and tearing and keeping him from rising. I was beside the vampire who chose the form of a great wolf now, with one of the great wolves of the jötnar on my other side. The giant on his back swung a bearded axe in a long arc that slammed home between the necromancer's shoulder blades and cut deep.

Still, nothing we were doing was obviously harming him. The wounds sealed themselves, the flesh we took was replaced, and afterwards all was as it had been before.

But I knew that we were depleting his life, I knew that this *was* accomplishing something. He only had so much stolen life hoarded up, and if we could wear him down, he was as mortal as anything else.

But that was little consolation when he reached out and grasped one of the wolves, and tore its life out in an instant. Our protections had done something against the aura of necromantic power, but against the directed power of the necromancer himself, they were nothing.

He dropped the wolf lifeless to the ground and a moment later it stood and began attacking its fellows, the cloud of the Wild Hunt gone from it. The necromancer reached out again, and only the swift intervention of the most human-looking vampire kept it from claiming another of the hounds.

Once again, many of the Hunters had to pull back. Every life he claimed made him stronger, undoing the work we'd done, and thus to surround him with the living was to threaten ourselves. The hounds, the wolves, the mages, all of them pulled back again, leaving him room to stand. I remained, tearing and biting and pulling at him, and the vampires were there, and so were some few of the jötnar.

Too few, I thought. He was standing again, and though I was pulling at his leg, he was braced against it now and he was stronger than I was. Even with the Wild Hunt lending me the power of giants and werewolves, even with the ice beneath his feet and the storm winds howling around us, he was stronger.

Three of the mages were talking to each other, or at least their lips were moving; the meaning was carried by the Hunt, not by the air. I could catch that meaning even if I couldn't catch the words, and thus I knew to brace myself as they coordinated with each other and blasted at the necromancer with force and lightning. His muscles jerked and the force sent him reeling and now I could pull his leg out from under him and he fell again.

The lightning ran through his body and into mine, and I shuddered ecstatically at the feeling of the electricity surging through me to the ground. I knew that it was hurting me, that my fur was smoldering and my muscles were twitching and my pounding heart had skipped a beat in its course, but it just felt *so good* that I couldn't help myself.

He was down again, and I was tearing at his flesh and the creatures beside me were biting and cutting at him while the rest of the Wild Hunt kept the dead at bay, and still, *still* nothing was visibly harming him.

And then I saw another figure, wreathed in the ice storm without quite being *of* it. It was dead, but it didn't belong to the necromancer. Its bones were sheathed in ice, and over that there was a layer of dark fog that kept the storm of the Hunt at bay. Pale blue lights blazed in the skeleton's empty eye sockets, bright and pure as tiny suns in the darkness.

I looked at the skeleton, and suddenly I had an idea. I had a wonderful, terrible idea.

I thought I could feel Legion smiling as the demon moved off into the darkness. It didn't matter. I knew what to do.

Tyrfing came readily to my call, appearing by my side. The storm caressed it gently, and it was an easy thing for the wind and the ice and the darkness to undo the catch and slide the cursed blade gently out of its sheath.

The storm stood still, for just a moment, and the necromancer turned to stare, stopping momentarily in his attempts to stand.

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The air lifted the blade and I took the hilt in my mouth. Ice formed around it, twisting it around and holding it tightly in place. More ice coated the cutting edge, glittering gently in the glow of the lightning which cracked the night again, slamming the necromancer back to the ground.

I lunged forward and bit down again, and this time it wasn't teeth that hit the necromancer's flesh, it was Tyrfing.

The sword sliced off a chunk of flesh, and this time it didn't grow back.

The necromancer screamed and swung one fist at me, but one of the jötnar seized his arm and held it in place, pinning it to the frozen ground. Another jotun grabbed his other arm and held it down, and a swarm of wolves piled onto his legs, so that he couldn't move at all.

I moved into position and bit down. Tyrfing plunged through the center of his head without slowing at all, and the tip bit into my own lower jaw.

I shuddered in pleasure at that, letting out a low, incoherent moan.

The necromancer jerked against the hunters holding him down, and then went still.

And then the darkness began to fade, letting the moonlight shine down on the scene.

All around us, the dead fell to the ground again, clumsy and lifeless.

A crowd of mages and other fighters stood around the edge of the area which had been drained in life. They watched in shock as I pulled the sword back out of the necromancer's body and threw my head back, howling once again as the moonlight flooded down onto me. Blood dripped red and black from my jaws as I howled, and the Wild Hunt howled with me.

Then I looked out at the crowd again, grinning a broad, bloody grin. Some part of me could recognize that they weren't my enemy. Some of them were even friends of a sort.

But I could smell the hot blood of my prey, bright and red and full of life, and after so much dead meat and corrupted blood, it would be a great pleasure to hunt another sort of prey.

We howled again, jötnar prayers and Sidhe war cries and above all else the high, sweet howls of wolves delighting in the moon and the hunt and the victory.

The smarter of the prey began to run.

Chapter Six

Before I could move to chase the fleeing prey, I became aware of a change in the atmosphere, a shifting of the air.

A handful of men and women were stepping out of the crowd. They were dressed in simple robes, one and all, but there was a power and a confidence to them that defied anyone to think them insignificant.

There were nine in total, forming a broad arc between us and the rest of the prey. Most of them looked tired, favored injuries, but they weren't running, and their attention was focused on me.

A werewolf's ears were sharp enough to hear as one spoke to another. "Fool got himself killed," the blue robe said.

Black shook his head, though he kept his eyes on us. "Not quite yet," he said. "Though it was a rash choice. To call the Wild Hunt with so weak a will...he will be lucky to survive."

The darker blue snorted. "The Hunt might not kill him," he said. "But the stupid is terminal. Trust me on that."

"Enough," white said, with a tone of command that silenced the others instantly. "Walker, begin evacuating. Arbiter, Keeper, establish defenses. The rest of us will keep them off you."

Their conversation had been interesting at first, but I was losing interest. So I threw myself forward, and the Wild Hunt came with me, moving as a single unit. They were half a mile away or more. We could reach them in a matter of moments.

The white robe was almost within the storm when he sighed and raised his hand. With that warning I wrapped the Wild Hunt around myself more thickly, the storm thickening to something closer to a sheet of ice, the defensive magics of the Sidhe sliding over my skin like chilled silk. Secure behind my defenses, I grinned and kept moving.

The storm took something of the force out of the blast, and the warding spells took more, draining its energy away.

What was left was enough to pick me up and send me sailing backwards through the air faster than I could run. Bones broke and flesh tore from the acceleration.

The storm cushioned my fall when I finally came to earth again, softening the blow. I still broke further, and bounced, skipping and skidding along for another fifty feet before hitting a dead tree and knocking it down.

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I lay there for a moment, panting. It was hard to breathe with my ribcage crushed, and every movement sent a shock of sensation through me as it pulled against broken ribs, broken spine, shattered pelvis.

Ice sealed the gaps in my flesh and pulled them shut, and as I pushed myself to my feet the storm tugged and pulled at me, tugging bones back to where they should be. It felt good, little spikes of cold pleasure going through me with every movement. The bones would take a few minutes to heal, but in the meantime ice would serve to fill the gaps, adjusting to my movements as necessary.

Only the Hunt could see me through the storm—it was so thick now that I had no doubt of that—but I took a moment to cover my skin in frost anyway, mimicking the fur that had been torn away. I couldn't have said why, except that it amused me.

I saw that the prey were escaping, marching through holes between the worlds, and snarled in cheated wrath. Standing again, I threw myself at them again, faster than before. Every step, every breath, sent more sensations rushing through me, and I laughed to feel them, my own blood dripping onto my fur and freezing there.

The rest of the Wild Hunt had reached the humans in robes, but were faring no better against them. In a sense, I could see that this was very nearly the worst-case scenario for us. We excelled at culling the weak, the slow, the young. Against a single strong target we could surround them, keep up the pressure and capitalize on any mistake, the way we had against the necromancer.

Here, the prey were much too powerful to be taken down with the casual brutality with which we had killed the dead. But they were too numerous and too quick to be overwhelmed as the necromancer had been. They hit back just as hard as he had, though. A direct hit from the white's force magic sent us flying half a mile or more, and even with the storm to guide and protect us, not all of the Hunters rose again after being struck with such power. The violet's lightning sliced through the storm with startling precision. She was as blind as I and lacked the Hunt to compensate, but she did not miss her targets. Even the Sidhe could not dodge aside swiftly enough to escape.

The last of the other prey in sight stepped out of this world, and the last hole sealed shut behind him. The nine people in their colored robes fell back and formed a tighter group. I could smell the barriers around them, defensive spells that would keep us at bay. There was layer on layer of barrier there, and I knew just from the smell that there was no way we were going to be breaking through.

And then we were all forcefully reminded that there were more people there than just the Wild Hunt and the prey. When we'd first entered the field of the dead, a small group of alien beings had come with us, too strange and abstract to join the Hunt, but also so far removed from anything we knew that it was impossible to categorize them as prey.

They had entered the darkness beside us, and they had stayed beside us as the necromancer fell, and they were still beside us now. Except now one of them reached out and *did* something. It was

impossible to say quite what; the thing's magic was as alien and abstract as the thing itself. It felt somehow sideways to reality, a line drawn perpendicular to everything I understood.

I might not know what it was, or what it had done, but I knew what the results were. Their protections, the defenses they had raised to keep us safely at bay, were gone, wiped away without a trace. It was odd; they hadn't been dispelled or overpowered. I would have understood that. This was more like they had been entirely erased, simply wiped out of existence.

I leapt forward, grinning widely. They lashed out with their power, but they had been caught by surprise by the disappearance of their defenses, and they were slow to react. Before they could do anything to stop me I had pounced on the woman in the green robe, bearing her to the ground with my weight. I bit her neck and she screamed, pulled and bit deeper and the screaming stopped.

The pale woman in the blue robe stopped trying to burn me and gasped a few words. A moment later, as I released my prey and turned for the next, she let out a powerful surge of magic, scented with disinfectant and wide-open spaces, a long breeze flowing over the plains.

All of the prey vanished, leaving the green behind. She was dying, if not dead already. I looked around and saw them standing on a hill a quarter of a mile away. The blue fell to one knee, gasping, needing to lean on a piece of wood to stay even that close to upright.

I started in that direction, grinning, then paused. Something was holding me back, though I hadn't noticed until I tried to move.

I looked back and saw that the yellow had her hand clasped tightly around my hind leg. She spoke a few words in a language I couldn't place. Chinese, perhaps, or something from the same vicinity. Even had I known the language I couldn't have understood her. Her voice was halting, choked with blood.

I smiled indulgently and watched her die.

And then a hammer of magic slammed me to the ground, knocking me out in an instant.

Things got confusing after that.

There was darkness, and pain. I felt cold, and then very hot, and then cold again. Odd colors burned against the blackness. I heard singing, quavery singing in a language I didn't know, and then the singing turned into screaming and a massive technicolor macaroni penguin swallowed me. I rolled over, and that *really* hurt, and someone told me to be quiet, which was funny because I hadn't said anything. I tried to tell them so, but all that came out was a growly sort of whimper, and that hurt too.

At some point, I realized that a lot of what I was feeling and seeing was probably a hallucination. The penguin was a bit of a giveaway, really. The hell of it, though, was that knowing it wasn't real didn't do me any good at all in terms of knowing what *was*. I opened my eyes and saw storm clouds swirling

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over my face, a beam of vivid green light tying itself in knots, a giant wearing velvet and carrying a massive axe with a head made out of ice. What, if any, of it was real? I couldn't say, couldn't even guess.

Unconsciousness would have been nice. But I didn't have that luxury. I couldn't tell what was real, couldn't process or think about what was going on at all, couldn't move beyond the occasional twitch, but I was conscious.

I closed my eyes again and lay there shuddering while the world spun around me.

The next clear impression I got was someone talking in my ear. It was a quiet female voice, which I recognized as Selene after a few seconds.

"Change," she said. "The doctor's here, but she needs you to change. Come on, jarl, change for me."

I had no idea what she was talking about, not really. But Selene was one of my most trustworthy followers, and if she told me to change, there was a reason for it. So I reached inside, to where skin met fur, and *twisted*.

It's hard for a werewolf to scream during the change. Your body's all twisted around, things don't connect right and it isn't doing what you tell it to.

I screamed. There were times it was loud and piercing, times when all I could manage was an agonized whimper, but I screamed. It wasn't just the pain, though there was plenty of that, enough to make most changes look like a pleasant trip to the spa. Worse than that was the feeling of *intrusion*, the sense that there were things inside me that did not belong there and weren't responding the way they should to my magic. It felt like it took me an hour to tear myself apart, and five to put myself back together.

The whole time, Selene was murmuring gentle encouragements into my ear. It was weird, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't scare me a little to have a demon sitting there encouraging me, but it *did* give me something to focus on other than the pain.

Finally, after what felt like a small eternity, it was over. I collapsed back against what felt like a stack of pillows. I was lying in a bed on the upper floor of the mansion, back in Colorado, in one of the housecarl's rooms. I recognized it, even if I hadn't spent much time there.

The sheets were damp, and shredded where I'd torn them during the change. It smelled like blood, sweat, and urine in there, and I knew I was to blame for all three. I was naked, of course.

Another time, I might have felt awkward about this combination of circumstances. At the moment, I was mostly too busy feeling exhausted and in pain. *Mostly*.

"Good," Selene said, standing from her chair by the head of the bed. "I'll go get her. You just lie still."

I was too tired to argue, so I just lay slumped against the pillows as she left. She came back in about a minute later, with two people following her. The first was the same doctor I'd taken Snowflake to, her pristine white lab coat flapping around her legs as she walked.

The second was Aiko, who looked about as tired as I felt. "Hey," she said, moving over and sitting by my side, grabbing my hand and holding it tightly. "Sorry I couldn't be here earlier. The doc said I shouldn't be in the room with you."

The doctor snorted. "I should bloody well say so," she said. "I mean bloody hell I really don't think you people have even the foggiest idea how much danger you were in here. Do you have even an idea and I mean even the *tiniest* idea of how much damage he'd have done if he woke up in the wrong way? Jesus, the way you amateurs fuck about with that which you don't understand scares me some times. Now lie still."

This last was directed at me, and made more ominous by the fact that she had a scalpel out in one hand and a mouth mirror in the other. "What are you doing?" I asked, edging away a little.

"I'm taking a looksee at what we're dealing with here, what d'you think I'm doing, really, this isn't that complicated, people. Now lie still, and yes, this is going to hurt, what kind of pansy are you anyway?"

It *did* hurt, but it wasn't actually as bad as I'd been expecting. She mostly just used the scalpel to hold open cuts that were already there while she probed around inside with the mirror. Only once did she actually cut deeply into flesh, and even then it was so sharp that I didn't feel much pain.

"All right," she said, taking a step back from the bed and wiping the tools off on the sheets before dropping them into a pocket. "Now I first want to make it very clear that this is a special case and I can honestly say that I've never seen someone with their bones turning into ice before so you get no guarantees on any goddamn word out of my mouth right now. That said, it looks like it's healing okay and the ice is *apparently* fused with your flesh in a way that will eventually recover, so aside from being a total freak of nature you don't have a think to worry about."

"Gee," I said dryly. "How comforting. My bones are turning into *ice*?"

"Turned," she corrected me. "In a few places mostly around the ribs and joints. And honestly you should be grateful, because if they *hadn't* you'd probably be dead and definitely be paralyzed, since it looks like you snapped your spine like a fucking toothpick. How the hell did this happen anyway?"

I coughed, wincing as I did so. "I kind of joined the Wild Hunt for a while," I said weakly. "Um. As the leader."

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She stared at me, and something about the expression emphasized the odd, almost reddish tone of her black irises.

It wasn't until then that I realized I could see again. It was a bit blurry, especially for things more than about ten feet away, but I could *see*. That was pretty freaking nice.

"That," she said, "is possibly the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"It wasn't my fault," I protested. "Loki roped me into it!"

She continued to stare. "You are not improving things," she said solemnly before turning to Selene. "He'll be wanting a few days of bed rest that we both know he isn't going to get but I kinda had to say it anyway," she said. "And maybe keep him out of the heat for a while, 'cause how the fuck do I know what happens to him if that ice melts? I mean it should be melting already and it isn't so maybe it doesn't matter but I, personally, wouldn't be taking chances with that if they were *my* bones. I checked up on the dog, too, and *apparently* being in the Wild Hunt of all fucking things to do with a brain injury was actually good for her. Passed out right now, but condition's stable and actually better than it was."

"Thanks," Selene said.

The doctor snorted. "You thank me with payment," she said bluntly. "Send it to my Cairo address. Okay, good luck and whatnot, buh-bye now, *please* don't call me again for at least a week, you people need help from *another* kind of doctor if you know what I mean, have a nice day!"

She swept out of the room with another swish of her lab coat, leaving the space feeling much emptier. Which was odd, considering that she was the smallest one in there by a considerable margin.

"So," I said. "Killed the necromancer in Russia, along with a whole lot of other people. Most of them were dead already, though, so that's okay. Might have killed some people that I wasn't supposed to kill; my memory's a little fuzzy. How'd it go here?"

"Nothing like as exciting as your evening," Selene said dryly. "Though we do have some news."

Before she could say anything else, the door opened again. This time I wasn't the only one to cringe away from the people that entered.

There were two of them, one male and one female, and both of them carried power around them like a mantle, thick and rich. The intense, musky scent of fox was heavy in the air, almost choking even to me, and I *liked* the way foxes smell. He was dressed in a sharp black suit, while she was wearing a grey kimono with a simple floral pattern in black.

And, in case there were any doubt of what they were, bright red fox tails protruded from the rear of their clothing. He had seven, tipped with white and waving cheerfully. She had *nine*, lacking the paler tip and very, very still.

I gulped hard. Seven tails was bad enough. *Nine* was...well, it made an impression.

He waved to me, but she dismissed me as completely as if I weren't even there, all her attention on Aiko. "What is the meaning of this?" she asked, her voice so calm and level that you just *knew* there was something else underneath.

Aiko looked at her mother and swallowed. "Um," she said. "Hi?"

Chapter Seven

"Why did you send me that note?" Aiko's mother demanded, advancing on her daughter at what could only be called a stalk.

Aiko gulped. "I didn't realize I'd written anything *that* bad," she said nervously.

"This is the first time you've replied to one of my messages in twenty-nine years," her mother replied, continuing to advance. "What you wrote seems quite immaterial in comparison."

Aiko hesitated, then sighed. "I don't want to be your enemy anymore," she said. "You were never trying to hurt me. I see that now. It's just...can we move past all this? Can we be a family again?"

There was a brief pause, during which I could see her mother's composure crack. It was hard to say just what the emotion on her face was, but it was so intense it was painful to see.

Then she rushed forward and swept Aiko up in her arms, holding her so tight that the younger kitsune squeaked. All nine of her tails were held stiff now, as though she were afraid to let them move for fear of what they would betray. The male kitsune kept his distance, but he was watching intently, and his smile was profoundly satisfied.

It felt good to watch it, I couldn't deny. I didn't know much about the history there, but I knew her relationship with her family had always caused Aiko a lot of pain. To see it being resolved, to see the wounds being healed like this...it was good. It was *very* good.

And then I paused as something odd occurred to me.

Since when was Aiko the sort to forget and forgive? I loved her, but I also *knew* her. There was no question that she was a vindictive bitch. I could count on the fingers of no hands the number of times she'd just *forgiven* someone who really upset her.

I told myself this was just a side of her I didn't usually see, but I still just couldn't make it fit. Even if she were to make up with her mother and move past their history, it was hard to imagine it happening like this. Aiko wasn't the sort to make heartfelt emotional speeches. She masked the important emotions behind a shell of mockery and apathy so thorough it had taken me more than a year to even realize she was doing it.

She hadn't made a single crass joke or smartass comment since her mother showed up. She hadn't done a thing to deflect attention or pretend this didn't mean anything to her.

The more I thought about it, the more this didn't feel right. It was natural, and good, and simple, people moving past their history in a way that was healed old wounds. Everything about it was so perfect.

This just wasn't *fucked up* enough to really be Aiko making peace with her mother.

And then I had a thought. I had a terrible, horrible thought.

They were still embracing when I spoke. "Aiko?" I said, my voice sounding flat and dead to my ears. It was a bit like the remote, disconnected feeling I got when I was really angry, in the same way that a hydrogen bomb is a bit like a hand grenade. "How did we meet?"

She let go of her mother and took a step back, looking at me oddly. "It involved a demon and a werewolf and people getting killed," she said. "Don't tell me you forgot."

I nodded slowly. She knew the answer. Of course she did. But in a way, it was another crack in the facade. Why had she actually *answered* me?

"What's your name?" I asked, watching her fixedly. I felt odd, sick and angry and *hungry*.

"Pretty sure you said it a minute ago," she told me. "Aiko, remember? You're starting to worry me now, Winter."

I nodded again. Further confirmation. Not actually answering my questions. Trying to change the subject. Why was she worried? Because I was asking questions. I was paying attention.

In a way, it was brilliant. Anyone else I would have caught by now. But I'd decided long ago to exempt Aiko from my usual paranoia. There was no other way I could keep our relationship intact.

On an intellectual level, I could appreciate the cunning nature of the scheme. I could respect them for arranging it and carrying it out. I could respect her for playing the role so skillfully.

On an emotional level?

Don't think about that, I told myself. Even considering it, even *contemplating* how I felt right now was enough to scare me.

"Jarl?" Selene said quietly. "You're shaking. Is something wrong?"

I ignored her completely, keeping my attention firmly on "Aiko." "Tell me two plus two is five," I said to her. "Come on. Say it."

"Okay then," she said, drawing it out to make it sound sarcastic. "I am now officially creeped out. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Too little, too late," I said. I reached out for power and twisted my thoughts into a different pattern, a different level of interaction with reality, one that focused less on the material and more on the *concepts* underlying that matter.

The Second Sight was always unpredictable. There was no telling quite what it would show, no guessing what you might see or how your mind would choose to portray the information you get. It changed from one day to the next, though there were elements that remained constant. It was always an *intense* experience. It was always hard to describe, hard to even grasp and conceptualize in words. It

always took the form of a sort of hallucination, as though what it showed was too *real* for the brain to process directly.

This time, the experience manifested as a combination of sights, sounds, and scents, all blending together into a psychedelic cocktail that put me right back on the bed.

The first thing I saw, overwhelming and pulling all attention from what I actually wanted to look at, was Aiko's mother. The nine-tailed kitsune blazed with silver light in the spiritual spectrum, so bright it would have blinded me if it were really there. It almost did anyway. The nine tails spreading out behind her seemed more beams of light than physical objects, spreading and interlacing in fractal patterns that seared themselves into my brain, leaving me gasping for breath. To look at her was to hear resounding drums and horns singing out over the hills, to smell fox and spice and salt and the endless passage of time.

I fell back onto the bed, and in the falling I brought Selene and Aiko's father into my view. The kitsune burned with crimson light and resounded with the sound of flutes and laughter, but next to the nine-tailed kitsune, a seven-tail was almost a relief. Selene was another story. Seen with the Second Sight, she did not so much give light as take it, almost like a void in the world. There was a hint of wings, a hint of a humanoid form, but beyond that there was no definite form there. She smelled of blood and brimstone, sounded like quiet contemplative organ music, and felt like distance and unconcern, calculation and patience.

I forced myself to sit up again, the world spinning around me a little as I did, and got a glimpse of myself. My body was made of ice, hard and cold, glittering in the light. Dark shadows moved under the surface, hiding my core.

I didn't look any closer than that. I didn't want to look too long in the mirror. Easy to see too much, even when you aren't transparent.

I looked back at Aiko, forcing myself to disregard the blazing *power* that was her mother. And this time I saw what I'd been looking for.

On the surface, it looked like Aiko should. The light of her power was red and gold in equal measure, the scent was fox and spice, the sound was laughter and metal music. But once I looked a little deeper, I saw the gaps, the inconsistencies. Behind the light was a void not unlike that I'd seen in Selene, vague and shapeless, with flickers of odd lights and shapes within, a patchwork that was somehow less than the sum of its parts. The scent was a fake, closer to skunk than fox; it might have fooled someone else, but I *knew* the scent this was mimicking, and this wasn't it. The laughter was feigned, a mask over a face that wasn't happy, or sad, or anything.

I closed my eyes and forced the Second Sight away. It took a few seconds, and when it was gone I slumped back to the bed for a moment, gagging at the instant headache. It lasted only a few seconds, but while it was there, it was hard to even think past the pain.

"Okay," I said, forcing myself to sit upright again. "Who are you, and what did you do with Aiko?"

The impostor grinned at me. "Um," she said. "Winter? I was serious when I said that you were scaring me with this. You're still shaking, by the way."

I stared at her for a few seconds, then said, "You don't understand your situation. I can kill you right now. I could freeze your blood inside your veins so that it tears you apart from the inside out, and with the way I feel right now, I *might*."

Aiko's mother turned to face me. "I will not suffer you to threaten my daughter," she said quietly. "Should you try to harm her, I will see you dead." Her voice was quite calm and polite, which in a weird way made it even scarier.

"I would never hurt Aiko," I said. "But that is not your daughter. She is an impostor, attempting to fool us into thinking she is."

The nine-tailed kitsune went absolutely, utterly still, then turned to look at the impostor in question. "Is this true?" she asked, in that same calm, polite voice.

"I should hope you'd—"

"Answer me!" the kitsune shouted, losing her composure completely. Her tails started to lash violently back and forth, forming a complex and ever-shifting web of fur in the air.

"Aiko" said nothing, which in itself was an answer.

The male kitsune whistled quietly. "Oh, no," he said quietly. "You might want to back away."

"What?" I asked, like a fool.

Then I saw what happens when a nine-tailed kitsune absolutely *snaps*.

I didn't see her move. Not really. Not even a blur. It was more like I was watching a flipbook animation that had a handful of pages torn out. One instant, a mostly-human kitsune was standing a few feet from an entirely humanoid pseudo-kitsune. The next, both of them had moved seven feet sideways. The nine-tailed kitsune had abandoned any pretense of humanity, her body as much fox as human, her face almost completely animal. She had the impostor pinned against the wall with one hand.

That was about all I could see. The ancient kitsune blazed with light, much like what I'd seen with the Second Sight, except this was *real*. It hurt, it physically *hurt* to see that light, to be in it. I smelled smoke, and realized that the walls and floor were smoldering around her, burning from just her *presence*.

"Who sent you?" she screamed at the impostor. Her voice was unpleasant to hear; I couldn't say what about it was so distressing, but I cringed away at the sound, and I wasn't alone. It almost made me think of nails against a chalkboard, except that it still sounded beautiful.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

The impostor screamed and lashed out at the kitsune, trying to punch her. It had no effect, not little effect, but *none*. She could have been hitting a brick wall for all the apparent good it did her.

"Tell me," the kitsune said, tightening her grip. Then she said something in else in Japanese.

The impostor screamed again, louder and more agonized than before, and flailed, bucking against the kitsune's grip, to no avail. "Scáthach," she gasped after a few seconds. "Scáthach sent me to replace her!"

"Where is she now?" I asked. It was a risk, stepping into *this*, but I needed to know.

"At the castle," the impostor gasped. "The Isle of Skye. Dún Scáith. Please, have mercy. I only served my queen!"

"You served too well," the kitsune said, her fist closing tightly around the impostor's throat. That action, just clenching her fist, was enough to shatter the impostor's spine. A moment later the body burst into brilliant silver flame, reducing it to ashes in an instant. Not even the bones survived intact.

The light faded a few moments later, and we all let out a sigh of relief as it did.

The other kitsune shot me a warning look as he walked by, telling me very clearly to be still and silent, without saying a word. I didn't argue with that look. I wasn't *that* stupid.

The two kitsune stood together, with her leaning heavily on him for support, for several moments before she returned to the mostly-human form she'd had on when she first came in. "I apologize for my hasty and unseemly behavior," she said, turning to face me. Her tone was very formal now. "It was inappropriate of me, particularly as I am a guest in your home. Please, excuse me. This is unlike me, but to hear this struck me deeply."

"Yeah, I could tell," I said, watching her now with the same feeling of intense *disconnection* that I'd felt while watching the impostor. "You really love your daughter, don't you?"

"Very much so," she sighed. "Though I have never been able to express it as I might wish to." Left unspoken, but not unheard, was the fear that now she might never have the chance.

"I love her as well," I said.

"You do not seem to care about her abduction," she said. It didn't sound like she was disagreeing with me, exactly, more just making an observation.

"I am intimately aware of the limits of my own control," I said. "This goes well beyond them. If I allow myself to care about it right now, I will begin destroying things, and I don't know whether I will be able to stop once I start." I smiled. "Better for that to wait until I am in Scáthach's home, it seems. Do you know the way, or should I seek another means of transport?"

"Um," Selene said, sounding like she would rather shove bamboo splinters under her own nails than speak up right now. "We, um. We do have news. Um. If that's okay?"

"Please continue," I said. I was still smiling. It wasn't a good smile.

"Um. While you were in Russia, a few of the mages started a sort of a rebellion? I don't know what else to call it. They haven't really done much, but they're speaking out against you, and they ambushed a couple of our patrols. No deaths yet, but it was close. I don't know if you want to leave them be while you go do...this."

"I see," I said. "Thank you, Selene." I looked at the two kitsune. "My apologies," I said. "I have handled this poorly, and caused you unnecessary pain as a result. And now I find that the timing of this affair is also quite unfortunate. As the jarl of this town, I should tend to this uprising myself. However, if you would prefer to leave now, that's fine too."

"Go and tend to your business," Aiko's mother said. "I will attempt diplomatic channels to resolve this. Once."

"Thank you for your understanding, ma'am. Shall I meet you here in two hours, that we might go to Scáthach's home, rescue Aiko, and bring her world tumbling down around her?"

"You're willing to anger a Faerie Queen to save my daughter?"

"Yes," I said, smiling. "Yes, I think I am. I warned her that some things were off limits, after all. It's hardly *my* fault that she didn't take me seriously."

"In that case," she said, "*you* may call me Kuzunoha. I will meet you here in two hours."

"Excellent," I said, standing and stretching. I still hurt, a lot, but it didn't seem to matter much. I walked out of the room and went downstairs, calling Tyrfing and spinning it idly in my hand as I walked.

Activity came to a standstill when I walked into the throne room. An absolute standstill. I supposed that made sense. It isn't every day that your jarl walks into the throne room naked and smeared with blood, grinning like a lunatic and spinning a sword in his hand.

"Hi," I said. "I'm about to go kill a whole lot of people. Who wants to come with?"

Chapter Eight

I whistled as we walked down the street. I wasn't very good at whistling. That was okay.

There were only a handful of people with me. Vigdis was there, as were Ragnar, Thraslaug, and Nóttolfr. Jibril walked in the crowd, the ghouls' human mask slipping further with every step. Jack, the mage I'd hired for his talent with barriers, slouched along at the back of the group, arrogant and smirking in his casual shirt and slacks. Matthew skulked along at the periphery, with the skin of a wolf, but not the mind.

Only the most aggressive, violent, amoral of my minions had come. There was a very good reason for that. I was not in a moral state of mind.

Anna had stayed back at the house. I knew she didn't want to be here for this, whether she knew it or not. And my vision had recovered enough that I didn't need her to provide eyes.

Not for this, anyway. You needed delicacy, care, and precision to create. Destruction was easier. Destruction was easy as breathing.

I'd worked so hard to build something here. To make Colorado Springs into something better. I'd worked for it. I'd bled for it. I'd sacrificed so much. And less than twelve hours later, the people I'd been trying to help started tearing it down again.

So be it. We all made our choices. We all faced the consequences.

We knew where they made their home. They did not rely on secrecy to protect them. They did not rely on defenses to protect them, either. They relied upon the hesitation of my housecarls to act without my order, and my hesitation to endanger the innocent.

On another day, these might have been good things to rely upon.

The college was quiet. Naturally; anyone could be forgiven for running for cover when they saw us coming. We were not pretending to be kind and harmless. Not today.

The door to the lecture hall was locked. A security measure, most likely. Meant to keep the building secure from vandals and such. There was little reason for those without keys to be there when class was not in session.

That wouldn't do. I was here to teach a lesson today. The students had perhaps not realized that yet.

I kicked the door once, twice, and it broke. The metal was too strong to break, but the glass inset was not; it shattered under my boot and fell to the ground in shards. There was something pleasant about the sound, the cracking of the glass, the pieces falling broken to the ground. There was something comforting there. I didn't ask what.

Stepping inside, I found myself in a large lobby. I didn't recognize it; we were at the community college, and I'd gone to the more expensive private school on the other side of town. It didn't matter; I knew where we were going. I could smell them.

I looked for a staircase, couldn't see one. The sign said there was one around the corner, so I walked that way, the minions trailing behind me.

I realized that I was still whistling, and debated stopping. I couldn't come up with a reason to. They would know I was coming, but I didn't care. The sound pleased me, so I kept whistling. It sounded bad even to me, but was still recognizable as a tune, albeit a simple one. "A-Hunting We Will Go," if I wasn't mistaken.

Appropriate enough, I supposed, though I had no intention of letting anyone go.

Upstairs, to the second floor. The hallways were floored with plain white tile, clean and gleaming in the harsh fluorescent light. It seemed wasteful to have the lights on when no one was supposed to be here. Did they ever turn them off? I supposed not. I wouldn't have cared, except that the humming of the lights was annoying me.

I started to hear voices and knew that we were getting close. I picked up the pace slightly, until Jack was almost running to keep up. Unsurprising; he was only human. The rest of us were, in various ways and for various reasons, more and less than that.

We reached the specific classroom I was looking for and I kicked the door, planning to knock it in the same way I had the front door of the building. It should have worked easily, since this door was simple pine, but instead my boot bounced off without even making it shiver in its frame.

Reinforced with magic, I didn't doubt. So be it. I drew Tyrfing and took a moment to appreciate it, the beauty of the blade, the delicate play of light on the metal.

Then I slashed straight down the center of the door, from top to bottom. The sword passed through wood and magic with equal ease, slicing a gaping hole in the ward. I heard a shout from within as the mage responsible realized that his spell had been destroyed, and I kicked the door again.

This time it worked, breaking the lock and knocking the door open. Almost half the door fell to the floor, cut off by Tyrfing; the rest looked sad and inadequate in a doorway far too large for it.

I stepped in and saw them gathered there, the men and women who would tear down all that I had sacrificed so much to build. They looked young, and mostly they *were* young.

As I entered, with various minions following behind me, one of the males stood and ran for the other door out of the room. He opened it in a panic and started to exit, then stumbled back into the room, blood leaking out around the head of the axe buried most of the way to the eye in his skull.

Vigdis followed him in, grabbing her axe and tearing it back out, shoving the corpse to the side. She was grinning like a child in a candy store.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

The giants and the ghouls started moving up into the student area. The seats rose up in curved, tiered ranks, something like a small amphitheater. The room could have seated perhaps a hundred, but only a quarter or so of the seats were filled.

I left them to it and went to the podium, where another young man was standing. He had been in the middle of talking when I opened the door, I thought, but now he was silent.

"I surrender," he said as I approached, stepping away and holding his hands above his head. "Oh God, please don't hurt me."

Tyrfing reached out and took his head off. The body fell to the ground in two pieces, spraying blood all over the place.

"He surrendered," one of the mages in the audience said. She sounded stunned and horrified. I got the impression she'd likely never seen anyone die before.

Thraslaug grinned and chucked her axe at the girl who'd spoken. It wasn't a spectacular throw, and throwing an axe is a pretty weak attack at the best of times, but she was a giant. It didn't really matter that it wasn't the best performance I'd ever seen. The girl still fell like a puppet with her strings cut.

"Funny thing, we just don't care," the jotun said cheerfully, pulling a large knife from her belt to replace the axe. "The jarl was very clear on this topic."

People started screaming and running, getting in each other's way in their desperation to get out of ours. After a few seconds, they remembered they had magic, and some of them started fighting back.

But here, too, the lack of coordination showed. One whole group attacked in a ridiculous variety of ways, interference between their magics and their own poor aim combining to make sure that not a one hit its target. None of them thought to put up a defense of any kind, and when Matthew reached them, he ran amok like a fox in a henhouse, biting and tearing and pulling them apart.

I stood and watched the carnage, not moving. I felt no real urge to participate. I wasn't quite sure why. It wasn't that I wasn't angry; on the contrary, the undercurrent of rage I was feeling right now was still indescribably intense. It just didn't feel quite real. There was still that sense of disconnection, of detachment. I couldn't quite fit my emotions to my thoughts, and neither one had any real connection to what was going on around me.

I felt, more than anything else, numb.

I didn't fight that feeling. I got the impression that doing so would be a very, very bad idea. I hadn't been lying when I told Kuzunoha that my reaction to this was beyond anything I could control. If I let my current state of detachment slip, I really couldn't guess what I would do. I mean, in the past when I'd thought Aiko had been killed, I went completely berserk. And I'd been a *lot* less powerful then.

Anyone can lose control of their anger. When a normal person does it, it's bad. People get hurt. People get killed.

When it happens to someone with the kind of power I'd accumulated, insurance companies have to invoke the line about acts of God to keep from going broke, and the reconstruction process takes years.

Which was fine with me, but I wanted to make sure that if I snapped, it happened in the right place, at the right time.

So yeah, I was fine with autopilot now. Just fine.

"Keep one alive," I called, watching the slaughter. Any pretense of fighting back was gone by now. These mages had barely any combat experience, and taken by surprise, with giants and monsters getting up in their faces, they couldn't use that to any real effect.

It was sort of crazy to watch, when I contrasted it with the fight in Russia. *Those* had been serious mages, forces of nature. That necromancer had been an army on his own, literally. These guys were...not even in the same realm. It was hard to conceptualize them as being the same sort of creature.

They finished up and dragged the one I'd requested down to where I was standing by the podium. She was older than some of the others, maybe early twenties, with long dark hair, running mascara, and a bite wound on her thigh.

I glanced at the injury as they dragged her closer. Lethal, I thought. Not immediately, but Matthew had bitten through some major vessels. She would bleed out within a few minutes.

"Who is your leader?" I asked, looking down at her. My voice sounded bizarrely blank, almost like flat affect. I realized I was spinning Tyrfing in my hand again, and forced myself to stop.

"J-Jimmy," she said. "Jimmy J-Justice."

"Jimmy," I said. "Pompous asshole? Good with fire magic?"

She started to talk, nodded instead.

"I'm going to eviscerate him," I said calmly. "He's had more than enough chances. His last name is Frazier, by the way. Would you like something to drink?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "What's going to happen me?" she asked.

"You're dying. I suppose I could save you if I wanted to."

"Please?" she whispered. "I'll work for you if you want. Anything, just...don't let me die."

"From someone in your position, that sort of offer is unreliable to say the least."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"Jarl," Jibril said disapprovingly. The ghoul was chewing on something; I didn't think about what. "Kill her or don't. It's cruel to keep her waiting like this."

I looked at her for a moment longer, then shrugged. "I suppose you might be useful," I said. "Someone put a tourniquet on that and call an ambulance." I dismissed the matter, pulling my own phone out of my pocket and dialing a familiar number.

"Jarl?" Selene said. "Are you...feeling better?"

"No," I said. "Send Signý down here. Have her bring everything she needs to curse someone, and the collection of samples I took from the employees."

It took less than twenty minutes for Signý to get there. By that point we'd moved from the college to a nearby park. The sole survivor of the attack was unconscious in an ambulance, on her way to the hospital, where she might or might or might not die. I wasn't concerned about the wrong sort of questions being asked about the event. I practically owned the hospital she'd gone to.

The jötnar were standing around eating tacos they'd bought at a truck on the way to the park, and talking about the "fight" in much the same manner as normal people might discuss a particularly rousing football match afterwards. Matthew was eating as well, though he was still in fur, and thus not participating in the conversation.

I wasn't eating or talking. I was in no mood for casual conversation, and I wasn't hungry. Or, rather, I *was* hungry, to an extent that would have left me afraid that I was about to starve to death before that ceased to be a plausible concern. It was just separated from my conscious thoughts, in the same way as the anger that was still continuing to build in my subconscious.

I wasn't concerned. I'd started to put two and two together about what made me feel that unnatural hunger, and what made it go away. If I was even remotely close to right, I wasn't going to be feeling hungry at all here in a little while.

"Jarl," Signý said, walking up to me. "You have something for me to do?"

"That's right," I said. "I need to find Jimmy as soon as possible. Ideally if you could also kill him that would be nice, but I remember you saying that was more difficult with your approach."

"That's right," she said, dropping the packs she was carrying on the ground. One was a heavy backpack, which contained the hair and blood samples I'd taken from all of the Inquisition and arranged to have kept fresh in case I needed them. The other was more of a satchel of black leather; I didn't know what it contained, beyond that it was presumably what she needed to do her thing. "Why do you want him dead?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not for the magic," she said. "No. But I like to know."

"Ah," I said. "In that case, it's because he betrayed my trust, repeatedly refused the offers I gave him to change his ways, worked to tear down what I've given everything to build, and led numerous idiots to their unnecessary deaths."

"I see," she said. "In that case, let's start the cursing."

Chapter Nine

"So I'm curious," I said, watching as she squatted and opened the bags, digging through them. "How does this work? I haven't studied seithr at all, so this is a completely new kind of magic for me."

"It works," Signý said. "I can't explain more than that. Seithr is something you have to experience. Can you get a horse for me to sacrifice?"

"I don't do animal sacrifice. Is that a problem?"

She shrugged. "The curse will be weaker without it. But it can be done." She looked around, and then pointed at Vigdis, seemingly just because she was the closest of the housecarls. "Go cut a pole," she said. "Living wood, four feet, sturdy enough to bear weight."

I tensed, expecting Vigdis to react poorly to being ordered around like that, but she just nodded and walked off towards the trees around the edge of the park. No griping, no backtalk. She didn't even look to me to confirm the order.

"You're respected by the other jötnar," I commented. It was something I'd noticed before, but this seemed like a good time to ask about it.

"Seithr is not something that is regarded kindly among my people," she said. "But it is a thing which is respected. Everyone is aware of what it can do, and the risks it poses. So when the volva says a thing is needed, you do not argue, yes? Because if the ritual fails, or if she takes offense, you may be better acquainted with what it can do than you want to be."

I nodded. "It makes sense. It's just interesting to me."

About that time, Vigdis returned, carrying a thick pine branch in one hand and the axe she'd used to cut it in the other. She handed the branch gingerly to Signý and backed away.

The volva took the branch and knelt on the ground, her black cloak puddling around her. She took the knife and trimmed off the twigs forking off the main branch, then sharpened both tips so that it looked something like a double-ended spear. Once that was done, she carved a handful of runes on it, spacing them out seemingly at random.

I was still watching curiously. I couldn't smell any magic, and from her attitude, it didn't seem like she was concentrating on it enough to be doing anything particularly difficult.

Suddenly, she stood and slammed the pole into the ground. Normally I wouldn't have expected that do much beyond making her look silly, especially since Signý was hardly muscular, especially compared to the other housecarls.

She was still a jotun, though, and I was guessing there was more to this than just muscle. The improvised spear sank a foot into the ground and stood there. Signý pushed it a bit, making sure it wasn't going to fall over, and then grunted in satisfaction and went back to her bags.

First she opened the bag of samples and took out one of the vials of blood. I could smell the magic around it, a subtle, deceptively powerful piece of work. I'd hired Alexander to do the work, since something like that was far beyond my means; it had been ridiculously expensive, and worth every cent.

She grabbed a small paintbrush from the other bag and went back to the pole, where she cracked the seal on the vial. She dipped the brush into the blood and painted a couple more runes on the pole, her motions quick and confident. Then, just as confidently, she bit her own thumb, drawing blood. She wetted the brush with her own blood and painted a few more runes onto the pole, then returned to her bags.

She capped the vial of blood again and returned it to the bag of samples, then reached into her satchel, digging around. It seemed like she was reaching further into it than should really have been possible, considering the size of the satchel, but I wasn't going to ask questions.

She pulled out a skull and a pelt, and went back to the pole. I noticed that she was holding a small hammer and several nails in her other hand, as well. She draped the pelt over the pole like a cape, trailing onto the ground, and then slipped the skull on top. She hammered a few nails into the pelt, holding it in place, and then went back to the bag.

I was pretty sure both pelt and skull had come from a horse. I thought about commenting that this was still a little suspect, even if she hadn't killed the animal in front of me, but I didn't say anything. It was dead either way, after all. Getting squeamish now wouldn't exactly do it any good.

"Start a fire," Signý said absently, pulling out several bottles and pouches from her satchel. Instantly, several of the jötnar leapt to obey. Thraslaug took her axe and started cutting out a fire pit near the pole, while the others went and started collecting firewood.

Within about ten minutes, the fire was burning brightly. Signý had mixed liquids from some of the bottles with powder from a couple of the pouches, muttering quietly. I *could* smell magic now, something dark and cold and oddly alien. It wasn't much like what I associated with jötnar in general or Signý in particular, which was interesting.

She drank whatever that vile concoction was, grimacing at the taste. From the smell of it, I was surprised that she could get it down without *vomiting*, but I supposed this was something a volva learned to do.

She grabbed a handful of what looked like dried berries from another pouch and walked to sit by the fire, tossing the berries into the flames. They burned with an acrid, bitter smoke; I recognized the scent as a nightshade of some kind, although I couldn't have said what species it was. Henbane, maybe.

"Jarl," Signý said. "I need you to focus on how much you want this Jimmy to suffer. I need you to think about all the pain and trouble he's caused you, and how much you want to punish him for it. Think about it, and look at the fire."

"Okay," I said. "I can do that."

She nodded and then started chanting. It was an interesting sound. She was speaking in whatever bastardized form of Old Norse the jötnar spoke, and I had no idea what the words meant. It was a repetitive chant, though, the same handful of phrases repeating over and over again. The cadence was strange, incredibly regular and constant. Normally, even in a chant you could hear a slightly longer pause between sentences, letting you parse what they were saying. This was different, words coming out without anything to distinguish which ones went together to form a coherent idea. I imagined that even people who spoke the language would have a hard time sorting it out.

Signý leaned forward and inhaled the toxic smoke from the fire, coughing a little without pausing in her chant. She fumbled blindly behind herself for her satchel. After a couple of seconds of that, Thraslaug pushed it into her hand, and she pulled it forward, digging through it without looking. After a moment she came up with a drum.

It was small enough to easily hold in one hand, but elaborately decorated. The oval bowl of the wood was carved with long strings of runes, and had small silver bells dangling from it. The leather of the drumhead was painted with elaborate designs, the center of which was my own coat of arms. There were a handful of runes on the leather, but by and large the designs were more pictorial, and very stylized, with a strong nature motif. At least it wasn't covered in wolves and snowflakes, the way most of my stuff ended up being whether I liked it or not; the predominant pictures here were mountains, trees, and ravens, all painted in simple, bold strokes.

Without pausing the chant, she started to beat the drum with her other hand. It was an odd rhythm, fast and heavily syncopated, totally unconnected from the chant. The bells on the drum jangled to their own time, adding a third rhythm that had just as little in common with the others.

She skipped a beat to reach over and slap me lightly on the arm, and I started guiltily, remembering that I had a role to play here. I looked from Signý to the fire, thinking about Jimmy.

It was hard to argue that he'd been a thorn in my side for years. I couldn't even keep track of how many times he'd pissed me off with his idiocy, arrogance, and overwhelming selfishness. But this...this was something else. To work to undermine me now, to lead others into doing so when they had no real conception of what it meant, that went beyond anything else he'd done. Not only had I killed people for less, I had a hard time thinking of anyone who upset me on that level that I *hadn't* killed.

Signý threw another handful of the dried berries into the fire. I coughed at the smoke, closing my eyes briefly before forcing myself to open them again and stare into the flames. They seemed to

dance now, shapes on the very edge of meaning appearing in the play of the fire on the wood, disappearing before I could identify them.

Without being prompted, Thraslaug threw more wood on the blaze, stoking it up into a bonfire. I realized that she was following along with the chant, nodding her head in time with the drumbeat. Several of the jötnar were, in fact. Thraslaug was the closest to the flames, and keeping up with the chant the best, but Vigdis and Nóttolfr were chanting as well.

I caught my mind drifting and forced myself to focus on Jimmy again. It was difficult, much more so than I would have guessed. The different rhythms and the endless repetition of the chant were making it hard to focus. I'd already been feeling pretty loopy, disconnected from my own emotions, but it was getting worse now, even more dissociated.

When the chant stopped, it took a few seconds for me to realize it. I blinked and looked at Signý. She was standing there, staring into the fire, but not chanting anymore.

As I watched, she walked over to the pole. Her movements were clumsy now, almost making me think of a sleepwalker. She stumbled over her own feet and made no effort to catch herself; she would have fallen had Thraslaug not stepped in to hold her up.

They reached the pole and Signý grasped it, not leaning on it or trying to pull it out of the ground, just holding it. She recited a few lines in Norse, then glanced back at me and started again in English.

"Here I set up a curse-pole," she said, her voice breaking a little. "I raise this pole against Jimmy Frazier, in my name and my jarl's, and this curse I turn on him. I curse him with blindness, that he may not see, as I have been blind to his treachery. I curse him with pain, that he may suffer, as I have suffered for his cowardice. I curse the earth that nurtures him and the sky that watches him. I curse the spirit that guards him, that he may wander astray and not find his home."

She twisted the pole until the head was facing generally northwest, then took a step back, breathing hard. "There," she said. "That should do it."

"Interesting," I said, trying to piece my scattered thoughts together again. "What was the purpose of the chanting?"

"Seithr is not just magic," she said. "It is a state of mind. The chanting, the rituals, they make you think the right way. Push you until the impossible becomes possible."

"Almost like a vision quest," I mused. "Breaking down mental barriers. Interesting. Do you know where he is?"

She nodded and pointed at the pole. "That way," she said. "The nothing pole faces towards him."

"Anything more specific?"

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

She shrugged. "I can feel him. He burns like a candle in my mind's eye. But I could not tell you where to go to find him. It doesn't translate to words."

"That's fine," I said. "You can come with us. Come on, people; break's over."

It was surprisingly easy to find him, with Signý's help. He was holed up in Manitou, just outside of Colorado Springs proper, and right on the edge between my territory and Kikuchi's. The building he was in was one that I'd often seen while visiting Kyra, back when she lived in this neighborhood, but I'd never had cause to go inside before. It was a small house that had been built probably fifty years ago, crowded up in the hills on a narrow street.

I glanced at Signý, and she nodded confidently. "This is the place," she said.

"Cool," I said. I walked up to the door and knocked. I could feel the spark of a magical ward against my knuckles as I did, not too intense, but present.

There was no answer, and I nodded. I hadn't expected one, really, but I figured I'd give him the chance.

Now, I got to do things *my way*.

I wrapped myself in cold air and spread frost and ice across the ground and the walls, giving myself a nasty little flashback to the Wild Hunt. I shook that off and grabbed Tyrting, flicking the sheath aside.

The sword sliced the door in half, and cut into the structure of the ward as well. The magic wasn't completely unraveled, but it had never been that strong, and what was left was barely enough fire for me to notice through the cold. I disregarded it completely.

I moved inside, the housecarls following closely at my heels. Jibril had left after we dealt with the main group, but Matthew was still there. I hadn't asked how he felt about taking down one of the other Inquisition members. Likely he wouldn't care. Even by my standards, Matthew was a sociopath.

I was whistling again as I walked through the house. It wasn't hard to figure out where Jimmy was hiding; Signý pointed firmly downward once we were inside the building, and at that point it was just a matter of finding the stairs.

I wasn't delicate about searching the place, and the jötnar followed my example, a celebration of destruction, casually tearing apart what had probably taken someone a lifetime to build. We kicked doors in rather than bother checking whether they were locked, pulled paintings off the walls and threw them carelessly to the ground, pulled bookshelves down to check the walls behind them. Having your house ransacked by the cops would have been gentle by comparison.

Eventually, we found a hidden door in the small closet attached to the master bedroom. It was locked, a situation I resolved with Tyrfinng rather than take the time to pick it, and we filed down.

The basement was tiny, just one room, clumsily excavated from the bedrock. I was guessing the owner had put it in themselves. At the moment, it housed Jimmy and three other mages, people I didn't recognize.

They'd obviously been alerted by the noise upstairs, and they were ready when I came down the stairs. One of them threw a lightning bolt at me, while another tried to set me on fire. The third was maintaining a kinetic barrier just inside the room, trying to keep me at bay. A little better coordinated than the last bunch, at least.

Not that it did them any good. The lightning hurt, it made my muscles jump and twitch, but it wasn't that serious. It wasn't about to stop me. The fire was even more of a nonstarter; with so many jötnar in that staircase, it never had a chance. Matthew was shivering in his fur, and I knew for a fact that he could handle temperatures well below zero without really caring.

I cracked the barrier with Tyrfinng on the first stroke, and shattered it completely on the second, proceeding into the basement. My minions streamed around me, jumping on the subsidiary mages and taking them down so fast they never had a chance to really process what happened.

Jimmy and I, though, only had eyes for each other. "You're a tyrant," he spat, glaring at me. He made no effort to attack me with his magic. He'd seen enough of what I was capable of to know that he wasn't a match for me, let alone all of the people here.

"That's a pointless accusation," I said calmly, raising my voice a little to be heard over the noises Matthew was making. "It's funny, if you think about it. If you can get away with calling someone a tyrant, they're almost certainly not."

"Right," he said. "Because this is getting away with it."

"In fairness, I have shown you *incredible* patience." I paced back and forth a little, shaking my head. It was getting harder to keep my composure. The unthinking rage I was holding back wanted so badly to be let out.

"See," I said, "this is what I can't stand. I have tried to be patient. I have tried to be a good jarl. I have been reasonable. I have been fair. And people like *you* see it as weakness. You think it means you can push me around and exploit me, and the only way, the *only* way I can get anything resembling respect is with violence."

He opened his mouth, and I stepped up, punching him in the face before he could say anything. He fell to the ground, bleeding from the nose.

"You called me a tyrant," I said. "As that appears to be the only way to make an impression on you *idiots*, I am going to show you what a tyrant is *really* like. Hold him."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

Instantly, jötnar grabbed him and pulled him up to a standing position. I approached him again, still holding Tyrfing.

"You know," I commented idly, "in the past I've always put strict limits on what I allowed myself to do. I always told myself that I'd never use blood magic to steal someone else's life. I told myself that the power wasn't worth it, that it was a slippery slope and the only way to keep myself from going too far was to not even touch it."

I smiled behind the helmet. "Well, guess what? I find myself in rather dire need of power just now, and I recently had a rather impressive object lesson in what this kind of magic can do."

He screamed, briefly, before I cut his throat.

Chapter Ten

It felt strange to hold someone else's life. There was power there, undeniably, but it was an odd sort of power, one that burned too hot in my mind. It strained against my hold, and it felt slick, hard to maintain a grip on. I managed to keep hold of it, but it took a constant effort of will, and it left me distracted. The feeling was also painful, in ways I couldn't quite grasp or define. I couldn't imagine keeping thousands of lives at once. I imagined that was why I wasn't a necromancer.

In a way, I was glad that it felt so awful. Despite what I'd told Jimmy, this kind of magic still scared the shit out of me. If it was this unpleasant, this difficult, that made it less likely that I'd rationalize doing it again. This could be a one-time thing, a single misstep.

And if there was ever a time I needed the power, it was now.

Perhaps sensing the state of mind I was in, none of my housecarls said a word on the way back to the house. It only took a few minutes, which time I spent sitting in the back of the car and plotting. It was hard to think straight with so many pressures on my mind; between stolen power pressing on me and the emotions that were getting harder to hold back with every passing breath, I was having a hard time keeping my composure.

Vigdis, having spent more time with me and thus being more comfortable breaking traditional protocol around me, was the one to lean over and nudge me when we got there. "Jarl," she said. "We're here."

I blinked and shook my head. "Thank you, Vigdis," I said. I climbed out of the car and walked up to the door. Every movement was slow and deliberate, too careful in a way that reminded me of a man walking through a glassblower's shop, where any mistake might shatter a work of art.

In a way, it was an apt comparison. I felt like I was walking through a fragile world, like any misstep on my part might lead to things *breaking*.

I was surprised at how steady my hand was as I opened the door. With how I felt I should have been shaking like a leaf, but I wasn't quivering even a little bit.

Inside, Kyi was next to me within seconds. "The kitsune are waiting upstairs," she said. "I'm guessing things worked out?"

"It won't be a problem anymore," I said. My voice sounded flat and dead, at least to me; Kyi didn't seem to be upset by the sound, but then, she wouldn't. "You're in charge while I'm gone."

That got a reaction at least. She looked at me with the panicked stare of a deer in the headlights, then licked her lips and nodded. "Okay," she said. "What should I do if something like this comes up again?"

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

I paused and looked at her. "I'm through being nice to these people," I said. "I've given them warnings. I've given them second chances. At this point, if anyone tries a stunt like this again, use your best judgment. I expect the problem to be solved when I come back; *how* you solve it is immaterial."

She grinned and nodded, a quick bob of her head that didn't look quite human. "This," she said, "*this* is what a jarl is supposed to be. Good luck, boss. Hit her a good one for me."

I continued upstairs. I could smell magic, and followed it to the same room I'd been in when the kitsune first showed up. I didn't see anyone else on the way. They were busy, or they didn't want to get in the way, or they were scared of the kitsune, or they were scared of me. It didn't matter.

I opened the door and, as expected, found both Kuzunoha and the other kitsune, who was presumably Aiko's father. They both looked entirely human, without even the fox tails that had marked their nature on their previous visit, but they weren't wearing formal dress this time. She was wearing armor that looked suspiciously similar to the set Aiko had before she got an upgrade, and carrying the traditional daisho on her hip; both katana and wakizashi looked well-worn. He was more modern in his outfit, with what looked like modern body armor and a whole lot of knives.

Any doubt I'd had that this wouldn't be resolved diplomatically vanished when I saw that. They were dressed for war, and from everything I knew of Kuzunoha, she wasn't the sort to dress for war unless she was expecting war.

Unexpectedly, though, they weren't alone. Snowflake was lying on the ground next to the male kitsune, who was scratching her ears with a bemused expression. Kyra was there as well, and while she looked human, she was also ready for a fight. There weren't many other reasons for someone to be carrying a set of werewolf armor; it looked like a tangle of straps and metal plates without much rhyme or reason, but I'd seen such things frequently in the past, and I knew what it was for.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, glaring at Kyra.

"I heard what you're doing," she said, staring defiantly back at me. "And I'm coming with you. Aiko is my friend too."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Kyra," I said, with as much patience as I could muster just now, "this is suicide. You know that, right? I'm basically declaring war on a Queen of Faerie right now. That's like one step short of walking up to Loki and starting a fight. And you can't even walk."

"That's not true," she said, standing and taking a few steps to prove it. "The Wild Hunt did wonders for my leg. It feels like new. Maybe even better than new."

I started to tell her that didn't make this a good idea, then stopped. She knew that. Kyra wasn't a fool; she knew the risk she was taking here. She was an adult, making an informed decision. It wasn't my place to tell her she couldn't make that decision.

And besides, I would need all the help I could get to have any prayer of pulling this off.

"Fine," I said. "Go ahead and get changed. You'll want to be in fur for this."

She grinned, brief and fierce, and then started stripping out of her clothing. I glanced at Snowflake, and then looked away again. I knew better than to even try and tell her she couldn't come. She'd risk her life for Aiko without a second thought, and she wouldn't miss a fight like this for the world.

"Are you ready to depart?" I asked Kuzunoha.

She nodded. "We are, jarl. Are you?"

"I am, and my associate will be momentarily. Can you open a portal to Scáthach's fortress?"

"I could, but she will be holding the fabric of reality closed within her domain. We will have to take a more circuitous route, I fear. There is a Way which leads nearby and which she can't hope to close; it's an older magic than hers."

I frowned. "She'll also know to expect an attack from that direction."

"Yes," Kuzunoha confirmed. "I would expect her to arrange her forces to defend that approach heavily."

I smiled. "Good," I said. "I could use someone to vent on right now."

The first portal led to Inari's Wood, predictably enough. Kuzunoha's portals were incredibly smooth, almost as mild as the direct connections established by deity-level magic. Even Kyra was only unconscious for less than five minutes on the other end; Snowflake woke up again in less than two. Kuzunoha was as unaffected as I was, and the male kitsune was up as fast as Snowflake.

While we were waiting on the others, he walked up to me. "Hi," he said. "I don't think I properly introduced myself earlier. Katsunaga, pleased to meet you. Aiko's told me lots of stories about you."

"You're her father, then?"

He nodded. "That's right."

"In that case, I've heard stories about you, too."

He grinned, the expression very sharp and almost painfully reminiscent of Aiko. "Only the bad ones, I'm sure," he said. "If we make it through this, I'll have to tell you some of the ones she wouldn't have."

"You think we're going to pull this off, then?" I asked.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

He shrugged. "Could be. My daughter says you're good at what you do, and with the sword you carry, you can probably hold your own where we're going. Then there's Kuzunoha, and she's...well. Just because you don't like to fight doesn't mean you aren't good at it, you know?"

I nodded. "So we have a chance?"

"Aw hell no," he said, grinning. "Against Scáthach in the center of her power, surrounded by her troops? We don't even have a prayer." He shrugged. "But I'll give it a shot. Everybody dies eventually, you know? I figure going down like a hero while trying to save my daughter, it isn't a bad way to go."

"Yeah," I said. "That's about what I figured, too."

And then Kyra woke up, and shook herself a few times to get over the dizziness, and we went through the next portal. This one led to one of the great bazaars of the Otherside, the sort of place where everything you could imagine was for sale, if you were willing to pay the price. In another state of mind, it would probably have been a little overwhelming. As it was, I was so focused I didn't even really notice.

We walked through the streets of the market at a pretty brisk pace, fast enough that a human would have had to run to keep up. A couple of vendors approached us, but they left quickly when they got a closer look. I wasn't sure who scared them off, exactly; it was a tossup as to whether Kuzunoha, Snowflake, or I was the most intimidating presence here at the moment.

And then I spotted another stall, and a thought occurred to me. "Wait here," I said, walking over to the vendor standing there.

It took several minutes to haggle out a price, and a few more to make the necessary arrangements. Once everything was settled, I went back to the group, fingering my new toy within my cloak. "Okay," I said. "Sorry about that. Let's keep moving."

None of them asked what I'd been buying, and we started walking again without any further delay. After only a few more minutes Kuzunoha drew to a stop in an open square that was filled with more stalls, these ones selling what appeared to be foodstuffs. For a certain definition of *food*, anyway; most of the products were still wriggling, although I wouldn't have guessed at a glance that they'd ever been alive.

"Here we are," the kitsune said, gesturing slightly. There was a rush of power, much subtler and less intense than actually creating a portal, and a hole opened in the world. It was like a portal, sort of, but also very different. There was an element of structure to it, a sense of three-dimensional form that a portal utterly lacked. There was more to it, of course, dimensions unfolding in ways that hurt my head to look at, but it didn't feel nearly as alien as a portal.

Kuzunoha walked into the hole in the world without any hesitation. After only a brief pause, the rest of us followed her into the Way.

As expected, we met resistance almost immediately. We stepped out the other end of the Way into a midnight forest, and instantly they were on us. There were a handful of Sidhe in the crowd, but by and large it seemed to consist of the servants and client races of the Midnight Court. The bulk of the crowd were goblins, with a handful of trolls and ogres, a handful of less identifiable creatures.

Kyra and Snowflake leapt into the fray immediately, and it was readily apparent that they hadn't been exaggerating about the Wild Hunt being good for their healing process. Both of them appeared to be fighting at more or less their full potential, and they were a hell of a lot more effective than I'd really been expecting. Snowflake was wearing steel armor and her teeth were mostly steel as well, which meant that any touch inflicted hideous agony on the vast majority of the enemies in the crowd. Kyra lacked the metal teeth, but the heavy steel plates she was wearing for armor served almost as well, keeping the fae from doing any real harm to her.

We were winning, but it would take time to deal with the sheer number of monsters in the crowd, and there was always the possibility that one of them would get a lucky hit in. So rather than jump in beside them, I took a moment to look at our surroundings.

We were standing on a narrow gravel path. Ahead, a broad expanse of trees led up to the base of a mountain. A castle rose proudly from the mountainside, silhouetted against the full moon that hung high in the sky. Behind us, just a few feet away, the path dropped away, the cliff falling at least five hundred feet to a stormy sea.

Perfect.

I reached out to the wind, feeling it twining through my fingers, and then reached further, feeling how it blew through the crowd, winding between their legs and brushing over their heads. I reached out to that breeze, calling it, and then I threw the life I'd stolen behind that call as well.

Magic was always easier on the Otherside, for reasons I didn't entirely understand, and I'd put a *lot* of stolen power behind that call.

Thus, it wasn't a gentle breeze that answered me. It wasn't even a gale.

It was a sudden, instant hurricane, an almost irresistible force that snatched the fae off the ground and hurled them over my head, off the cliff. A handful of the larger creatures, the ogres and trolls, were too large to move, and I couldn't hit those closest to us without risking hitting Kyra and Snowflake as well.

The rest, though, flew off the edge, their screams drowned out by the wind. Five hundred feet straight down, and if I knew anything about the Midnight Court at all, there would be monsters in the sea when they got there.

I didn't expect further trouble from them.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

Such a massive, sudden expenditure of power should have left me gasping on the ground with a crippling headache. I wasn't entirely sure why it didn't; it might have been that we were on the Otherside, or because most of the power had come from the life force I'd been hoarding, or it might just have been that my own mental state was getting in the way of experiencing that feedback.

Whatever the reason, all I felt was a mild satisfaction.

I drew Tyrfing and started forward. The kitsune walked on either side of me, their own weapons held out.

The larger fae were looking at each other in shock over what had just happened. A couple of them turned back to the fight, and were cut down by steel blades within seconds. A couple tried to run, but we weren't inclined to allow them to. Snowflake and Kyra ran most of them down, tearing out their hamstrings and leaving them crippled on the ground for the rest of us to take care of. The last ogre went down when Katsunaga threw a dagger at it from almost a hundred feet away. For a human throwing a knife was almost a waste of time, let alone doing so at such a distance, but he wasn't even close to human; he'd probably had five hundred years of practice, and he threw the dagger with inhuman strength and precision. The blade slid into the base of the ogre's skull, and it hit the ground instantly.

"Is that the place?" I asked, pointing to the castle that rose from the mountain.

"It is," Kuzunoha replied. She was looking at me with a respect that hadn't been there before.

"Good," I said. I started walking in that direction, and then after a few steps started to run instead.

Chapter Eleven

I was grinning as I ran through the forest. It was wide, predatory sort of grin, but strangely enough it was the product of actual entertainment, rather than aggression. This situation was horrible, in every way, but at least it was clear. I knew what I wanted to do. There was no politicking to deal with, no worries for the long-term consequences of every move, every word.

There was just killing the people between me and Aiko, until there was no one left to kill.

The forest was thick and trackless. Almost none of the moonlight penetrated the thick canopy overhead, leaving the ground pitch black. That was fine; I could smell my way forward, I could choose my path based upon how the air felt as it moved through the branches and brushed against my skin.

Something rushed at me with a spear from the side, counting on my blindness to cover its approach. It was utterly silent, but I could smell the thick, heavy reek of swamp coming off it, and I could feel the air parting before it. I turned just as it came within reach and started to thrust at me, and Tyrfing flicked out to take its head off. I kept running, barely even breaking stride.

The next creature dropped out of a tree as I passed underneath. This one genuinely did surprise me; I had smelled it, and felt it in the air, but I'd thought it a piece of the tree. It smelled like sap and wood, and it moved like a branch swaying in the wind. Even when it hit me, it was like being hit with a living tree.

It slammed into my armor, and wood splintered and shattered against the metal. The transmitted force of the blow cracked a rib, but I still came out considerably better in the exchange. The wooden thing jerked back as it broke itself against the steel, screaming with a sound like a piece of lumber fed into a wood chipper.

I elbowed it hard, knocking it the rest of the way off of me, and turned to stab it while it was down. I might as well not have bothered, though; Katsunaga was already there, putting one of his knives through its throat. The screaming stopped instantly, and the knife came out dripping thick red sap. Kuzunoha was holding her katana in both hands before herself, and it was dripping fluid with a wide variety of scents and consistencies, though I hadn't noticed her getting into a fight.

The two kitsune moved beside me as I continued to run. Kyra and Snowflake were running in circles around us, now in front, now behind, now slipping between us on the way from one to the other before turning sideways. I was moving fast now, much faster than a normal human, but they still put me to shame.

More creatures were attacking now, and I wasn't bothering to pay attention to their nature. They were fae; that was all I needed to know. Tyrfing cut broad arcs through, laying them on the ground in pieces. Kuzunoha's sword moved faster and with a great deal more precision, picking out vital targets rather than slashing through the crowd indiscriminately. Katsunaga was even faster, his knives moving in

a blur. He stabbed and slashed like an angry cat, all aggression and offense, not letting up enough for the enemy to get their bearings and counterattack. Whenever he had a breath between enemies he threw a knife into the crowd, with the same inhuman precision and power as before. One of them slit a throat on its way past to sink into an eye socket. It was the throw of a lifetime for any human, but barely more impressive than average for the kitsune.

I wasn't sure how long he could keep that up, even with all the knives he'd been carrying. Then I happened to glance at one of the corpses, and realized the knife was gone, just an empty hole left behind. Of course he didn't have to worry about running out of knives. He *was* a seven-tail.

The fighting wasn't particularly intense, but it was incessant, almost every step seeing a new enemy. We slowed from a run to a jog, and then to a walk, not because we were tired, but because we had to stop every couple of seconds to kill something.

Some part of me wondered whether Scáthach would run out of minions at some point, or they would lose their morale. The rest knew it was a waste of time to even ask. She was a Faerie Queen; she had an army, and they would rather die than court her displeasure.

We had already put probably a hundred of them on the ground, though, and in some ways it was actually helping us. Most of them burned where iron touched them, bursting into bright pale fire that didn't spread to the grass or trees, and didn't seem to give off any heat. Between the various burning corpses, the forest was bright as day, if rather more garishly colored. All of the pyres were bright and pale, but beyond that the colors varied wildly.

Snowflake and Kyra had given up even bothering to bite them. It was more efficient to just run through the crowd, knocking them to the ground and slamming into them with the steel armor. It didn't actually set them afire unless it cut into them, apparently, but it left them rolling around on the ground in agony, easy prey for the slower members of the group.

We were winning. Undeniably, we were winning. We'd put whole swathes of the fae down, and as far as I could tell none of us was even scratched beyond my cracked rib.

But these were cannon fodder, and every one that we took the time to kill was time for the real defenses to be initiated and strengthened. It didn't matter that we were slaughtering them in droves; this wasn't the real threat, and every moment we spent here made that threat harder to deal with.

I grimaced and threw myself forward, into the middle of the crowd. I lashed out around myself with Tyrfin. Flaming blood sprayed out all around me, thick and blueish, and that entire group of the fae went down. But almost instantly more of them pressed in around me, filling in the narrow window of space I'd cleared for myself. It reminded me of scooping a cup of water out of a lake; you could take out a cupful, but it won't take long for the lake to even itself out again.

Which, in turn, gave me an idea.

"You can handle ice, right?" I asked the kitsune, between strokes. It was surprisingly hard to come up with the words; I had to grope for them, struggle to associate meanings to sounds.

"Sure," Katsunaga said, throwing another knife. The blade flicked past not three inches from my nose and slid into a throat, putting another of the fae on the ground.

"Good," I said, and reached out for the cold inherent in my blood. It came slower than usual, more reluctant to answer my call, but I pushed harder and brought it forth, covering the grass in frost. Then I sheathed Tyrfing and started walking carefully forward.

Snowflake and Kyra had the right idea, although I was too out of it to realize that in the moment. This wasn't a fight, not really. They couldn't beat us, and beating them won us nothing. This was a delaying tactic, a distraction, an annoyance. Every second that we spent fighting them was a victory for the real enemy.

So I stopped fighting them, and just walked through them. They kept throwing themselves at me, but they couldn't get much leverage on the slick ground. Even when they did reach me and manage an attack, they couldn't get much purchase on the armor; it was too hard, too slick, and above all else, too *steel*.

I ignored them completely and kept moving.

Only a few minutes after I changed my tactics, the trees started thinning out. I quickened my pace, almost running again. It should have been slick, with the frost under my feet, but it wasn't. If anything it made it easier, since the frost made it slightly harder for the fae to get underfoot.

From a distance it had seemed as though the forest led right up to the base of the mountain, but as it turned out there was close to a hundred feet of open space in between.

I stopped and stared in dismay as I saw that space now.

It was filled, from a few feet in front of me to the base of the mountain, and as far as could be seen in either direction, with monsters.

Out in the moonlight again, I could see them more clearly. There were trolls and Sidhe, shadowy wisps that seemed almost more visual artifacts than anything, barghests and great cats with jaws that dripped flame. Ogres dotted the ranks here and there, ten-foot-tall monstrosities that could have picked me up in one hand. And finally, on the opposite side of the open area, was a giant. Not a jotun, but a true, Jack-and-the-Beanstalk-style giant.

I looked at the massive creature, and then I looked up. And *up*.

Fifty feet tall if it was an inch, and I wouldn't have been surprised if the actual figure was closer to a hundred. It was fully as tall as the cliff behind it, the beginning of the mountain. It looked unreal, inconceivable; my brain refused to process it on a basic level. This thing wasn't real. It *couldn't* be real. It could pick up an elephant in one hand. It could have given a blue whale a run for its money in sheer size.

If it stepped on a building, the building would break. There was just *no way* this thing could actually exist. Everything I knew about the laws of physics said it shouldn't be possible.

But this was the Otherside, and here the laws of physics were more guidelines than hard rules. Guidelines which, with the power of a Faerie Queen, could be ignored entirely.

Kyra and Snowflake caught up to me, and both of them stared out over the field for a long moment.

Wow, Snowflake said at last. That's big. That's...really, really big. I feel a lot less confident all of a sudden.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm with you." I stared at the giant some more. "Normally I would aim for the knee against something bigger than me," I said conversationally. "But I can't reach that thing's knees. I'm not sure I can even reach its *ankle*."

I vote we kill the other ones first and hope that a nine-tailed kitsune can bring down a giant, Snowflake said.

"Seconded, motion passed," I said, nodding. That was still a rather tall order, but at least it was a problem I'd come here expecting. Dealing with massive swarms of faeries was well within what I'd anticipated when attacking Scáthach in her house. Dealing with something that could look down on a lot of trees was...not so much.

I tried to look away from the giant, reaching into my cloak. I didn't have any grenades—they were pretty damned unlikely to work, this far into Faerie—but I'd been saving up stored spells for years. I'd been stockpiling weapons in case of a rainy day.

If things got much rainier than this, I'd need a freaking *ark*.

I picked through my selection carefully, sorting out the items that were most useful against a large group. The army of fae on the open field didn't seem to have noticed us yet; the fae in the forest were still attacking, but Snowflake and Kyra kept them off me while I made my choices.

It took maybe thirty seconds, and then I threw my hands out, flinging two full handfuls of small objects out over the crowd. They reached the apex of their various arcs. Metal, glass, and various crystals glittered in the moonlight, and the world seemed to freeze for a moment, the weapons hanging in the air in the endless tipping point just before they began to fall.

And then the moment ended, and the stored spells I'd thrown started downward. "Trial by fire!" I screamed, as loud as I could, throwing magic out at the distant spells.

I almost thought I could see the pea-sized silver spheres in the mix spark with light as I said the words. I *couldn't*, but I almost thought I could.

Then they all went off in a burst of force and fire that laid waste to the army.

I'd used all of these spells before, or ones very similar to them. But I'd never seen how they interacted before. I'd never seen what happened when all of them went off at once.

It started with fire, white-hot fire like a magnesium flare, unimaginably hot. Intense colored light followed a moment later, green and blue spreading and overlapping. I caught the scents a few seconds later as the hot air hit me in the face, cooking flesh and superheated stone.

The earth cracked apart under their feet, literally. The force and the fire tore through the ranks, shredding them. It didn't toss them aside, not really; this wasn't that kind of force magic. It didn't knock people around, it *broke* them.

I couldn't see the other spells, the ones that sent waves of force through the sacks of nails they were enclosed in. But I could see the results. I could see the fae fall, ogres laid low as quickly and easily as lowly goblins. I could see the pale fire break out where the iron was embedded in their flesh. I could hear them *scream*.

I stood and watched as the fae burned, and broke, and screamed, and I felt...nothing.

Thick, heavy fog poured out a moment later, fog and shadows hiding the scene. I could still hear them screaming inside.

"Right, then," I said, drawing Tyrfing again. "Let's finish the job."

Chapter Twelve

The cloud of fog limited my vision as badly as anyone else's. But I'd always had some talent for functioning without vision, and I'd recently had a great deal of opportunity to practice.

The ground was surprisingly hard to navigate safely. It had been uneven and rocky beforehand, but the detonations of the various stored spells had worsened things considerably. There were cracks and craters in the ground, places where earth and stone had been removed as neatly as scooping ice cream from the container, places where they had been shattered.

On the whole, the terrain was treacherous, in some ways as dangerous as the creatures on it. A false step, a stumble, could mean disaster. I was forced to move more slowly than I would have liked, feeling around carefully through the air to be sure that I didn't make a mistake. Kyra and Snowflake both stuck close to my side as I walked into the fog. Neither werewolf nor husky was totally dependent on sight, but this sort of situation wasn't what their other senses had been designed for; hearing and scent couldn't necessarily warn them of an upcoming pit in the ground.

But they followed me in, trusting totally in my ability to keep them safe.

I could feel heat in the air ahead, coming off a lingering fire, and reached out to quench it. The cold flowed through me, and the fire died, the corpse it fed on blanketed in frost instead.

There were still fae moving around in the fog; as dramatic as my initial barrage had been, it hadn't directly hit more than a small fraction of the crowd. There were still plenty more that were up and moving.

I had nothing against them, but I couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't continue to hunt us if we simply slipped past them in the fog, and not all of them were blinded by it; many were still moving with deliberate purpose, navigating by some means that didn't depend upon sight as I understood it.

So rather than guide us to the less traveled areas, the route we could have walked without running into opposition, I deliberately turned our path towards the pockets of resistance.

The first group couldn't see, and we closed in on them in perfect silence, ensuring that they didn't notice or react to our presence. I couldn't see them, either, but I could feel the air stirring around them as they moved, and I could smell the canines smelling them, a reek of swamp and night and ugliness that burned foully in the back of the throat and left the sinuses clenched against the stench.

I stepped up and ran one of them through with Tyrfin, smashed another's face in with my armored fist, then drew the sword out and swept it in a broad arc parallel to the ground. Beside me Snowflake and Kyra both bit and tore, the blood tasting foul in their mouths.

The others could feel the spraying blood strike them, could hear the bodies hit the ground, but still didn't see us, didn't know where to look. I stepped up to the next, feeling its mindless terror burning

in the back of my mind, hot and frenetic. The blade lashed out again and the fear ended, the flickering candle of the creature's life extinguished.

It took only moments longer for the last of them to fall, and we kept moving, padding silently through the fog.

I could hear bellowing now, the giant's voice loud enough to be painful even from the opposite side of the field. The massive creature was above the fog, but it didn't seem able to see what was happening within the cloud any better than the rest.

It was swinging at random, though, apparently uncaring of how many of its own allies it crushed. At one point I felt the air stirring and stopped just barely in time as its club smashed into the ground in front of us. The earth shook, literally *shook* for twenty feet around the impact site with the sheer power behind the blow. I managed to keep my footing, but it was an effort, and I watched with respect and fear as the club was lifted again.

Any conception I'd had that I could fight that thing vanished in that moment. One hit from that and we were dead. Period. There was no room for argument, no chance to intervene. That was enough to pulverize us beyond all hope of recovery.

I waited for the giant to lift the weapon again, and then led us onward.

We ran into several more groups of fae and dealt with each of them in much the same way we'd removed the first one. Some were more of the swamp-creatures, but there were others, goblins and redcaps and hags and all manner of other foul things that I couldn't name. There were a handful of Sidhe in the mix, but I avoided them carefully. I knew the Sidhe intimately enough to have an acute respect for their power, and I did *not* want to fight them when I couldn't see.

It took a few minutes for us to reach the other side of the field and step out into the open air again. Our armor, and fur where it showed through the armor, were stained a dozen colors, as though we had swam through the blood of a dying rainbow.

But Tyrfing's blade shone brightly with the reflected light, clean as always.

The giant towered above us, close enough now that I could count the individual hairs on its legs, each as thick as ropes. It didn't seem to have noticed us yet, but that couldn't last, and I still hadn't come up with any way to take it out that wasn't just a cruel and unusual way to commit suicide.

I gritted my teeth and started forward, gripping Tyrfing more tightly. This needed done, and if that meant taking a gamble with my life, so be it.

Then I paused. It seemed too bright for just the moonlight.

I turned, and saw that there was a light coming from the fog. It was brilliant silver in color, almost the same tone as the moon, filling the entire fogbank with pure vivid light. The giant swatted at the brightest point repeatedly, but it didn't seem to be doing anything.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

The light got brighter and brighter, and then Kuzunoha stepped out of the fog.

She had her game face on again, nine tails spreading behind her in a shifting, weaving mass. Her blades dangled casually from her hands, both of them literally dripping the same multicolored blood we were soaked with. Silver light poured from her, casting shadows from every rock and blade of grass, so pure and bright it was hard to look at.

The giant roared and swung again, moving faster than anything that size had a right to be. Its club smashed down on the kitsune over and over, shattering and crushing the earth beneath her. Standing twenty-five feet away, I was still tossed to the ground.

But the kitsune wasn't affected. At all. The club passed right through her, and she kept walking on empty space as the earth was cratered and broken underneath her feet.

I stared for several seconds before realizing that I was looking at an illusion. It had to be an illusion.

I looked up just in time to see a speck leap from the cliff above the giant. It dropped straight down for a second and then swung into a fast, steep arc to the side, passing just under the giant's chin. Blood poured out in its wake, a ridiculous amount of blood, almost comical.

The speck reached the end of the arc and started back down, then dropped back into a downward fall. It rode the tide of blood that rushed to the ground like a scarlet waterfall, and slammed into the ground not thirty feet away from us.

At the same time, the illusion of the kitsune winked out like it had never been. The light, the blood dripping from the blades, everything just vanished.

Katsunaga stood, not seeming to have any trouble with the weight of the blood pouring down onto him, and walked over to us. He had a long sword in his hand, apparently what had just opened the giant's throat. "You're slow," he said casually. "And...three, two, one, *move!*"

On the final word, he suddenly darted forward with incredible speed. His shoulder caught me at the waist, flipping me up into a fireman's carry, and he grabbed one of the canines in either hand. He carried us forward to the edge of the cliffs like that, moving as fast as a vampire, fast enough to make me look slow.

Instants later, the giant's corpse slammed down into the fog with a *crash* more appropriate to falling buildings than anything alive. One hand hit the ground where we'd been standing, and just its hand was huge enough that I had no doubt that we'd have been crushed if we were underneath it.

I slipped off the kitsune's shoulder and hit the ground, and he grinned down at me, dropping Kyra and Snowflake as well. The sword had disappeared at some point, although I wasn't sure when or how.

"Seriously, you guys are slow," he commented casually, walking back out from the cliff. "We've been waiting up top for like five minutes now." He whistled piercingly, and a moment later a coil of rope fell from above, hitting the ground with a *thunk*.

I stared. "How?" I asked.

He grinned at me. "That would be telling," he said. "Now get over here. It won't be long before the reinforcements get here."

I walked over in something of a daze, with the others following a few feet behind. Katsunaga clipped the rope to Kyra's harness with a carabiner and then wrapped the rope around one hand. He scooped Snowflake up with the other, grabbing her around the abdomen. "Might want to grab on," he said.

I stared, then shrugged and grabbed the rope. The kitsune tugged the rope, and then we started rising into the air.

How much weight was on the rope, I wondered? Two people, a werewolf, a husky, three full sets of armor...it had to be more than a thousand pounds.

But the rope was rising past the cliff at a dizzying pace, far faster than I could have climbed.

We reached the top of the cliff and clambered over. Kuzunoha was standing there, holding the rope. Apparently she'd just pulled us up hand-over-hand, easy as that. Though perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised at that, given that Katsunaga was holding his weight and Snowflake's both with one hand and didn't seem to be straining at all. Elder kitsune obviously had some pretty ridiculous strength.

"Let us proceed," she said, dropping the rope and turning towards the mountain. "There will be more of them to come."

I nodded and then started forward, running. Apparently the kitsune were more than fast enough to keep up, given that they'd been waiting for us at the top.

The rage simmering inside me had been dulled a bit, pushed out of the way by surprise at the kitsune's antics. But as we ran, it came to the forefront again. It wasn't getting milder as time passed; to the contrary, it was just getting stronger and more overwhelming, driving me harder and harder.

The path leading up to the castle was clearly marked, leading through the trees. I hesitated for a few seconds, looking at it. On the one hand, they would be expecting us on the path; I had no doubt there would be heavy resistance. On the other, running through a forest in the heart of Faerie without a path was one of the stupidest ideas I'd ever had, and that was a strongly contested position.

Fuck it, I thought, starting up the path. Resistance was okay. Resistance was just *fine*.

The path was gravel, fine and pale, almost glowing in the moonlight. It should have been good footing, but it wasn't; the stones turned underfoot, always at the worst time, and small irregularities in

the path conspired to make every footstep an inconvenient one. We weren't welcome here, and every part of this island was working against us, trying to keep us out.

I grinned and kept moving, fast. The path led steeply uphill, and I was breathing hard, but I didn't slow, didn't pause. I slipped on the gravel and fell, but I was up and moving again almost before I hit the ground.

Now there were people in front of me, and this wasn't the disorganized mob from the base of the cliffs. This was an organized, disciplined group, standing in tight formation. Many of them were Sidhe, with all that entailed. Every fourth space was occupied by a faerie hound; in every third rank, these spaces were occupied by an ogre instead.

I smiled at them and then moved in.

I walked right through them, the wrath boiling up inside me into action, driving every motion faster, harder. Tyrfinning lashed out again and again, drawing blood and sparking fire. The werewolf and the husky were close beside me, teeth gleaming in the moonlight, growls and snarls bubbling forth. Further out the kitsune were moving with us, blades out and ready, but I was only dimly aware of them, my world contracted to myself and the enemy in front of me. Even the canines close against my sides were only vaguely remembered, more presences than people.

I was not a gifted swordsman, not even close to being a match for the least of the Sidhe. That didn't matter. I was stronger, faster, and far angrier than they could hope to be. I was wrapped in steel and I carried a blade that was more than a match for any of their defenses; brute force could serve here where skill was hopelessly overmatched.

Their weapons got through, opening numerous cuts and gashes in my flesh, puncturing deep into muscle, shedding my blood freely onto the gravel. That didn't matter either. I was beyond pain just now, and damage just drove me on, fueling the wrath that was carrying me forward.

I pushed myself further, faster and harder, and I wanted to laugh at how *easy* it all was. I was faster, stronger, I was so much *more* than merely human. Everything I tried, every strike, every parry, every smallest movement I made *worked*. The air around me danced and glittered with snowflakes and moonlight, knocked out of the air by the spraying blood, brought up and dancing again moments later by the wind of my passage. It almost felt like running at the heart of the Wild Hunt, but this was all me, something taken rather than given.

In a strange way, it was almost meditative. I'd always thought of meditation, of that state of mind, as being something calm, but now I was approaching the same location from the other direction. The wrath was so intense that it became the sole focus of my existence, driving any other emotion, any thought from my mind. In that moment, violence was not so much something I did as something I *was*, a state of being rather than an action.

At some point, I became aware that there were no more enemies before me to kill, and something made it through the red mist of anger, a sort of vague disappointment that it was over. I

pushed that feeling away and continued onward, running along the path. My footsteps now were light, though I was bleeding, heavily from a stab wound on my thigh and more lightly from a hundred other cuts all over my body.

I laughed and laughed, and when I ran into more of the fae on the path, I cut them down as well, not even pausing in my run.

"Jarl. Jarl!"

I blinked, shook my head, looked at the voice. From her tone, I was guessing it wasn't the first time she'd said it.

"What is it?" I asked. I expected to be slurring, from how far gone I felt, but if anything, the opposite was true. My words were crisply enunciated, my voice calm and cool.

"We're there," Kuzunoha said, pointing past me. There was an odd tone in her voice, an odd note in her expression. There was something deeply worried there, something disturbed on a basic level.

I looked in the direction she was pointing and saw the castle, right there, standing up from the mountainside. It had looked smallish before, but that had been a trick of distance and perspective; up close, it was huge, towering overhead, a keep the size of a town. We were separated from it by a broad dark moat, with a single stone bridge across it. I didn't for a moment think it would be that simple, but I needed to get to the other side, so I started for the bridge.

I could feel the concern, the worry, the slight edge of fear from the others. Even Snowflake, who was as viciously aggressive as anyone I'd ever known, who was literally addicted to the rush of violence, felt disturbed and frightened, and I knew it was me she was scared of.

I ignored it. There was always a price to pay.

Chapter Thirteen

Moving towards the bridge, I was surprised at how hard it was. I was almost staggering, my steps awkward and irregular. It hurt to move. It hurt standing still too, but it wasn't as noticeable when I wasn't moving.

How many injuries did I have? I wasn't sure, couldn't even make a reasonable guess. The major ones had been mostly healed already, at least to the extent that I wasn't likely to bleed out in the immediate future, but there were still plenty of small cuts, bruises, even a few cracked bones.

I wasn't sure how I'd gotten most of them, exactly. I was trying not to think about it too hard. From what I *could* recall, I'd lost myself pretty badly on the way up here. About as far gone as I'd ever been. This situation was fucking with my ability to maintain control.

It was hard to say quite why the anger that had carried me this far was in the background again. Maybe I was just tired; not even the most bloodthirsty werewolf could keep going indefinitely, and at some point injuries and fatigue *would* bring you down. Maybe that part of me had recognized that we were at the point where rational thought and care would get us further than psychotic rage.

I stepped up and looked over the bridge. It was about a hundred feet across, maybe a little more. The stone was pale, almost luminescent in the moonlight, unmarked by any signs of having been worked with tools. It looked like it had been grown in that shape where it stood, a single arch of stone over the water. Considering where we were, maybe it was.

I was more concerned with the water. The water was dark, a deep, inky blackness that didn't so much reflect the light as eat it. The surface was utterly calm, still and smooth as a pane of glass, but I didn't for a moment imagine that it was empty. There might be Sidhe in there, or the nasty sort of mermaid. Maybe one of the more exotic water fae, a kelpie or a rusalka. Hell, for all I knew she might have a *kraken* in there.

All I could say for sure was that it would be bad.

I looked at the bridge, chewing my lip. It couldn't be as easy, as simple as just walking across. The Sidhe didn't work like that; there was always a trick, a catch, a sucker punch somewhere in the works. It was *never* as easy as it looked.

The hard part was figuring out where the trap was. Was it the bridge, an obvious answer to the problem meant to lure in the foolish and straightforward? Or perhaps this trap was meant to catch the paranoid, and the bridge actually *was* the safe way over. Perhaps this entire thing was an elaborate decoy, and the real entrance was somewhere completely different?

I growled. There was no way to guess, and I was wasting time standing here trying.

I stepped out onto the bridge, ready to dodge or fight at a moment's notice, all my senses extended for any hint of trouble. I made it maybe ten feet out, and then the stone bucked under my feet, tossing me up and back.

I hit the dirt hard and rolled back to my feet, watching warily, but it looked like the bridge had gone back to being inanimate.

"Are you injured?" Kusunoha asked.

"No," I said, checking to make sure as I said it. Then I realized what had just happened and started to laugh. "Bloody hell," I said. "I can't believe she's still using that."

"What?" The kitsune sounded calm and patient. Snowflake, who echoed her mentally an instant later, did not.

"One of Scáthach's most famous appearances is in the Cúchulainn stories. In them, she had a bridge that would throw anyone who tried to cross it back to the bank."

So how do we get across? Snowflake asked, pacing back and forth restlessly by the edge of the water.

"In the story," I said, "Cúchulainn crossed the water by jumping into the middle of the bridge, then jumping from there to the other side. It didn't have time to throw him off."

"I don't know if you noticed, but that's a bit of a long jump. Even for me," Katsunaga said. He was flipping a small knife in his hand idly.

"Yeah," I said, looking back at the bridge. "I know. Cúchulainn was maybe the strongest hero in Irish myth; I doubt any of us could match him. But looking at this, I think maybe we can fake it."

Faking it, as it turned out, was easier said than done. When I tried walking above the bridge rather than on it, holding myself in the air with magic, it threw me off anyway. Jumping across in stages didn't work. Having multiple people on the bridge at once didn't confuse it; it could chuck all of us at once.

Eventually, after a couple of minutes of frustration, Katsunaga proposed another idea.

I stared at him. "You have got to be kidding me."

"It might work," he said defensively. "You never know."

I continued to stare. "This," I said, "is very much the kind of plan that Aiko would come up with. That's not a compliment, by the way, if you were curious."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"In fairness, her plans sound like mine, not the other way around. I taught her everything she knows."

Yeah, not helping your case much, Snowflake said dryly.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay," I said. "You're sure the rope will work out right? You've got the length worked out?"

"Yes," he said. "Well, probably. Unless the distance here isn't what it looks like. Which it probably isn't since this is Faerie. But I can finagle it. Probably."

"Still not inspiring great confidence," I told him. "But I don't have a better idea, so let's do this."

He grinned. "All right!" he said. "Come on, I think we've got a pretty good tree over here."

He led us over to a large conifer, well over a hundred feet tall, not far from the edge of the moat. I eyed it dubiously. "You really think this will bend that far?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "These things are more flexible than they look," he said, producing ropes from pockets that shouldn't have been anywhere near large enough to hold them. "Come on, dear, we're going to need someone to watch our backs while we work this all out."

Kuzunoha walked from the bridge over to stand next to us, holding her sword in one hand. It was hard to tell, between the darkness and how restrained her body language typically was, but I thought she was smiling indulgently, just a little bit.

"Right, then," the other kitsune said, throwing one of the ropes up into the air. It was an unnaturally precise throw, the rope wrapping around the trunk of the tree and then falling back to earth. He snatched the other end out of the air as it fell and tugged on the rope, making sure it was secure, then turned to me. "Here's yours," he said.

I took the rope and waited as he tossed another two ropes up and around the tree, passing one off to Kyra and one to Snowflake. I could hear some fighting behind me as this went on, the roaring and screeching of the fae contrasted with the utter silence of the kitsune, but I didn't pay too much attention. The fighting was Kuzunoha's job right now, and on a job like this, you had to trust the people you were working with to do their jobs.

"Okay," Katsunaga said. "Pull!"

I set my feet and started pulling down on my rope, hand over hand. It was hard, physically, but simple and repetitive, almost a meditative act. In some ways it almost reminded me of fighting up the mountain; there was the same element of action without thought.

The two canines pulled on their ropes as well, although they did it somewhat differently; both of them had their jaws clamped firmly on the material, and were simply walking away from the tree. It

seemed like they should be tearing the ropes apart—I *knew* how sharp Snowflake's teeth were, after all—but they weren't. I guess kitsune can get ropes made from tougher stuff than hemp.

"Stop!" Katsunaga said, jolting me out of my reverie. I stopped pulling, holding the rope tightly instead, and he darted forward to look at the tree. It was bent almost double now, straining against the ropes. He nodded, apparently satisfied, and then jogged over to me. He grabbed the rope I was holding and wrapped the end around another tree, tying it firmly in place.

I let go carefully, half-expecting the tree to snap back upright, but it only groaned a little as the rope shifted. This gave me a moment to breathe, which I spent checking on the fighting.

Kuzunoha was standing alone on the path, her sword held neatly in front of her. Her skin glowed with a quiet silver radiance, not the blinding, burning light I'd seen earlier, but still noticeable.

All around her, scattered across the ground, were the pieces of those fae who had attempted to follow us up. All of them were dead now—none were even just dying, or near death. Most of the bodies burned with a quiet silvery fire from the touch of the iron.

It was hard to say just how many of them had died there. Enough.

I stood and waited as Katsunaga tied another rope to me, attaching me to the tree. There was plenty of room between us, more than two hundred feet of rope. I was holding onto another length of rope, one that was already tightly stretched between me and the trunk. It was a convoluted arrangement, but I trusted him when he said it would work out. It had already become very apparent that he was very, very good with ropes.

"You remember what to do?" the kitsune asked with a mad, devil-may-care grin. "Oh, who am I kidding, of course you do. Ready, set go!"

As he said "set," he brought a knife down on the rope tied to another tree, the only thing anchoring *my* tree down. The tree instantly snapped back up to its full height. Thanks to the rope stretched taut between us, so did I. The rope almost pulled out of my grip, and it felt like it was going to pull my shoulders out of their sockets, but I managed to keep ahold of it.

The world blurred past me, and I realized that the tree was already almost back to its full height. I let go of the rope and continued rising, soaring up into the night.

Then the rope tied around me jerked tight, and I started to swing down in a long arc towards the castle. I started forcing magic into the air around me, slowing the fall, but the ground was still coming up fast. I could jump out of a plane without worrying a bit, but the centrifugal force here was still pretty damn considerable.

I slammed into the ground, hard enough to knock the wind out of me. Instants later, the ground moved under me, throwing me back into the air.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

I hit stone rather than dirt, though, and knew I'd made it far enough; the bridge had thrown me to the *other* side of the moat, rather than back the way I'd come.

"Right, then," Katsunaga shouted from the other side. "We'll be right over. Hold your end tight."

I pushed myself to my feet and braced myself to hold the rope steady. A few seconds later the kitsune jumped out onto the rope, ziplining across. He was holding onto the rope casually with one hand and a carabiner, while Snowflake dangled from his other hand.

I watched them come, and then realized we hadn't exactly planned for what to do once it worked.

Katsunaga hit me in the chest, feet first, knocking me to the ground *again*. A second or two later, Snowflake landed on my chest, panting exuberantly. *That was awesome!* she exclaimed. *Let's do it again!*

Despite myself, I had to smile. It was good to see her back to her usual self. Very good.

Kuzunoha followed a few seconds later with Kyra, although she dismounted the rope much more gracefully. I suspected the other kitsune could have done the same—he was at *least* as agile as Aiko, after all—but he was the sort to enjoy doing it the way he had.

She really did take after her father.

"Great times," Katsunaga said, grinning like a loon. "Much more fun than just flying across."

I stared at him. "You could have just flown?"

"Sure. But how boring would that be?" He grinned at me some more, then cut the rope away where it was tied around me. He rolled it between his fingers and it burst into flame, bright and fierce. He dropped it, and we walked into the castle as the fire spread up the rope to the tree behind us.

The courtyard of the castle was broad and open, but sterile, totally lacking in life. The ground was a single sheet of black marble, utterly dark. There was a large fountain in the center of the yard, and the water sparkled in the moonlight, but it didn't make a sound as it fell back into the pool.

There were several doors opening off the courtyard. In addition to the massive doors of the main entrance, oak bound with silver, there were smaller entrances scattered around. Some were on upper levels; about half of those had stairs leading up to them, but the other half opened into thin air.

"Which way?" I asked, looking warily around. I was anticipating an army to boil out and fall on us at any moment, but it appeared the quiet would last at least a little longer.

"They will be keeping her below," Kuzunoha said quietly. "And not through the main entrance. That isn't the Queen's style; she prefers to keep the ugliness hidden beneath a veneer of deceptive beauty." She turned slowly, and then pointed at one of the other doors. "There," she said.

"Okay," I said, starting in that direction. "Are you guessing here, or do you have a way of knowing? I'll go with it either way, but I'd like to know where we stand."

"Some of both," she said, following close behind me. I got the impression that she wanted to push me out of the way and move faster, but even now, she had too much ingrained poise and decorum for that.

The door opened easily and we moved inside, into a narrow hallway with a high, arched ceiling. Everything was constructed of that same black marble, and the hall was completely unlit. Kuzunoha fixed that easily enough, emitting more of that pure silver light until I was more likely to be squinting against the brightness than the dark.

In truth, I was just as glad for the darkness. It kept me from seeing anything of the castle beyond what was right in front of me, and I had the strong suspicion that that was a good thing.

I wasn't sure whether it was luck or some sort of kitsune magic, but Kuzunoha managed to lead us straight to a staircase leading down. There wasn't much point in asking, really. I had a hard enough time understanding how *Aiko* did some of the things she did.

The stairs led straight down, unpleasantly steep. I ended up carrying Kyra, while Katsunaga carried Snowflake down, since going down steep stairs with four legs isn't actually very much fun. It felt like it went on for an impossibly long time, and I started counting the steps just out of curiosity.

By the time we hit the bottom, I was at four thousand. The risers were a uniform eight inches in height, which meant that we'd gone down about three thousand feet since entering the castle. We had to be down near the water level by now, the whole weight of the mountain hanging over our head.

We finally reached the bottom, and I set Kyra down, groaning a little. I was strong, but it had been a long climb down. Kyra wasn't a lightweight, especially in armor, and I'd already taken a beating tonight.

The hallway at the bottom was larger, wide enough that we could all walk abreast and still have enough room for a car on either side. The ceiling was a high arch, twenty feet over my head. It was hard to see much more than that, since we were still dependent upon Kuzunoha for light; unsurprisingly enough, the Maiden of the Midnight Court wasn't given to much lighting within her fortress.

The hall was built to the same scale as the staircase, ridiculously unnecessary. We walked for a while, and then we started running instead, and then we went back to walking when it became clear that I wasn't up to another prolonged sprint, and still it stretched out of sight in front of us.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

Finally, after a solid twenty minutes of walking, we reached a door. It was a huge piece of what I was willing to bet was solid silver, and the lock on it was a piece of black iron easily the size of my head. There were two guards outside, Sidhe warriors dressed in fine crystal armor. It was a pretty respectable set of defenses.

Or, at least, it used to be. Now the Sidhe were lying on the ground in pools of their own blood, throats slit neatly from ear to ear. The door hung open a few inches, not wide enough to see inside, but more than wide enough to make it clear that it wasn't locked.

"Well, that's ominous," Katsunaga said lightly. Then, before I could respond, he darted forward and pushed the door the rest of the way open, heedless of the body he stepped on as he passed.

I opened my mouth to rebuke him for being so hasty, then stopped and stood there like an idiot when I got a glimpse inside the room.

Aiko was in there, all right. But she wasn't alone.

Chapter Fourteen

The room was fairly small, and it was *weird*. For one thing, it was made of silver. Literally *made* of silver, the walls and floor and ceiling all sheets of metal. Unlike the hallway leading here, it was brightly lit, pure white light shining off every surface from no apparent source. The place was a peculiar mix of cutting-edge technology and ancient magic; hospital equipment and computer screens stood side-by-side with magical fetishes and ritual objects. Runes and other, less identifiable symbols were painted on the walls, almost covering the metal with how thickly they were arranged on the walls.

Everything—the hospital equipment, the ritual objects, the runes—it was all arranged around a bed on the other side of the room. It looked a little like a hospital bed, but it was larger, and looked at least marginally more comfortable.

Aiko was lying in the bed, and she looked terrible. Her knees were thicker than her thighs, and I could not only count her ribs from across the room, I wouldn't have been surprised if I could count *vertebrae*. Her eyes were closed, and for a second I was scared that she was dead, but after a moment I saw that she was still breathing, just very quietly.

As much as I hated to admit it, though, my attention was mostly focused on the person sitting next to her. There was something about her that drew the eye like a magnet, irresistibly.

It was hard to say why. She was small, probably barely five feet, and hunched over in her chair so that she looked even smaller. She was wrapped in black cloth, except it went further than just *black*. It was almost like she was clothed in darkness made manifest. The light that filled the room and left every other surface gleaming didn't seem to touch her. Every inch of skin was shrouded in that fabric, her face lost in shadows under a deep hood. I couldn't even say why I got the impression of femininity from her, except that I knew without a shadow of a doubt that she was female.

Looking at her, I was struck with a feeling so intense that it was almost a vision. There was a feeling of the wind blowing over vast steppes, stars wheeling in the sky against the backdrop of the ever-shifting moon, the slow passing of years dragging on into a blur as the stars themselves shifted in their orbits. There was a feeling of power, so vast and fundamental that it permeated the entire island. I'd been smelling it since I first set foot within the castle, I just hadn't recognized its source.

I blinked, and stared at her, almost dazed. I couldn't remember having ever seen this much power in one place before. Excepting Loki and Coyote, probably, but they were a hell of a lot more subtle about it.

"Come in," she said. Her voice was a rasp, sending chills down my spine; I shivered a little at the sound, involuntarily. "Sit down."

I obeyed, without even thinking about it. I had a guess, just the tiniest guess, about who this was, and if I was even close to right, there was no point in arguing with her.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

I stepped inside the room, wincing a little at how much silver there was. It was burning my feet a little, even through the boots, and I was itching within seconds. Kyra whined quietly with pain as she followed, but she followed. Both of the kitsune came in, and Snowflake was pressed tight against my shins, her fear humming in the back of my head. She'd picked up enough of my thoughts on this situation to be absolutely terrified of the person sitting in here.

I walked until I was facing her at a comfortable conversational distance, then sat, fully confident that there would be something for me to sit on by the time I got there.

I wasn't wrong. A wooden chair appeared underneath me, all hard angles and a bit too low for comfort. Similar chairs appeared for the two kitsune, while simple wooden benches were provided for the canines. Kyra jumped up gratefully; the silver was still intensely uncomfortable, but getting out of direct contact with it did a lot to limit the pain. A small wooden table appeared between me and the woman in black.

All of the wood was the same blacker-than-black color as her clothing, darker than even the finest ebony. This was no natural wood.

"Who am I?" the woman asked.

I swallowed hard. "I don't know," I said.

She reached out and cuffed me on the head. I never saw her move, but suddenly something hit me on the side of the head, and I was knocked sprawling to the ground. It wasn't painful, exactly—she wasn't hitting me to hurt—but it dazed me for a second, and being knocked to the silver floor wasn't doing me a whole lot of good.

I pushed myself back to my feet and sat down again. Notably, no one made any kind of complaint, not even Snowflake. We were *that* scared of this creature. "What was that for?" I asked, making sure that my tone was in no way aggressive or whining.

"Don't play stupid with me," she rasped. "You may not know, but you can guess."

I swallowed again. "Yeah," I admitted. "From what I've seen...yeah. I'm guessing you're the eldest queen of the Midnight Court."

She inclined her cowed head very, very slightly. "Correct," she said in that same rasping voice.

I shivered again, not so much from the voice as from what she'd *said*.

The Crone of Midnight. The Grandmother of the Unseelie Sidhe.

I was talking to one of the scariest beings in existence. The eldest Queen of the Midnight Court. This was the oldest and most powerful Faerie Queen from the more violent, predatory side of Faerie. Every wicked stepmother, every crone in the woods, every witch that lured the children in for her dinner, every hag in every fairy tale...they were all, in the end, just echoes of this. They were all

pretenders to her throne. She was the eldest and greatest, everything they aspired to be. She was a force of nature as much as a person, so feared that I'd never met a single person who would so much as *speak her name*.

And she was sitting here talking to me.

Great, I thought sourly. And here I thought declaring war on Scáthach was going to be the most suicidal Sidhe-related thing I did today.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but why are you here?"

"So ungrateful," she rasped. "Do you so soon forget the favors of the past? Or did you think you found your way here by chance? Did you imagine that it was so easy to reach this sanctum?"

"It's not that I'm ungrateful, ma'am," I said. "It's that I've had some experience with such things. In my experience, favors are seldom free, especially when granted by someone of your stature. Such things have consequences."

"Clever child," she said. Teeth glinted for a moment in the darkness under her hood; a smile, presumably, although I couldn't see for sure. "Too clever by half."

I swallowed again. "Are you here to keep me from killing Scáthach, then?"

"There has always been a Maiden of Midnight," she said, not answering the question. "Once it was Nemain. Now it is Scáthach. One day it will be another. What care have I for such things?"

"Nemain," I said. "That's one of the Morrigan. The old Irish war goddesses." Or goddess, depending; I was never totally clear on whether it was three deities or one with three aspects.

Teeth glinted within the hood again. Grandmother Midnight said nothing.

"Okay," I said. "That is incredibly disturbing."

"You know so little," she rasped. "So little of what passes about you. So little of the forces which move you. Give me your hands."

I hesitated. "Will you give them back?"

"That remains to be seen," she said, with the faintest trace of black, grim amusement in her voice. "Give them, or I will take them."

I shrugged and extended my hands towards her, across the table. Again, I never saw her move, but she reached out and snatched them, pulling them close. I was tugged forward, almost falling out of the chair; I had to be almost twice her size, but when she pulled, there was no question of me resisting. I could come with, or I could have my arms ripped from their sockets; there wasn't much in between.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

Somehow, her own hands were still concealed beneath the sleeves of the robe. I could feel them, though, as she held my wrists. Her skin was deathly cold, chilly even to *me*; her fingers were skinny as though there was nothing there but skin and bone. Her nails were long, and sharp.

She tugged my gauntlets off and tossed them carelessly aside, seeming not to care about the iron in the metal in them, then held my hands up before her cowl, examining them closely.

Finally, after an agonizingly long few moments, she let me go. "You are your grandfather's child," she said. "Tell me, child, do you wish to know your fate? Would you know your future?"

I started to answer, then hesitated. "I don't know," I said. "I think the only way I could know the answer to that is if I already knew my fate. Once that happens it's already too late."

Teeth gleamed again in the darkness under her hood. "And you show wisdom as well as cunning," she murmured in her quiet rasp. She produced a deck of jet-black cards and set them in the center of the table. "Cut," she said.

I stared at them. The backs of the cards were unmarked, pure black of the same sort as her clothing. "No, thanks," I said.

"Cut," she said again, more firmly. I shrugged and took one card off the deck, setting it to the side. I got a glimpse of the face of the card as I did.

It looked the same as the back, utterly black without marking or meaning.

Grandmother Midnight smiled again, momentarily, teeth gleaming for an instant before all was dark again. "Interesting choice," she said, slipping the card to the bottom of the deck. Then she flipped the top card lightly off the deck, letting it slide across the table until it came to a rest in front of Katsunaga.

The black face of the card glimmered with light, and then a faint tracery of silver spread across it, lines as thin as spiderwebs branching out across it. They faded in and out, making it hard to see quite what they were hinting at, but there were hints. Here was the suggestion of a sword, there a hint of scales.

"Justice," the crone said simply. The word had a heaviness to it, the simple finality of a tombstone. Katsunaga bowed his head silently; it was impossible to say what he felt at this.

Another card slid across the table, coming to rest in front of Kyra. Again, silver light sparked and flickered across the black surface of the card, alternately revealing and concealing. There were hints of wolves, of water, suggestions of a moon shifting from sliver to circle and back again.

"The Moon. How apropos." Kyra whined quietly in response, but I couldn't have said quite why.

Another card, this one sliding to Kusunoha. This time the light traced out suggestions of a staff, a key, a pillar.

"The Hierophant. Is that a kindness for you, or a cruelty?"

Kuzunoha just smiled in reply. Her tails flickered briefly through a complex series of movements before going still again. The black hood nodded, very slightly, before reaching for the deck again.

The next card went to Snowflake. This time the light traced out suggestions of something slightly more abstract. There were odd geometric figures, broken lines and odd angles, a hint of something that might have been meant to represent fire.

"The Tower. All things fall in time." Again, the card was met with silence.

Finally, one of the cards slid to a stop in front of me. Silver light outlined a skull, a scythe, hints of a robe. Even before the word, the nature of the card was clear.

"Death. But not for you, jarl."

I looked at the card, then looked back to Grandmother Midnight. "I'm surprised you would use Tarot cards, ma'am. They seem too young for you."

"Young things may still serve a purpose," she said. Then she laughed.

It was a horrible sound. It caught in her throat and worked its way out only with difficulty, as though straining against its confines. It slipped through the air with the delicate grace of a cat stalking its prey, and brushed against me as tenderly as an assassin's dagger laid gently against my spine.

I shuddered and pressed myself back in the chair at the sound, just to be slightly further away from that laughter.

"You seek the death of a Queen of Faerie," she said, while the echoes of that hideous laughter were still fading. "This is far beyond your means. I would have thought you would know this, child; you have seen the unbridled power of a god before."

"Those were greater deities," I said. "Ancient even by the standards of the gods. Scáthach is the least of the Queens of the Unseelie Court. She's not even on the same *planet* as them in terms of power."

"Even so, this is not a fight that you can hope to win."

"Right now, ma'am, I don't give a damn. I came here knowing it was likely to be a suicide mission. I'm okay with that. There comes a point where you have to draw a line and say to hell with the consequences. I'm not willing to let her get away with this."

"Indeed." Grandmother Midnight considered me for a moment. "I could offer you a share of my power for the time. You could be my champion in this matter."

I froze. "I thought the eldest Queens didn't keep mortal champions," I said, very, very carefully.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

I thought I saw another gleam of teeth within the cowl. "In the past, we have not."

I swallowed. "So...why would you now?"

"My reasons are my own, boy, as they always are. The offer has been made; that is all you need know."

I thought for a second. This was...power on a level I couldn't even conceive of. Carraig was only *Scáthach's* champion, and it had still turned him from a normal man into a killing machine that could take on an entire army and walk away laughing. To be Grandmother Midnight's champion would mean...I couldn't even wrap my head around that. It would be the kind of power that could go toe-to-toe with the major players. In one step, it would take fighting *Scáthach* from suicide to a reasonably fair match.

"No," I said.

"No?"

"No," I said. "Favors have consequences, ma'am. I don't think I like the consequences of this one."

"In that case," she said, "good luck surviving the next few hours. You're likely to need it. Take your cards with you. You'll find them useful eventually."

"Wait," I said, before she could stand. "How do I wake Aiko up?"

She sighed, a sound nearly as upsetting as her laugh. There was ancient hatred and contempt and weariness and bleak amusement all bound up into a single emotion so complex I couldn't begin to name it, but I could *feel* it in her sigh. "Humans," she said disgustedly. "Always looking past the obvious."

Then she grabbed me by the neck and physically threw me into the hospital bed with Aiko. My helmet flew off and knocked over a stand of crystal tubes, and my head hit the wall, dazing me. I thought it might have knocked a tooth loose, and it had *definitely* split my lip; I could taste blood. I slumped forward momentarily, and my face brushed against Aiko's.

After a couple of seconds, I collected myself enough to push myself back to a half-sitting position, bracing myself against the next attack.

It didn't come.

A moment later, Aiko's eyes opened. For a moment there was fear in them, a blind, mad, animal terror that overwhelmed all rational thought.

Then her features returned to their usual devil-may-care mask, hiding any hint of fear beneath. Her tongue flickered out to taste my blood on her lips, and she grinned.

Emrys Vaughn

"Damn," she said, her voice weak but still recognizably *hers*. "I gotta say, of all the ways to wake up from that fucking nightmare, naked with you on top of me? Not bad."

Chapter Fifteen

"So let me get this straight," Aiko said, putting on the armor I'd carried in. It was too big for her, though it had been perfectly tailored before. She'd lost a lot of weight since the last time I saw her. "This faerie pretended to be me for almost four months?"

"Yep."

"Man," she said. "Fuck her. With great sincerity. Forward, backward and sideways. With her *pants* on."

"I think Kuzunoha kinda took care of that one for you," I said dryly.

There was a momentary stillness. "Yeah," Aiko said, very delicately. "I guess she did."

I winced a little. Aiko had been awake for almost fifteen minutes now, and she and her mother hadn't exchanged a single word, hadn't even really looked directly at each other. It was incredibly awkward and uncomfortable, but at the same time, there was something oddly comforting about it. *This* was the kind of dysfunction I expected from Aiko.

"Are you feeling good to stand?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I'm fine, Winter. Really." She then stood up, and immediately proved herself a liar when she stumbled sideways and had to lean on me for support.

"Okay," I said, holding her up. "We ready to keep going?"

Katsunaga grabbed his tarot card off the table and then nodded. He'd been the last one to take his card. Even Kyra and Snowflake had theirs, tucked neatly into their armor in places where they weren't likely to be damaged or lost.

Aiko didn't have a card. I tried not to worry about that.

"Where are we going?" Aiko asked.

"Well," I said, "that kind of depends on you. I mean, *my* thought was to go and carve Scáthach into itty bitty pieces for this. But if you'd rather just go home and take a nap, I'll understand."

"Screw that," she said cheerfully. "I'm inclined to get *creative* with her. I mean, at this point, she's earned it. I don't care if you're a Faerie Queen, there are things you just don't do."

"That was kind of my thought too," I agreed. "What about you? Are you coming with us, or do you want out now?"

"I think that you've already phrased it better than I could," Kuzunoha said. She was toying with her card, turning it over in her fingers. Both sides were pure, unblemished black now, no hint of silver

light to show the nature of the card. "There are lines one doesn't cross. There are rules one doesn't break. When Scáthach took my daughter, she flew in the face of those rules." Katsunaga nodded vigorously.

"Nice to think that you care about me," Aiko said, her voice very tight. "Even if it is just as a status symbol."

Kuzunoha opened her mouth to reply, then just sighed and closed it instead.

Fuck that noise, Snowflake said. Her voice was tense and excited in the back of my head, hungry and thrilling with anticipation. *Nobody fucks with us and gets away with it. What more is there to say?*

Kyra just looked at me and nodded. I wasn't sure whether she was agreeing with Snowflake, or whether she'd even heard the husky. But either way, the message was clear. She wasn't backing out either.

"All right, then," I said. "You guys go ahead. We'll catch up in a minute. Meet us at the top of the stairs. I'm pretty sure we're going to want a different entrance for the next part."

There were a few doubtful looks at that, but they went without arguing, leaving Aiko and I alone in that room. I helped her out more slowly, just to get away from the silver in that room. The hallway was much more comfortable.

"So what's this about?" she asked, leaning against the wall to keep her balance. "Inappropriately timed sexual hijinks? 'Cause if so I'm down with that, it's about time it was you suggesting that in the middle of a rescue instead of me, but I don't know about a minute. That doesn't seem like enough to make up for four months."

I sighed. "How did I ever think that fae was you?" I asked rhetorically. "I don't think she said a single thing that disturbed me in that whole time. No, Aiko, that isn't what I was thinking. Believe it or not, I had a practical purpose behind this delay." I pulled out the toys I'd bought at the market. I knew she'd recognize their purpose.

She stared. "Okay," she said at last, in a voice that wasn't nearly as cheerful as it had been a moment earlier. "*Please* tell me you aren't thinking what I think you are. Because if so, I really think we might be better off going back to my idea. At least then we'd die happy."

"No," I said. "For once, my plan is actually less suicidal than you think it is."

I explained what I was planning to do. It didn't take long; this was actually a very simple plan, so simple the term *plan* was almost too much to represent it.

By the time I finished, she was grinning. "Okay," she said. "Do it."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

The hallway felt shorter on the way back. I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was just that it was done. There was still facing off with Scáthach to look forward to, which I didn't, but we'd gotten Aiko out. Even if we all died now, I'd know that I hadn't completely failed her.

She was obviously in bad shape, but once we were up and moving she wasn't quite as badly off as I'd thought she was. We weren't setting any speed records, and she had to lean on me occasionally, but she was up and moving under her own power, even wearing armor.

The stairs were harder up than down, reminding me that I wasn't in the best condition myself. I was tired, and injured, and I was starting to come up against my own physical limits.

Again, though, it seemed shorter than the staircase we descended to reach that level. It only took a few minutes for us to make it to the top, and we weren't exactly sprinting up the stairs.

And that was when I got the next unpleasant surprise of the evening. The room we were in wasn't where we'd been before. Instead of a tangled warren of narrow, lightless halls, we emerged into a massive open hall. From the way the air moved I could tell that the ceiling was only about fifty feet up, but there was some kind of magical illusion there, making it look like the night sky overhead, complete with a field of stars and a full moon. The light from the false moon illuminated the room reasonably well, although there were still deep shadows in the corners.

The people we'd sent up ahead were there, at least. That was a major plus, and one that I'd been seriously concerned about.

"What is this?" I asked. "Where are we?"

"The Queen's entrance hall, unless I'm mistaken," Kuzunoha said calmly.

"And we're here instead of where we went down because...why?"

"Space is a relative concept," she said. "This castle is the Maiden's sanctum, one of the great strongholds of the Midnight Court. In this place, their power is more than sufficient to influence space and time."

My heart sank. "She can keep us away from her, then."

"Oddly enough," Kuzunoha said, "that doesn't appear to be what's happening. She will be in her throne room, the seat of her power. We're closer than we were."

I processed that, then sighed. "You know what? I hate politics. Come on, I'm *really* in the mood to be cutting things into pieces."

Walking towards the door, I glanced back once. The staircase leading down into the bowels of the fortress was gone, just an open expanse of stone where it used to be. I wasn't surprised in the least. I had a *strong* suspicion that that staircase, up and down both, hadn't really been there. We had traveled by the will of a Faerie Queen, all right, but not Scáthach.

No, I was pretty sure our path had been smoothed by an older queen than that. We were doing the bidding of the Crone of Midnight, the Grandmother of the Unseelie Court. That old hag wanted us to make it to Scáthach, for whatever reason, and even in the younger queen's sanctum, Grandmother Midnight was the stronger of the two by several orders of magnitude. If they opposed, no one smart was betting on Scáthach's will to win out.

I hate politics.

The door out of the entry hall was surprisingly small. Still impressive by mortal standards, ten feet tall and covered in inscriptions in the same odd script we'd seen down in the prison room, but compared to the scale of the room, it felt underwhelming.

I opened it and then waited. It was dark on the other side, but I had tendrils extended through the air down the hallway, feeling for any disturbance.

As I'd predicted, only seconds later I felt something approaching. It was small and fast, tipped with silver, and if I'd been an idiot it might well have killed me. I had a pretty solid idea of what to expect here, though, so I reached out and swatted the arrow out of the air with one hand before it even came close to us.

"Oh, you're no fun," Carraig said, somewhere in the darkness in front of us.

"I'm surprised at you," I said. "That you would play along with something like this. I know we aren't friends, but I would have said you were an honorable man in your way."

"See, here's the thing," he said. "One of the hardest things for me to explain to someone from outside the Courts is the distinction between the role and the person. Now, Carraig might think this whole situation is fucking shameful. He might quite reasonably be disgusted at *numerous* aspects of what's happened. Scáthach's champion, on the other hand, has no such opinions."

"I understand," I said. "I really do."

"Yeah. Yeah, I thought you might. Look, turn around now and you can walk. I've got nothing against you, and no order saying I have to kill you."

"I can't do that," I said. "She crossed lines that I can't ignore. Back down, and you can walk. I've got nothing against you, and no reason to include you in my grievances against your queen."

"I can't do that," he said.

"Why not? You know that what she did was wrong. You *know* she's messed up."

"It isn't in me," he said. "I'm an old man, Winter. I've watched this world move on without me. I don't belong in it. I don't have a place in it anymore. It doesn't matter if she's wrong. She's my Queen."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"You really think you belong in the *Court*?" Aiko sounded incredulous.

"The Court is all I have," he said simply.

I sighed. "So it's like that, then."

"Looks like it," he agreed.

And then Carraig, the personal champion of the Maiden of the Unseelie Court and one of the most personally dangerous human beings in the world, started trying to kill me.

Chapter Sixteen

Given his choice, I knew that Carraig preferred to fight up close, with his sword. He enjoyed it more that way. But this was business, not pleasure, and he would be trying to kill us in the most practical and efficient way he could, not necessarily the one he liked. That meant a barrage of arrows from the darkness, too many for me to bat them away like I had earlier. He'd be using silver arrows, and he'd be using poisons.

I dealt with that attack the only way I could think of, with a trick I'd only used a couple of times before. I conjured up a wall of ice, blocking the hallway from edge to edge and thick enough to stop an arrow without any difficulty.

Or, at least, that's what I *tried* to do. The ice was slow in coming; I felt like the cold was far away. I called it and it came, but it was slow and clumsy, the frost spreading across the stone as lazily as if it were a summer day in the sunshine. There was no way it would be fast enough to keep us from resembling a group of porcupines.

Kuzunoha saved our asses. With a gesture and a quiet word, she filled the hall with a curtain of white-hot fire. The little frost I'd been able to spread burst into steam in an instant just from being near the flames, and the stone of the walls was glowing, but I couldn't feel the heat from where I stood; it was very tightly controlled, unnaturally so.

A handful of arrowheads made it through the flames. But they were misshapen, no longer anything like as sharp as they once were, and they were tumbling through the air without much in the way of direction. Most of them bounced off my armor harmlessly; one hit Kuzunoha, but as expected, her clothing was a great deal more than it looked like, and the arrowhead had no more luck there than it did with my armor.

I started to turn, knowing what Carraig's next move would be, but Aiko beat me to it. She spun and snatched the arrow coming from behind us out of the air with one hand, making it look effortless. She twirled the arrow in her fingers once before flicking it aside.

"Damn," she said. "Winter, that trick is a hell of a lot more fun than you make it look."

"Focus, please," I said, stepping away from the doorway and looking around. The entry hall was dim, but Scáthach's vanity was working against her now. The illusion of the night sky overhead gave me something to work with.

There. A patch of stars was occluded by something that looked suspiciously like a person pressed against the ceiling. He would be lining up his shot carefully this time, hoping to take us down with surprise and precision now that the initial barrage had failed.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

I pretended that I hadn't seen him, walking back towards the center of the room a little. That took me closer to Carraig, but not directly towards his position, hopefully keeping him from suspecting anything.

Then, once I was close enough, I suddenly pulled out one of my few remaining stored spells and threw it at him. At almost the same instant, he loosed the arrow at me.

The spell detonated on impact and shattered most of Andromeda, but Carraig was long gone by then. His arrow hit me, but clattered off my armor without doing any real harm.

A no-score game, except that I had a very limited number of those spells. I had a strong suspicion that his ammunition wasn't limited in that way.

And now we needed to find him again.

Before I could even try, I felt another stirring in the air, and barely managed to slow the passage of the arrow enough to reach out and knock it down.

We couldn't keep this up. Sooner or later, we'd miss one, and he'd get lucky enough to hit a weak point in the armor. Once that happened, it was all over but the crying.

"We need to light the room!" I shouted to Kuzunoha, barely slipping aside from another arrow. "Bright as you can get it!"

The kitsune nodded and gestured. She began to burn with a pure silver light again, within seconds brighter than the false moon overhead. For my part, I pulled out a couple more stored spells from my pockets. These weren't weapons, and normally I would never have wasted pocket space on them, but it hadn't exactly been a surprise that we'd want our own light within the sanctum of the Maiden of Midnight. I threw the crystals into the corners of the room, where they cracked against the walls and began to emit a bright light of their own.

I felt an odd, creeping despair as I did. We could light the room, but we couldn't kill the darkness. Every spell we cast, every light we made, they just made the shadows that much deeper. In addition to being a depressingly apt metaphor for reality as a whole, that was distinctly unfortunate for our immediate future. Carraig walked through darkness, and to my knowledge the only way to stop him was to take away the darkness.

I growled to myself. This wasn't working. We were fighting Carraig's way, and we were losing. We would *inevitably* lose, if we kept this up. He was built to fight this battle, everything about his powers and his training designed to hunt and kill his prey from the shadows. We couldn't win against him. It just couldn't be done.

"So much for honor," I shouted, backing up until my back was against the wall. The others came with me, until we were all pressed against the edge of the hall. He couldn't appear behind us, at least. "Shooting at us from the dark? Is that really the best you can do?"

The only answer was another arrow. I thickened and pushed the air it was traveling through, slowing it down, and Snowflake bit it out of the air.

Shit. He wasn't interested in talking. That made it hard to lure him in.

Another arrow came in, and this time it was easier for me to catch it. I looked at it for a moment, and then an idea occurred to me.

"Take this," I said quietly, handing it over to Aiko. "Everyone get something to throw. On my signal, aim for the areas of darkness."

I waited long enough to grab another arrow out of the air. It was bizarrely easy. I remembered the first time I saw Carraig, catching arrows in flight had been incredibly hard, such an achievement that I had been shocked and disturbed that I was capable of it. Now, it felt almost casual.

The next time, I focused less on being ready for an arrow, more on finding Carraig before he could shoot. It was a risk—if he got the shot off, I probably wouldn't be able to stop it—but a calculated one. I had to do *something* to change the nature of the fight, and if that meant taking a risk, so be it. It wasn't like I had time to think of a better plan.

There, I thought, focusing on one of the patches of darkness between the various lights. It was a little too dark, it had a little too much *substance* to be just a patch of shadow.

I didn't hesitate for an instant, snapping my arm out and throwing the arrow I was holding at that spot. It wasn't a spectacular throw, certainly nothing near actually shooting someone with a bow, but it wasn't terrible.

In the same instant, Carraig sent an arrow back at us. I couldn't react in time to slow or deflect it with magic, and as fast as I was, I couldn't grab an arrow out of the air without some kind of assistance. I twisted desperately aside and it slipped past me, missing by less than an inch.

Carraig vanished before the arrow I'd thrown reached him, of course. That had been a pitiful attempt, unlikely to connect even against a normal person; against a champion of the Courts, it was about as serious of a threat as a falling anvil.

But I wasn't the only one who threw something. Instants after I threw my arrow, at about the same time he disappeared, all three kitsune hurled their own weapons, a mixture of knives and arrows.

Normally, that would have been an idiotic move. But just now, the number of places Carraig could reappear in was sharply limited by the intensity of the lighting in that hall. With three people throwing two sharp things each, the odds of someone getting lucky and aiming for the right spot started to look pretty reasonable.

And not even Carraig was fast enough to reappear, realize that he was in danger, and vanish again before the weapons reached him.

There was a brief, pregnant pause. Then Carraig said, "Nice trick." He sounded somewhat pained.

I fully expected that to be a deception, and for more arrows to follow the words as soon as we got complacent. But a few seconds later, Carraig walked out into the light, holding the bow in his left hand. One of Katsunaga's knives was embedded in that shoulder, almost to the hilt. If it was an act, it was a damned good one. I could smell the blood.

"Have it your way, then," Scáthach's champion said. He let the bow drop to the floor, and shrugged off a quiver of arrows from his other shoulder, letting that hit the ground as well. He'd shot more arrows at us than that quiver should have been able to hold, but it was still full. Typical fae bullshit.

He drew a short bronze sword with his right hand, and a nasty-looking iron dagger with his left. He spun each weapon once and then started pacing forward. If the knife in his shoulder bothered him at all, it wasn't immediately obvious.

Well, we'd gotten him out to fight directly. That would have been more comforting if I hadn't seen him fight before.

I stepped away from the wall, drawing Tyrfing. I could see the others moving with me in my peripheral vision, spreading out to surround him. None of us looked to be injured, which was a nigh-miraculous piece of good fortune. I'd been sure that the arrow I dodged had hit someone behind me, but apparently it just shattered on the wall.

I had Tyrfing. Aiko had her wakizashi, which I'd carried in; she had her tanto too, but her hands were still a bit unsteady, and I wasn't surprised that she'd decided not to use two blades at once. Kusunoha was holding her katana in both hands, and Katsunaga had a pair of long knives. Kyra and Snowflake both bared their teeth eagerly, hungry.

Taken as a whole, it seemed like a ridiculous degree of overkill. Way more than could be necessary for one man.

But Carraig was hands-down the best fighter I'd ever seen, full stop. There were no qualifiers there, no maybes. He'd spent the last few thousand years dedicating himself to violence, and he carried the mantle of Scáthach's champion, making him stronger and faster and tougher than a person had any right to be.

There were six of us, and we were all practiced and lethal fighters in our own right. But I had the sinking feeling that we were still the underdog here.

He reached us and cut at my head. It was a simple, brutal sort of attack, without any subtlety or artistry to it, and if it connected it would be lethal, instantly, even with my armor. That, more than anything else, convinced me that this was a real fight. There was no playing around, no striking to wound so as to make the fight last. Carraig wanted me dead, right here, right now.

I blocked his attack. I'd gotten stronger since the last time we fought, and I knew exactly how hard he could hit. I still barely managed to keep my grip on Tyrfing. He pulled his sword back and cut at me again. This time I knocked the blade up and away, rather than trying to block it outright, and even so I had to give ground under the sheer force of his swing.

At the same time, with his other hand, he fended off the others. All of them, with one hand. I watched it happen, and I *still* wasn't sure how the hell he did it. He parried Kusunoha's katana with his dagger, in such a way that it fouled Katsunaga's movement, keeping the younger kitsune from closing in far enough to attack with his daggers. One foot snaked out and tripped Aiko up, and at the same time he sidestepped both Kyra and Snowflake, their teeth closing on empty air.

For my part, I wasn't even considering attacking. It was all I could do to stay alive in the face of his assault. He was stronger than me, he was faster than me, and he was so much more skilled than me that it wasn't even funny. The only advantage I had, and the only reason I wasn't dead in the first two seconds of the fight, was that I wasn't alone, and he had to put some of his attention to keeping my allies off him.

He kept attacking me, moving through the crowd so easily it seemed like it wasn't even there. They slashed and cut and stabbed and bit at him, and he slipped aside from every strike without even really seeming to notice it. I kept deflecting his attacks, but I was still giving ground, and there was no question of a counterattack. If I took the time to so much as look at him funny, I'd get stabbed, and I had the nasty suspicion that my armor wouldn't do jack shit here. His sword was comparable to *Tyrfing*. Armor, even world class armor like what I was wearing, wasn't something you wanted to rely on against a weapon like that.

I was still uninjured, but I was getting dangerously close to the wall again. Earlier having my back to the wall had been a blessing, keeping him from coming at me from behind, but now it would be a death sentence. I was barely keeping myself alive with a full range of motion, where I could retreat before almost every attack. Take that away, and it would only be seconds before he gutted me.

The rest of my group was behind him now, and they should have been taking him to pieces. But he was just so freaking *quick*. He was in constant motion, bobbing and weaving, never still for even a heartbeat. It made him a damned hard target. A couple of times they managed to hit him, grazing him with a thrust or slash, but none of it was affecting him any more than the dagger still stuck in his shoulder. Kyra looked like she was going to take a bite out of his leg at one point, but he casually punched her in the face with his off hand and she hit the ground, dazed. She was up again in seconds, but the opportunity was gone.

It was unbelievable. He was alone, outnumbered and surrounded, already wounded, and yet he kept fighting, unwilling to abandon his oath to a queen he didn't even agree with. In a way, it was admirable, almost heroic.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

In another way, of course, he was about to kill me, and odds were good that he would then proceed to kill everyone else here. The last I checked, that was an undesirable outcome, so I had to do something about it.

And that meant I had to take another risk.

Up to that point, I'd been fighting a strictly defensive battle. I hadn't so much as taken a swing at him. I'd relied on my allies to take him down. And it wasn't working.

It was time for a change of plans.

Against a lesser foe, I might have left an opening, lured them into overextending to take advantage of it. Against Carraig, that was suicide, plain and simple. Any opening was too much opening with him.

Instead, I just took one moment to counterattack, slashing at his chest. He slipped forward in the instant I was vulnerable, and thrust his sword in under my ribs.

Against a lesser foe, that might have been the end of it. He stabbed me, I cut him, and the fight ended there. Against Carraig, that wasn't how things worked. Even while running me through, he had plenty of attention to spare for blocking my attack with his other hand.

But, and this was the essence of my plan, in order to do so he had to be focused on me. For that one instant, he wasn't paying attention to anyone else.

And they, unlike me, could make him pay for it.

Snowflake lunged in and bit down on his leg, breaking and tearing it. Bones crushed under her jaws, and flesh shredded between her teeth. He screamed at that, and started to fall; apparently not even he could ignore that degree of damage. Aiko's blade batted his dagger away in the moment of shock, while her father darted in to catch his other wrist between two knives. They snapped shut like a pair of shears, and suddenly Carraig was missing a hand.

The champion of the fae hit the ground between Snowflake and Kyra, disarmed and crippled. The rest of the fight was quick and messy, and at the end of it you'd have been hard pressed to identify the remains as belonging to a human being.

I didn't pay too much attention to that. I had more pressing matters to occupy myself with, most notably an acute case of stabbing. More specifically, the one I should have had, and inexplicably didn't.

Carraig had had a clear shot at me, and his blade had slipped through my armor without slowing at all. I should have a nice big hole in the liver, pouring blood out onto the floor fast enough that even I couldn't shrug off or recover from the wound. Instead, all I had was a thin red line, barely even parting the skin on my flank, just under my ribs.

"He missed," I said, looking at the little bit of blood on my fingertips.

"Carraig doesn't miss," Aiko said instantly.

"Yeah," I said. "I know. But the fact remains that I'm not actually dying, over here."

I looked back at Carraig. He was dead. He had to be dead. You couldn't lose that much blood, you couldn't be missing that many pieces and not be dead.

But for just an instant, I'd have sworn that Scáthach's champion winked at me from his ruined face before his eyes closed for good.

So died Carraig, a man with more honor than sense, who gave his life for a Queen he never loved, but who in the end proved himself to be more than just a champion of the Midnight Court.

Chapter Seventeen

Scáthach looked smaller than I remembered.

Before, I'd always approached her with the attitude that she was so far beyond me that a comparison was a waste of time. I'd seen her as a force of nature, something to be placated rather than opposed, with any thought of actually fighting her instantly dismissed.

Seen without that attitude, she was...less impressive. She was still tall for a woman, taller than I was, but she didn't loom over me nearly as much as I remembered her doing. She was beautiful, her features as perfect and remote as a marble statue, but I could detect a degree of uncertainty there as well. I'd never have dared to use the term to describe her before, but her expression was actually *petulant*, like a spoiled child denied her own way.

Of her power over me, how much had I given her, by my own attitude? I suspected it was a lot of it. Oh, she was still vastly stronger than I was—Grandmother Midnight had straight-up told me so, and she was neither capable of lying nor likely to be mistaken on this topic.

But she was neither omnipotent nor infallible. I could defy her, and while I might lose, that wasn't the only possible outcome.

We walked into her throne room, and found her sitting on the throne. It was much like the throne I'd seen her use before, a massive piece of crystal like an unbelievably large chunk of gem-quality amethyst. The violet crystal flared out behind her like a cobra's hood, simultaneously providing a dramatic backdrop to the person sitting in it and making her look insignificant by comparison.

It occurred to me to wonder what that might feel like to Scáthach. A palpable, ever-present reminder that the office she held was more important than she was? It seemed likely. I thought I got her a little better now, between having been a jarl and having seen something of how the Midnight Court functioned. I'd thought of her as a titanic force, but now I could see that she was if anything more of a middle manager. She had pressure from above and resentment from below, and she lived every day with the keen awareness that she could be replaced as the Maiden of the Midnight Court without the other queens giving a damn.

It didn't excuse what she'd done, and I had no intention of forgiving her for it. But I could sympathize with her a little more. I wouldn't take that job for the world.

"I take it you killed Carraig," she said calmly as we walked into the room. It was a vast hall, the ceiling lost in shadows overhead, the edges of the room fading into darkness. A narrow strip of light illuminated the path from the door to Scáthach's throne.

"Yeah," I said. "Do you even care?"

"He came to me seeking death," she said. "Should I cry now that he has finally found it?"

It wasn't an answer, but I didn't press her on it. I was self-aware enough to know that there was nothing she could say now that would really satisfy me. I reached into my cloak instead, snapping a piece of slate between my fingers.

Aiko, understandably enough, was less willing to let Scáthach off the hook. "Why?" she snarled, gripping her wakizashi so tightly that her knuckles were white. "Why the hell would you do this?"

"Does it matter anymore?" Scáthach asked, leaning back idly. She was draped across the throne now, lounging with her head on one armrest and her feet hanging over the other.

"It matters to me," Aiko snapped. "You stole four months of my life, and did a hell of a number on the rest of it. I think an explanation is the *least* you owe me for that."

The queen shrugged. It was an apathetic shrug, disinterested. "As you wish," she said. "I can see which way the wind blows, oh jarl. I knew that I was being used. I could see how the story would end. I simply chose not to comply with their desires."

"You play the victim very well," Kuzunoha said. Her voice was calmer than her daughter's, sweet and polite, but I could hear the edge underneath, the raw anger burning just below the surface. "Your hand was forced. You were compelled by circumstance. You did nothing that would not have happened anyway. Cast yourself as a victim if you please, but your actions are still your own. You chose to do this. You made the choice to cross lines."

"Don't pretend you understand me, fox," Scáthach said coldly. "You are not even a player in this drama. You have no part to play here. You have no place, here or anywhere. You never had anything to say on your own behalf, You are a servant of a dead god, a messenger without a message to carry. Your time has passed; kindly leave this conversation to those who still have some relevance to the world."

Well, damn. I glanced over at Kuzunoha to see whether she was about to start trying to claw Scáthach's eyes out, but apparently not even that provocation could really crack her composure. The nine-tailed kitsune's expression went blank and cold, and her posture stiffened slightly, but beyond that there was no reaction.

"So," Scáthach said, her vivid green eyes focusing on me again. An odd, unsettling smile played about her lips. "What shall it be, jarl? Will you take your lover and go? Or do you think to demand recompense from me, in exchange for the perceived crime that you accuse me of?"

I looked at her for several seconds. "Do you remember," I said at last, "when I made my bargain with you a few years ago, I turned down your first offer. I told you then that there were some things that were off limits. When you told me that you'd wake Aiko, the one that was actually your impostor, I told you the same thing. I told you that she was off limits, no questions asked, not negotiable. I straight up told you that if you pushed me on that it would be one step too far. Do you remember that?"

There was a long, long moment of silence. "I remember," she said, finally. Her voice had an odd tone to it, something I couldn't quite place. In a human, I might have called it regret. Even if I thought

Scáthach was capable of that emotion, though, this wasn't quite right for it. There was another note to it, something subtler.

"So why do it?" I asked. "Why cross that line? Why couldn't you just leave things be? All you had to do was stay away from that one thing, the *one* thing I told you not to mess with, and things could have been just fine. So *why* did you have to push it?" My voice rose as I spoke, until I was almost screaming by the end of it.

Scáthach seemed totally unfazed. "I am what I am, jarl," she said calmly. "We cannot change our nature by wishing. In the end, we can all of us only be what we are."

I sighed and nodded, feeling suddenly very, very tired. "Yeah," I said. "I guess you're right. And I guess we both know what happens next. I'm as bound by my nature as you are by yours."

"Yes," she said pensively. "I suppose you are. I want you to know that I never harbored any ill will for either of you, children. Had it been my choice, I would not have harmed you. But we all march to another's beat in this matter. You and I were always going to reach this point, jarl. To apologize for this would be neither warranted nor deserved."

Then she raised one hand and snapped her fingers. It was a small gesture, and a small sound, fading into the darkness almost instantly.

The result was immediate. Lights came on in the hall, bright silvery light like a half-dozen full moons shining down on us. And with that light, I could see what the darkness had hidden from me.

The room was full of monsters. Packed, wall to wall, with only a small space around the path left clear. There were Sidhe, sharp and lovely as well-honed swords, with cruel smiles on their lips. There were goblins, small misshapen creatures with too-large teeth and claws, grinning and gnashing their teeth. There were bogeymen, tall and slender things half-seen out of the corner of my eye, lurking at the edges of the shadows that still remained in the room. There were kobolds, ugly fae the size of children that walked wreathed in fire and dark magics and smelled of blood and secrets. There were rusalki, beautiful young women with their long wet hair hanging down over their faces. There were redcaps, ugly fae with metal-toed boots and bloody hats.

I stared. I'd been expecting something like this, but still. It was an impressive sight.

A pair of creatures stepped up behind Scáthach, one to either side of her. To her left was a tall, stooped hag, something that looked like an old woman until you looked close. Her hands were iron claws, long and sharp, and her teeth were jagged and too large, more appropriate to a shark than anything human. On the other side was what looked like a human boy in an expensive, if antiquated, red suit.

"Jarl," Scáthach said, not looking away from me. "This is Black Annis, and the child is Hinzelmann."

Wonderful. Just *wonderful*. Both of them were famous enough that *I'd* heard of them, and neither one was anything pleasant. Black Annis was a hag, the sort that liked to eat children and wasn't picky about how she got them; Hinzelmann was a truly ancient kobold, who might appear benevolent at first but could turn vicious at a moment's notice.

Either of those two was probably a match for me, and then some. Add in the army of lesser fae, some of whom were probably *lesser* only by comparison to the insanely powerful ones in front of me, and Scáthach herself, and I was about as far out of my depth as I'd ever been.

Then I noticed something else, and grinned. It was hard to say quite what the feeling was; it was something that I'd never have noticed if I hadn't known to look for it, and even then I suspected it was only possible because I was on the Otherside. The closest analogue I could think of was something scratching at the door, except that the *door* in question was more fundamental and abstract than any physical object.

"Finally," I said, grinning. "Kuzunoha, could you get the door, please?"

The kitsune looked at me oddly, but she gestured slightly, all of her tails moving as she did. The silvery light around her strengthened, and I could smell her magic on the air, fox touched with ginger and cinnamon.

That scent strengthened over the next several seconds, and I began to notice another as well, something cold and hungry and flavored with freshly spilled blood. Scáthach and her army just stood and watched, apparently content to wait and see where this was going.

Then, with a palpable release of tension, the force holding the Way closed shattered. The hole appeared in the world, leading off in a direction I couldn't place or name. A wind rose up all at once, blowing out of the Way as fierce and cold as if it had come down off the slopes of the Transantarctic Mountains. Snow flurries blew in with it, momentarily blocking my view.

When the snow cleared again, most of the clear space in the hall was no longer clear. It was full of jötnar, and more were pouring out of the Way, filling in the last few gaps. Some of the giants were barely larger than a really tall man, while others were much larger, easily the match of the ogres in the fae crowd. Most of them looked human, but a handful were very, very different. Here was one with two heads, there one that looked like a bear from the neck up. A handful rode on ridiculously huge wolves, the same as I'd seen back in the Wild Hunt.

They had one thing in common, though. They were armed and armored with bright, gleaming steel. There was chainmail and plate armor, swords and shields, axes and spears and massive hammers, all of them steel. One whole group was carrying wooden shields and steel-tipped spears, and had no armor other than the wolf pelts they wore as cloaks. Some of those giants were shaking, and others seemed to be chewing on their own shields; I didn't miss the fact that even the other jötnar were giving them a wide berth.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

The jötnar were muttering, shouting, and roaring. They were speaking Old Norse, but I could pick out a word here and there, mostly names. Loki was frequently referenced, as were his children; Fenrisúlfr seemed to be the favorite, but I heard Jörmungandr and Hel referenced as well, and even Váli and Narfi were mentioned a couple of times. Odin's name was more common than I would have guessed, although they pronounced it differently than I was used to, almost more like Othin.

I was pretty sure I heard my own name in that mix, too. I optimistically wrote it off as my mishearing something, and decided to pretend that I hadn't actually heard it at all. The alternative was too disturbing to contemplate right now.

There was a moment of stunned stillness from the fae as the jötnar marched into the hall. Even Scáthach seemed shocked into silence.

That silence was broken when Skrímir stepped up to face Scáthach, only a few dozen feet separating them. The master of Utgard had the skin of a polar bear thrown around his shoulders, and an axe as large as I was in his hand. An honor guard of jötnar accompanied him; they weren't as visually impressive as he was, but I had no doubt that they were absolutely lethal fighters. "So," he said, "one of my kin has a grievance against you." Skrímir's voice wasn't *loud*, exactly, but it was so *big* that it damn near shook the floor.

Scáthach glared at me for an instant, and if looks could kill, I'd have dropped dead where I stood. Then she looked back to Skrímir and smiled, smooth and sweet as honey. "I have no grievance with you, king of Utgard. This matter is between me and the jarl."

"That isn't how this works," the jotun said lazily. "See, the boy told me he has a legitimate grievance against you, and from what I heard here, I believe it. You went after one of his people, and you did it in about the least honorable way possible. You don't do that, Scáthach. Not to my people."

"And since when is he your people?" she said. Her voice was still sweet, but there was an ugly undertone to it now, something vicious and nasty. "The child is hardly of your blood, and he is more a liability to you than an asset."

"He drank my mead and took me as his liege," Skrímir said. "Maybe the Courts have lost their honor, but where I come from oaths still have meaning." He then sighed. "You really don't get it, do you?" he asked. "I don't *like* you, Scáthach. I don't like the way you operate, I don't like what you stand for. And now you try to screw one of my people over in about the most underhanded, despicable, cowardly, contemptible way I can think of, and you have the *gall* to tell me I should thank you for it?"

Scáthach nodded. "I understand what you are saying," she said. "Will you accept weregild as reparation?"

"No," he said, hefting his axe. "I don't think so. I don't care to take your reparations. I name you ergi, Scáthach. I call you a nothing."

When he said that, every single one of the jötnar in the hall went silent. Absolutely silent. Every single one of them. I wasn't sure quite what he'd just said about her—given that he'd used the Norse words, I was guessing the concepts didn't even have an equivalent that I could fully grasp. But from their reaction, I was pretty sure it was about the worst thing he could have called her.

"Well, then," she said. "I believe we're done talking now."

Chapter Eighteen

Technically, this wasn't the biggest fight I'd ever been in. That title went to the battle against the necromancer back in Russia. That had been literally global in scale, with the battlefield proper sprawling across miles.

But in a way, that fight had been *too* big to really register in an impressive way. It was too massive for me to take it all in or grasp the reality of what I was seeing. It was also hard to see, and I'd been effectively high on magic and the Wild Hunt for most of it, so it wasn't all that surprising that it hadn't quite seemed real.

This, on the other hand, was entirely real.

When Scáthach said the talking was over, nobody hesitated. The fae, in all their horrid and lovely varieties, threw themselves forward. Strange and confusing magic blazed in the air, things I didn't understand and couldn't fully perceive. Light blazed and pulsed in colors that didn't make sense, weapons were raised, and the fae screamed their war cries as they threw themselves into the fray. The high, ululating calls of the Sidhe, the mad cackling of the hags, the roaring of the goblins, the sad broken songs of the rusalki, the laughter and stamping feet of the redcaps, all blended together into a deafening cacophony.

Had it been just me there, I would have quailed before that noise. It would have left me trembling, and with reason; I'd gotten stronger over the years, but against this, I was nothing much.

Against a small army of jötnar, it was...insufficiently impressive.

The giants gave their answer, screaming and singing and roaring, gnashing their teeth and beating axes against shields, rapping spears on the floor. They actually drowned the faeries out, deafening me, and even the Sidhe paused at that, seeming to hesitate at the thought of fighting these lunatics.

Then they got over it, and the fighting started in earnest.

I couldn't really keep track of it. It was too big, and it was all around, to every side. Even overhead; sylphs flew above on their insectile wings, and jötnar swatted them down or threw spears of ice at them, tearing gaping holes in those wings.

Mostly I only got snapshots. The group of jötnar who had been chewing their shields rushed forward into the melee, howling like wolves and screaming something about Odin. They lashed out viciously, brutally, without any thought for their own defense. They were using their shields more as weapons than defensive tools, knocking the fae down and breaking their bones by main force. I watched as one of them lost his spear. He didn't even slow down, just crushed another goblin's skull with his fist and picked up the corpse, swinging it like a club.

On the other side, the fae pressed in. A group of Sidhe managed to make headway, moving with unnatural speed and grace as they cut down one jotun after another, and other fae were following them, goblins, an ogre. Then one of the jötnar, a female wearing a dark cloak rather than steel armor, struck a staff against the ground and said a line in Norse. I felt a surge of magic, dark and hostile, and all of those fae fell to the ground, screaming and writhing in agony.

Some of the fae tried to bring their own magic to bear, countering the jotun's seithr or attacking in return. But it didn't seem to be working. There was a *lot* of iron in that room now, and almost all of the jötnar were solidly encased in steel. Given time, the fae might have been able to deal with it; they were nothing if not resourceful, after all, and iron was a well-known weakness of theirs, something they would be prepared for an attacker to know about. But they didn't have time. They were in the middle of a fight, and by and large, they were losing.

All of that, though, faded from my awareness when Skrímir reached Scáthach. Because *that* was...well, it wasn't something to look away from.

Skrímir's honor guard peeled away as they got close. Two of them went to fight Black Annis, dodging in and out of reach of her iron claws, cutting into her with their weapons little by little. The rest of them spread out, holding off the lesser fae that would have moved in to interfere. They fought as fiercely as the rest of the jötnar, but at the same time there was strict discipline and a great deal of coordination there. They didn't slip, didn't advance too far, didn't interfere with each other's movements.

Hinzelmann was standing quietly to the side. His hands were clasped behind his back, and a quiet smile played around the corners of his lips. He still looked like a young child, but the look in his eyes was ancient and alien, and out of the corner of my eye I could see dark flames burning in their depths. I noticed that no one, not a single one of the fae *or* the jötnar, got within ten feet of the ancient kobold.

That left Skrímir and Scáthach dueling each other, and it was one of the most impressive things I'd ever seen. She had a long sword in one hand and a shield in the other, both made out of glittering crystal, though she'd been unarmed when we came in. He had just his axe, and disdained any shield or armor.

The Faerie Queen was faster, more graceful, and more precise than possibly anything I'd ever seen. She moved so fast that she was little more than a blur, her long black hair whipping around her. It was beautiful to watch, even more than usual for the fae. The Sidhe are never more beautiful than when they dance, and this was one of the greatest of the Sidhe in the purest, most intense dance there was. It was lovely beyond words, and the fact that she'd have cut me to ribbons in a matter of seconds just made it more so.

Indeed, had it been anyone other than Skrímir standing in front of her, she might have been winning.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

But it wasn't.

Skrýmir's fighting was not beautiful. It was not delicate. It didn't look like a dance. It wasn't that he was slow or clumsy, and it certainly wasn't that he wasn't skilled. It just looked like what it was: a huge, incredibly strong man trying to cut someone into pieces with an axe.

She was faster than he was. She was subtler than he was. But he was just as skilled as her, if in a very different sort of way, and he was far stronger. Thus far she'd dodged or deflected every strike of his axe, but it was obvious that if he could connect solidly with even a single stroke, it would all be over for her. Meanwhile, she'd cut him several times, but it didn't seem to matter. He was just too big and too tough and too relentless for the small, stinging wounds to matter.

I wanted to do something, to contribute something to the fight, but I wasn't sure how. Things were opening up a little more now, giving me more space, but I was still in the center of the jotun contingent, with several ranks of friendlies between me and the nearest of the fae. I could throw weapons into the crowd, but the clean division between the two sides had collapsed, fae and jötnar tangled up like water and oil after being shaken. My weapons were mostly indiscriminate, the sort of thing that I couldn't use to hit just one person.

Kuzunoha was throwing balls of silver fire with uncanny precision, and Katsunaga had vanished at some point, presumably to stab some of the fae from behind with his many, many knives. Snowflake and Kyra had both run into the crowd, low enough to the ground to avoid the press and the violence. They slipped between the legs of the jötnar and attacked the fae, biting and tearing, tripping them and pulling them down.

That left just Aiko and I standing in the middle of the room, not doing anything beyond watching. She was still leaning on me to stay standing, and she was shivering.

It was cold, I realized. I hadn't quite been aware of it, not consciously, but it was well below zero in that room now. The jötnar had brought the eternal winter of Jotunheim with them, snow flying through the air, frost and snow on the ground.

I pulled Aiko close and wrapped my cloak around her, sharing what warmth I could. It wasn't much, but she took it gratefully.

We walked forward towards Scáthach and Skrýmir. We had to move slowly, since Aiko still wasn't steady on her feet and she was slipping a little on the ice.

I wasn't. I wasn't slipping, and I wasn't unsteady. If anything, I felt better than before. I had been feeling a little weak, a little clumsy, the wounds I'd sustained getting in here dragging me down. And I was still *aware* of that feeling, but it didn't seem to be affecting me as much as it had been.

I had a distinct and uneasy suspicion that my improved condition and the presence of so much unnatural cold were not unconnected. But that was something to be dealt with another time.

Skrýmir finally got a solid hit in, a two-handed swing coming down on Scáthach at a diagonal. The Sidhe queen got her shield up to block the attack, but the hit was brutally powerful. The shield shattered under his axe, and the sheer force was enough to break Scáthach's arm behind the shield and knock her back close to ten feet.

Elsewhere, the tide had turned against the fae, to an extent that couldn't be denied. In the end, they just weren't a match for what they were up against. The fae were creatures of deception and trickery. They were powerful and deadly, to be sure, but at heart they weren't creatures of open battle and direct conflict.

The jötnar? They *were*. These were some of the greatest warriors of a warrior culture, a culture where prowess in battle was *everything*. They lived for moments like this.

Oh, some of the giants fell. Some of them died. But there were far, far more fae bodies on the ground. The berserks had carved a path through the ranks of fae, with Snowflake biting and tearing beside them, as mad and gleeful in battle as they were. Skrýmir's personal guard were pushing the fae back to the edge of the room, still tight and disciplined; not a one of them had fallen yet. I didn't think any of them were even wounded. The jötnar mounted on wolves rode back and forth, trampling the wounded and launching quick attacks against the wounded, disrupting any semblance of coordination.

Here and there a pocket of the fae started to turn the tide, but it never lasted. The volva chanted and worked her magic, and bad things happened to them, everything from stumbling at an inopportune time to dropping to the ground with blood pouring from their eyes, noses, and ears.

I shuddered a little at that one, and reminded myself to never, ever make Signý mad at me. Seithr was a hell of a nasty tradition of magic when it chose to be.

Scáthach was standing and fighting again, but she was more hesitant now. With one arm shattered beyond use and her shield broken, she was off balance, not as capable as she was. She was still beautiful as she fought, but it was a broken, off-kilter sort of beauty, a bird with a broken wing.

"You brought this on yourself," I called, helping Aiko over the corpse of an ogre in the way. Some of the jötnar were moving with us now, a loose formation trailing behind us. "Remember that, Scáthach. *You* started this fight."

She snarled and threw herself at Skrýmir, a straightforward lunge that buried her blade in his side.

The giant just smiled indulgently down at her and chopped at her leading leg with his axe. It was a short stroke, inside the effective range of the weapon, but it still cut halfway through her thigh, slicing through her femur and leaving little more than a chunk of meat holding her leg on.

On a human, either of the wounds they'd just traded would be lethal and then some. But they weren't human. They weren't even *like* human. Scathach threw herself back, wrenching the sword out, and passed her hands over the cut in her leg, murmuring quietly in a language I didn't recognize.

Shadows followed her motions, weaving themselves through and around the cut to hold it closed. She left some blood on the ground and she was clumsier than I could have imagined her being yesterday.

Skrýmir just grinned as the blade was pulled out of him. Blood followed it, but not as much as I'd have expected. I couldn't see, but I was guessing there was a plug of ice in the wound, keeping it from actually doing much.

Elsewhere, the last ogre went down in a tangle with the bear-headed jotun. The giant's jaws bit done once, twice, and then something tore on the third bite and the ogre stopped struggling.

"Stop!" Scáthach shouted, backing up to stand next to her throne. "You fools, you haven't even considered the ramifications of your actions!"

"Really?" I said. Aiko and I reached Skrýmir's position, and the three of us kept moving, advancing on her. "Because it seems to me that you're only saying that now that you've *lost*."

"There will always be a Maiden of the Midnight Court," she spat. "There always has been, there always will be. Nothing you can do will change that."

"The Midnight Court must always have its queens," Skrýmir said. "Nothing says it has to be you."

"Ah, but who will it be?" Scáthach said. She was grinning now, and she looked genuinely insane, her smile too broad, her eyes too wide and staring. "Have you thought about that? The role will not sit idle and wait to be filled. Kill me, and it seeks out the nearest person that can fill it."

"Do I care?" I asked.

"You should. It has very specific requirements." She was still grinning and staring, and it was starting to creep me out. Her eyes were too green, her teeth too sharp. She did not look beautiful anymore, not even in a scary way. "It will seek someone female, young by the standards of her kind. Someone with power. Someone who has a longstanding connection to the Courts. Someone who has been touched with the power granted by the role in the recent past, who carries it on her like a stain. Is this ringing any bells, oh jarl?"

I wasn't stupid. "You're talking about Aiko," I said flatly.

She laughed and clapped delightedly. "Aha!" she said. "Enlightenment dawns! Tell me, is it worth it? Will you condemn your lover in that way for the sake of revenge? Will you burden her with my crown if that's what it takes to kill me?"

I came to a halt about ten feet away from her. Skrýmir stopped next to me, glancing at me. I wasn't sure quite how, but I was absolutely certain that the ball had just been put back into my court. He wasn't calling the shots right now; I was. As far as he was concerned, it was my choice what we did next.

I stood there and tried to make it. This was...it was so typical. It was so fucking *typical* of the Sidhe. Not just screwing us over, but manipulating us into screwing ourselves. Giving us a choice where every path led to disaster, where we had to hurt ourselves just to survive.

I was so sick of it all. Sick of these choices. Sick of winning the battle to lose the war.

Before I could settle on a decision, Aiko walked up and shoved an iron dagger into the small of Scáthach's back.

The Faerie Queen gasped in shock and sagged to the ground. Aiko let her fall, leaving the knife in place.

Nobody else moved. We were all staring, unable to look away from what was happening before our eyes.

"You think I'm stupid?" Aiko said. "You think I don't *know* what you're trying to pull here? I'm not stupid. I've spent long enough around you people to know how the game works."

Scáthach opened her mouth, but didn't say anything. Maybe she couldn't. Even for someone on her level, she'd taken a *lot* of physical abuse in the past few minutes.

"I'm not going to kill you," Aiko continued. "I wouldn't take your job for the world. But even if you hadn't told me that, I wasn't going to kill you. Like I said earlier, I'm inclined to get *creative* about this. So you can take your threats and shove them up your ass."

The kitsune squatted down next to the Sidhe, and grinned. It was a nasty grin, sharp and humorless. She was enjoying herself, I was pretty sure. Aiko had always had a vindictive side.

"I'm going to leave you here," she said. "Just like this. You're wounded. Not just wounded, but *crippled*. You won't be fighting any time soon. You won't even be walking. How do you think your subjects will treat you, do you think? Knowing that you're weak? That your most loyal followers all just died in this room? That you *failed*? Do you think the Midnight Court will be kind to you in your moment of need?"

Scáthach glared at her, took a swing with her good arm. It was slow and clumsy, and Aiko slipped aside easily.

"Yeah," the kitsune said. "That's what I think too. That's what's going to happen to you, Scáthach. You're going to lie here in agony, surrounded by the corpses of your loyal retainers, until your own followers find you and fight over which one gets to kill you. And they won't kill you clean, either. You don't rule the nice Court, after all. You're going to die slow and nasty, and you'll know the whole time that you're helpless to do anything about it. I don't normally do this kind of thing, but for the shit *you* did? I think this is fair."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

Everyone in the room was looking at her with new respect now. I mean, *I* wasn't, since I already knew she had this side to her. And besides, she was right that this was pretty much what Scáthach deserved. Turnabout is fair play, after all.

But most everyone else was looking a little scared, or even a little bit queasy.

"Well," Skrímir said after a few seconds, "I believe your sentence has been pronounced, Queen. We'll be leaving now."

"Someone should restrain her," I pointed out. "That way she can't just kill herself when we turn our backs, and screw Aiko over anyway."

"Allow me," Hinzelmann said, the first thing he'd said. I'd almost forgotten he was even there. He gestured slightly, and I could smell his magic on the air, a dark, secretive sort of smell, earth and fire and bloody secrets kept hidden from the light of day.

A few seconds later that magic congealed into chains of black metal, wrapped tightly around Scáthach from head to toe. They were covered in barbs, which dug into her skin, and pulled tight enough to cut into flesh.

Scáthach screamed then, a high, piercing, agonized scream, and kept screaming until another chunk of metal appeared in her mouth, gagging her.

I stared at the kobold. "Why?" I asked.

"She ordered me to be here tonight," he said in a sweet, calm voice. "No one gives me orders." He brushed a fleck of dust off his jacket and walked away, leaving her there wrapped in those chains.

Aiko stared down at her for a few seconds longer, then walked back to me and hugged me. I hugged her back, although the armor got in the way a little on both sides.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go home."

Chapter Nineteen

Skrýmir opened the Way back to Jotunheim. I wasn't sure why there was a direct, established path between a seemingly random mountainside in Jotunheim and Scáthach's throne room, and I wasn't about to ask. I figured I'd done enough wildly stupid things already today.

I'd rather have taken a portal directly home, but Otherside portals were impractical for so many people when not all of them were inured to the effects. I could have opened one just for us, but it would have taken time, and at the moment I thought it was probably a good idea to get the hell out of Faerie as soon as conceivably possible.

And besides, it would have been rude not to take Skrýmir's offer of a ride. And given that he'd just saved our asses from maybe the single worst situation I'd ever been, rudeness seemed like a bad idea at the moment.

I was *really* trying not to do more stupid things today. Now that everything was settled out my head was starting to clear a little, and I could actually appreciate just how many insane risks I'd taken in the past day. It was a sobering thing to think about.

The jötnar walked or rode through the Way, talking, laughing, casually shoving or cuffing each other. It was more like they were leaving a party than a small war; some of them had even produced horns of alcohol and started passing them around already. They were carrying their few casualties with them.

The rest of us followed. I was feeling pretty brutally exhausted, and I hurt. Aiko wasn't in much better shape, if any; she wasn't injured, but spending that long in captivity had not been kind to her. Snowflake was happy and satisfied and a little bit dizzy from being too long on her feet; she was in *better* shape than before, but that didn't mean the brain damage had just gone away. Similarly, Kyra's damaged leg was starting to ache, and she had some shallow cuts and gashes on her back and shoulders as well.

The elder kitsune were both fine. The tension between them and their daughter was painful to watch, though. She hadn't spoken to either of them, and she still wasn't even looking in their direction when she could help it.

I stepped through the door into winter, and blinked as the cold hit me in the face. It felt good, crisp and bracing. Jötnar carried something of the eternal winter of their homeland, wrapped around them like a cloak, but nothing compared to getting it straight from the source.

The jötnar kept walking, but Skrýmir stopped beside me, dropping one hand onto my shoulder. He wasn't pushing me down, wasn't squeezing. It still felt heavy, more with meaning than with a physical weight.

I'd gotten what I wanted, then. Time to pay the piper.

"Are you satisfied with how this turned out?" he asked, leading me away from the others. None of them tried to follow.

"No," I said. "Not really. Nothing on you, it's just..." I trailed off, shaking my head. "Why?" I demanded. "Why did she *do* this shit? Why does everyone always make things hard?"

"That's life," he said dryly. "Nothing is ever easy."

"But that's just it," I said. "What if it could be? What if I could *make* things easy?"

"Better men than you have tried."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess they have." I shook my head, trying to clear it, and then looked at Skrímir. "I guess I owe you," I said.

He shook his head. "No more than you already did," he said. "Like I told her, where I come from an oath still means something."

I looked at him oddly, and things started to click into place in my head. Slowly, given how bad of shape I was in, but they were clicking. "That isn't all there is to it, is it?" I said. "You got something out of this. Reputation, maybe. I gave you free access to your enemy's sanctum and a legitimate grievance against her. An excuse." I shook my head again. "You were using me the whole time."

He sighed. "We all use each other, boy," he said. "All the time. That's life. It's nothing personal. It's nothing to get worked up about."

"Nothing to get worked up about?" I asked. "My friends could have *died* in there."

"And how many of my people *did* die?" he asked. His voice was still calm, but there was a hint of iron to it, something that suggested I'd be wise not to push any further.

I sighed and looked away. "Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to make light of that. It's just...it all seems so pointless, you know? So much suffering, so much death, and why? So one person could fight another in a politically acceptable way? It seems like such a fucking *waste*."

He grinned and slapped me on the back. "That's because you're one of us," he said. "Nobody's going to argue that after tonight."

I staggered a little as he clapped me on the back. "Thanks," I said dryly. "I think."

He laughed and let go of my shoulder. "Ah, get out of here," he said. "Take your lady somewhere warm." He turned and followed the other jötnar, whistling a simple tune as he walked.

The three kitsune were carrying on a quiet, intense conversation in Japanese when I got back to them. I didn't interrupt. I was pretty sure this was the most pleasant interaction Aiko had had with her parents in a very long time, and I wasn't going to be the one to interrupt it.

A couple of minutes later, the conversation trailed off. Aiko embraced both of her parents, two of the most awkward and stilted hugs I'd ever seen, and then they walked off as well.

Aiko watched them go with an odd, almost sad expression, and then turned to face me. She was shivering a little, but not terribly so. "Come on," she said. "Let's go home. It seems like it's been forever since I was home."

I smiled, and started working on the portal.

Much later, I was lying in bed back in Transylvania. I'd sent a message back to Colorado to let them know that we'd made it through more or less unscathed, but I hadn't been remotely up to going there.

I reached out and lazily stroked Aiko's fur, running my hand from her forehead down to the tips of her tails. The second one had been as much a surprise to her as me. Apparently being trapped and unconscious and surrounded by high-intensity fae magic had done something to accelerate the development of her own power. A small compensation, maybe.

Not remotely worth it, of course. But I was trying to look on the bright side, and I'd been drifting in and out of sleep long enough to manage it.

She arched her back against my hand and then rolled over to face me. She returned to human form as she did, throwing one arm around my shoulders and snuggling close. "You're cold now," she said sleepily.

"I know," I said. She'd told me years ago that my low body temperature was the most disappointing part of cuddling.

"Not like this," she said. "You used to just not be warm. Now you're cold. Like a snowman."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry." I started to move away, but she made an unhappy noise and pulled me towards her. I relented and pulled the blankets up instead, wrapping them more tightly around her. "Some of my bones are made of ice now, apparently," I said. "That's probably why I feel colder."

She giggled a little. "Made of ice?" she said. "That is so awesome."

"Yeah, sort of," I said. "It's...I'm worried, Aiko. I feel like I'm losing my grip on *me*. Everything like this that happens, I'm stronger, but at the same time, it seems like I'm moving further and further away from the person I was. It's like I can only get anywhere by turning into more of a monster, one step at a time."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"S'okay," she mumbled. "I'll still love you when you're a monster."

I lay there and stroked her hair for a minute. It wasn't as thick as it had been, some of it having fallen out while she was imprisoned, but what was left was still soft and sleek. I wasn't sure why her hair would have been affected when as a fox her fur was still as full as ever. Another question not worth asking.

"Thanks," I said at last. "That means a lot to me."

But she'd already dozed off again, and a few minutes later I had as well.

The next morning started out nicely enough. I woke up a little after noon, local time, and took a shower. Aiko joined me a few minutes later, which predictably made it take a little longer, but I had a hard time getting too upset about that.

We got dressed and went downstairs, where we found Kyra and Snowflake sitting at the dining room table. The werewolf had changed back to human at some point, and was currently staring into a cup of coffee. Caffeine didn't have much of an effect on werewolves, but if you drank *enough* coffee you could still get a little bit of a buzz, and a lot of them drank it anyway for the taste.

"Food," Kyra said. "I'm starving."

"Now that you mention it," I said, "so am I. I guess I could cook something."

She shuddered. "Hell no," she said. "I said *food*. Not the toxic pig slop that is the result of you cooking."

Oh, come on, Snowflake said. *Even pigs don't call that food. I'm pretty sure even goats don't eat your cooking.*

I laughed. "Okay, fine," I said. "We'll go out somewhere. Let me just get my armor."

Breakfast ended up being a seedy London cafe, the kind of place where you paid cash and a little bet extra was enough to convince them to overlook the fact that you had a dog with you. The food was surprisingly good, too, which was a nice added bonus.

I didn't see any kind of supernatural threats there, and I noticed a handful of wards and protections in the area. The graffiti painting of a traffic warden with his sign turned to STOP burned with defensive magic, and someone had drawn the cross-in-cross symbol of the City of London on the wall in blood. On these streets, that was one of the strongest symbols of protection and defense that there was.

In London, at least, the chaos was coming back under control.

Kyra flat out refused to let us drop her off in Wyoming, so the four of us went back to Colorado together.

As soon as I stepped out of the portal into the city, I knew that my pleasant little holiday was over. The air smelled like smoke, and the air was hazy, a thin pall of smoke hanging in the air all around. The mansion wasn't burning, but it wasn't in good shape, burns and gashes in the walls showing where it had been damaged.

I hurried up and opened the door. Inside, things weren't much better. My housecarls were scattered around the room, and they were beat to shit. Almost all of them had bandages in multiple places. Several had arms in slings, and a couple were missing ears or fingers.

Kyi walked up to me a couple of seconds later. She wasn't particularly steady on her feet, and she was in the worst shape of anyone there. Her right arm was in a sling, and she had a black leather eyepatch over her right eye. There were fresh cuts on cheek and her forehead, and she had bandages on her chest and her left thigh.

She knelt slowly in front of me and bowed her head, as formal as I'd ever seen her. "Jarl," she said. "Forgive me. I have failed you."

Chapter Twenty

"Okay," I said, grabbing Kyi's good arm and hauling her to her feet. I wasn't as polite about it as I might have been another time. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I've been gone for two days, yes?"

"A little more," she said. "Fifty-two hours or so."

"Right," I said, nodding. "So can you please explain to me just how the hell you let things get *this* bad in *two freaking days*?"

"Most of our allies started backing out as soon as you left," she said. Her voice was crisp and professional, although I could tell she would rather have eaten ground glass than described just what had gone wrong here. "They were more your personal allies than associated with your people as an organization, and most of them didn't expect you to come back. Most of them assumed that you were going to get slaughtered by Scathach; the rest figured it was all a cover and you were taking the money and running."

"I hope you have a list of who was saying that," I said.

"Selene does. She kept very careful note."

"Good. Continue."

Kyi nodded. "We were able to keep the situation under control at first," she said. "I kept the housecarls loyal, and most of the mercenaries you hired stuck around. Some of the mages, some of the ghouls. Then, about a day ago, someone started a fire in the forest west of town."

I winced. "Oh."

Wildfires are a perennial danger in Colorado. Most of the forests are full of standing dead, and it's often so dry that even a simple spark could set things off. I couldn't remember the last year we *didn't* have some kind of fire.

Usually, though, there were resources in place to fight those fires. There were people ready to limit the spread, and keep them away from populated areas. It was rare that a fire got anywhere near the city, and when it did, it usually got dealt with fast.

But now those resources were in shambles.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

Kyi looked away. "Bad. Very bad. The fire's already spreading through the forest, and it's getting close to the city. Maybe in the city by now, in places. I don't know for sure."

"Okay," I said. "That explains the smoke. But why are you guys injured? What happened?"

"After the fire started, Kikuchi pulled his people out of the city," she said. "He has all of them working on fighting the fire. Keeping it from spreading into their territory, mostly. That took our main ally out of the picture, and then someone told the police that the fire was your fault. Selene managed to talk them out of attacking us, I think, but they completely withdrew their support, and they took the military with them."

I groaned. "Leaving us overextended and isolated," I said.

She nodded. "Precisely. The attacks started almost immediately after that. They attacked us here, targeted our people out on patrol, attacked shops and associates under our protection. We've been holding our own so far, but it's taking a toll."

"Wonderful," I said sourly. "Who's attacking?"

"That's the thing," she said. "We aren't sure."

I considered her for a moment, then sighed. "Okay," I said. "Let's go over the details upstairs."

A few minutes later, I was sitting in my office upstairs. Aiko was sitting half in the chair next to me and half in my lap, and Snowflake was lying across my feet. Kyra was sitting in another chair, looking slightly uncomfortable to be there. She'd been the Alpha in this town for a while, though, and she probably knew the city at least as well as I did. I'd have been a fool to ignore her opinions.

Selene and Kyi were standing on the other side of the desk. I'd offered the jotun a chair, since I knew she had to be in a good deal of pain, but she'd refused without even considering it. Selene, for her part, was totally uninjured, and seemed as poised as ever.

I looked at the map between us with a certain amount of distress. It wasn't good news. It wasn't even a little bit of good news. There were pins stuck in the map to show the extent of the recent problems, red for the fire and black for attacks.

There were an awful lot of pins in the map. An *awful* lot.

"Okay," I said. "Start with the fire. How current is this estimate of the size?"

"Very," Selene said. "I've been keeping the reports as current as possible. Kikuchi has also been providing us with regular status updates, and his people have a very good idea of what's going on with that situation."

I grunted. "Looks like it hasn't really dropped into the city much, then. That's good."

"Kikuchi's people have been doing very good work," the succubus said. "Extremely good. My understanding is that he's brought in multiple people from outside his core group to help. Kappa and kitsune for the most part, although the rumor mill suggests that he might have a dragon assisting as well." She shook her head. "It was unfortunate to lose his military support so suddenly, but it's likely worth it to keep this fire under control."

"Yeah," I said slowly, thinking that through. Then my eyes went wide. "Contact him," I said. "Now."

"On it," Selene said, standing. "What should I tell him?"

"His people aren't safe out there," I said. "And his territory isn't safe either."

"I think he knows that," she said dryly.

I shook my head. "Not what I meant," I said. "They're going to be attacked. Maybe already have been. This fire, I think it was *planned*. It was meant to draw us out, leave us vulnerable. I don't know whether it was targeted at me or Kikuchi or both, but I'm sure that it's a setup."

"I'll tell him," Selene said. "Excuse me." She got up and left.

"Okay," I said, looking back at the map. "Tell me about these attacks."

"They've been coming frequently," Kyi said. "Not consistently, but frequently. They started less than an hour after you left; there have been eighteen of them so far."

"What's attacking?"

"That's just it," she said. "There's no consistency. These four were constructs. Cheap ones, something that anyone could buy. Here, here, and here, these were all demons."

"Whoa," I said. "Hold up a second. *Demons*? You mean possessed people?"

She shook her head. "Not that kind of demon. More like Selene, except not as nice as her."

I blinked. "Okay," I said. "So somebody literally summoned demons out of Hell to attack us. Keep going."

She nodded. "These three were fae. Ogres, trolls, that kind of thing. Another three were humans. Trained humans, with assault rifles. The last five were...I don't even know what to call them. Animals, maybe, dogs or something like it, but...wrong. Twisted somehow."

"Got it," I said, looking at them. "Of all of these, how many of the attackers got away?"

The jotun gave me an offended look. "Jarl. Please. I recognize that this situation does not inspire great confidence, but give us *some* credit."

I snorted. "Sorry. So we've been winning so far?"

She shrugged. "So far, yeah. But they're wearing us down. You saw the shape we're in. The ghouls and the mages have taken over for the moment to give us a chance to recover, but they aren't a whole lot better off. We've all taken some licks."

I nodded. "Yeah, I saw that. What happened to the eye, by the way?"

"I was sneaking up on a demon," she said. "Nasty one. It was actually holding its own against Haki one-on-one, if you believe that. I put a knife in its spine, but it tore like half my face off before he finished the job."

Aiko whistled. "You snuck up on a major demon and knifed it in the back? Badass."

Kyi grinned briefly. "I know, right? Wish you could have seen it, jarl."

"Congratulations," I said dryly. "I hope it was worth it."

She nodded. "Totally."

"Well, that's good. Back to business, though." I looked back at the map. "What I'm seeing here," I said, "is minions. These are all very anonymous, very *disposable* troops. I'm guessing you haven't been able to take any of them alive?"

"We got a couple of the humans," she said. "But they killed themselves before we could ask much in the way of questions."

"Figures." I shook my head. "Somebody's willing to throw a hell of a lot of resources away just to wear us down."

"Yeah," Kyi said. "That was about the read I got on it too. You think the fire's part of that?"

I shrugged. "Well, it fits the pattern. The fire wears us down, it takes resources and energy, it makes us overreach ourselves if we want to deal with it. Even if it *isn't* the same person responsible, I'd bet they'll jump on the opportunity." I looked at Kyra. "You know those neighborhoods better than I do," I said. "Is there anything in there that would make them particularly valuable targets?"

"I've been out of the city for years," she protested. "How would I know?"

"You lived on the west side for years," I pointed out. "You know that area, and you spent more time in these neighborhoods than I ever did. The kinds of things I'm looking for wouldn't have changed, I don't think."

She sighed, but leaned forward to look at the map more closely. "These are mostly more expensive districts," she said after a moment. "Gated communities and such. I used to run through them every now and then." She wrinkled her nose. "They ran their sprinklers all night," she said darkly. "Even in the middle of a drought. Stuck-up assholes."

"How enlightening," I said dryly. "You don't know anything else about them? Nobody important that lives there?"

She thought a moment longer, then shrugged. "Nobody comes to mind," she said. "I mean, there were a few wolves that lived over in that area, but they're all gone now. Jack went to New Orleans, Daniell came with me to Wyoming, Dave and Mikey moved to San Francisco, Chris is in Texas...I don't think any of them even have any friends or family still around there."

I sighed. Well, it had been worth a shot.

"Okay," I said. "As I see it, the only way we can really settle this is to find the person sending these minions at us and confront them directly."

"I already tried that," Kyi said. "I haven't been able to track them down at all. I even got the werewolf out to see if she could follow the trail. Nothing."

I nodded. It wasn't exactly a surprise, after all. Everyone who was likely to be targeting me knew that I'd bring in werewolves to try and hunt them down. They'd have a way to deal with that.

"That's fine," I said. I was smiling again, and my voice was a little bit too cheery considering the circumstances. I was just as glad, though. A little too happy was well within my normal response to this sort of thing, vastly better than the disconnected numbness and psychotic rage I'd been feeling earlier.

Kyi looked at me warily, though. "Jarl?" she said. "What are you planning?"

"Well," I said, "Anna couldn't find them, and we don't have the time or resources for a large-scale manhunt right now. So I'm going to have to call out the big guns." My smile faded. "Clear the room, please."

The jotun nodded and left without another word. Kyra looked considerably less happy, but she did stand and walk out.

Aiko didn't move, and Snowflake just settled in on my feet a little more comfortably. That was fine. I hadn't been expecting either of them to leave. Realistically speaking, it just wasn't going to happen, and there was a limited amount of harm that either of them could come to as a result. They were both screwed enough already that a little bit more was unlikely to matter.

I took a deep breath, making sure I was ready for this. Then, in a clear and authoritative voice, I said, "Loki Lie-Crafter. Loki Sky-Traveler. Loki Laufeyjarsen, I call you."

There was a sudden noise, something like a clap of thunder six inches behind my head. Snowflake and I twitched, and Aiko actually jumped, ending up mostly in my lap.

A second later the door burst into bright, piercing golden flames that burned it away to ashes without touching anything else, not even scarring the doorframe with heat. A similar flame erupted from the floor between the door and the desk, although that one didn't even burn the carpet, just flickered and danced in the air above it.

Loki swept through the doorway with a grin. The fires on the floor rolled away from his feet, something like a red carpet laid out just for him. He came to a stop in front of the desk and dropped into a low, elaborate bow, pulling a Robin Hood-style bicorn from thin air over his head as he did. He straightened with a snap and settled the hat onto his head and grinned at me.

"Hi," I said dryly.

"Aw," he said. "You two are so cute now that it's actually you two again. It's adorable."

Aiko stuck her tongue out at him and nestled in more comfortably in my lap. I just looked at him in a not particularly happy way. "And why didn't you tell me it *wasn't* actually us two before this?" I demanded.

"Then I wouldn't have gotten to see the cutesy lovey-dovey moment when you got together again," Loki said. He smiled his twisted smile, pulled out of shape by the scars around his mouth, and leaned back against a wall that didn't exist. "Or the delightful action scene when you went in for the rescue operation. Nine out of ten for that one, by the way. Wonderful performances all around. You should have seen what they did to her after you left."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was, in a way, fair enough. I'd known Loki wasn't my friend. It wasn't like it came as a surprise that he'd screw me over for the sake of a good show. Not that I seriously believed his motives were that innocuous, but I believed he *would* have done it for no more reason than that.

"Okay," I said. "I want to take another of my questions."

"So soon?" He shook his head disappointedly. "You're so needy," he complained. "Always asking me for help. Well, go on. Out with it."

"Someone's been attacking my people and my interests recently," I said. "They know how to hide from me, and I'm guessing that if I don't take them out they'll keep pulling this hit-and-run crap until they eventually bring me down."

"He will," Loki assured me. "At this point, there's basically zero possibility of a nonviolent resolution there. That one's a freebie."

"I figured as much," I said. "So where should I go to resolve things violently?"

He grinned again. "Let's find out," he said.

I blinked, and the world changed.

When I opened my eyes again, I was standing on a city street rather than sitting in my office. Aiko was standing next to me with her arms around my neck; she stumbled a little in surprise as the new situation resolved itself, and I ended up holding most of her weight for a few seconds while she got her feet under herself again.

Snowflake, for what it was worth, was still lying on my feet.

I looked around as Aiko got her footing again and unwrapped her arms from around my neck, grabbing my hand instead. It was hot and muggy here, the air humid and calm. I could smell salt, and between that and the humidity I was guessing the ocean was within walking distance. I glanced up and

saw that the light was slightly wrong, late morning instead of early afternoon the way it had been in Colorado.

"Honolulu," Loki said, walking briskly past us. "Not far from the coast. It isn't a part of town that most tourists visit, but I think there are things here you'll appreciate more than nice views and shopping malls."

"What are we doing here?" Aiko asked, still holding my hand as we followed him. She didn't sound happy.

"I was asked a question," Loki said. "I am answering that question in the most efficient way available to me. I fail to see how this is confusing to you."

"I think a better question is what the hell this jackass is doing in *Hawaii*," I said. "Usually the people that are starting problems for me are at least in the same state as I am, not on an island three thousand miles away."

"That's because the people starting problems for you are usually either local threats or else looking to take your territory," Loki said. "Whereas this time he's really only interested in *destroying* your territory and your organization. It's a rather important distinction. You don't need to be on site for that, and if you want a secure place to plan your attacks, this isn't a bad one. Especially now, since this city is one of the safest just now. You'd be surprised how many people around here still remember the old charms and protections."

"So why does he have it in for me to that degree?" I asked. "That's a hell of a lot of resources he's put into this just to bring me down."

"I suggest you ask him yourself," Loki said with a twisted grin. He gestured at a nearby shop, somewhere that looked like it had once been a restaurant. Now it had a FOR LEASE sign in the window, and the parking lot out front was deserted. "Just in there," Loki added helpfully.

I looked at it, committing the building to memory, then nodded. "Got it," I said. "Will he still be there in a few hours?"

"I'm guessing so," Loki said. "Now, I believe I've answered your question satisfactorily. I'll be going, then. Have a pleasant day, try not to get your spine torn out, and all that."

He disappeared with another crack of thunder, leaving us standing alone in the middle of the street. I looked at where he'd been for a moment, running through my usual list of curses on Loki's name.

Then I turned to Aiko. "Well, here we are," I said. "You in the mood for a fair fight?"

"Never," she said.

"Well, that's good. Neither am I."

She grinned impishly. "Well, then," she said. "Let's fight dirty."

About three hours later, the three of us were standing outside the abandoned restaurant again. This time, though, we were very much not alone. About half of the housecarls were there, along with a couple of the mages more suited to this kind of work than patrols and open spaces. Some ghouls lurked and waited, most of them already distinctly inhuman in their appearance. Kyra and Anna were there, both of them already in fur and wearing heavy armor. Half a dozen human mercenaries with body armor, grenades, and assault rifles rounded out the group.

Selene was standing next to me. She was wearing a suit of skintight black armor made out of an odd, almost chitinous material. I'd never seen her wear armor before that I could remember, but she wore it as well as she wore everything else.

There was something odd about her bearing, though. Selene's incredible, stunning beauty had always been more a matter of attitude and bearing than her physical features; she knew how to carry herself, how to walk and behave, to make herself into an object of admiration and lust. It was second nature for her, something so habitual that I was certain she typically didn't even know she was doing it.

And, in some ways, she was still doing it, even dressed in armor and about to go on a raid. But there was something different about her, something lithe and predatory. It made me think of watching a leopard, beauty and grace and speed all wrapped up in a lethal little package, utterly without mercy.

Looking at her now, I was reminded of why I didn't bring Selene to fights, even though she had volunteered a few times. She scared the crap out of me when she got like this. She was pleasant, and entirely reliable, and I didn't hesitate at all entrusting my fiefdom to her hands. But she was still a succubus out of Hell, or the closest thing there was to it. She might work for me, we might even be friends, but that would never change the fact that she had been designed and trained to tempt, seduce, corrupt, and destroy people just like me.

I imagined it was something like a normal human found out their best friend was a werewolf. Sure, they're friends. And they know he isn't going to eat them. But on some level, they'll always be aware that he *could*.

But this guy's attacks had included demons out of the same version of Hell as Selene, so I sucked it up and brought her with us. If he summoned more of those demons, she was the only one who had any real idea of what to do about them.

Aiko and I stood and watched as the last few preparations were wrapped up. Signý was chanting in Norse, a constant cyclic chant much like the one she'd recited while preparing to curse Jimmy. The volva was breathing somewhat toxic smoke from the fire again, too, although this time she had a broad dish laid out in front of her rather than a nothing pole. The mercenaries were checking their weapons and conferring with each other, making sure everyone was ready to go. The jötnar did something

similar, although their pregame ritual involved less quiet conversation and more drinking; some of them were also chanting along with Signý. The ghouls mostly just chewed on hunks of meat.

The volva picked her dish up off the ground, still chanting, and grabbed a horsehair brush with her other hand. The jötnar walked up and knelt before her one at a time so that she could mark their foreheads with her brush. She painted an algiz rune on each of them, three quick and confident brushstrokes per person. I wasn't totally sure what she'd done to the water in her bowl, but it seemed to sparkle a little more than it should have, and I could smell the dark, quiet magic in it.

I thought about asking what she was doing. Then I got my own rune instead, pulling my helmet on over it. I might not understand how Signý did what she did, but I could respect her skill, and I wasn't going to say no to any kind of protection right now.

Once everyone was marked, including Snowflake, Aiko, and even some of the mercenaries, Signý stopped chanting and set the bowl down again. "I am ready," she said, standing a little uncertainly. Thraslaug was there almost instantly to support her until she was steady on her feet again.

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

I drew Tyrfing and walked up to the building, kicking the door in. I rushed in, jötnar and werewolves and ghouls following me, growling and snarling and brandishing all manner of weaponry.

At first it seemed like it was a ridiculous amount of overkill. There was only one person even in there, a tall slender man standing by the windows on the other side of the room, looking out over the ocean. For a second I felt pretty smug.

Then he turned, and I saw the vivid urine-yellow color of his eyes, and I smelled his rotting-meat magic, and suddenly I wished I'd brought rather a lot more firepower. A tank battalion, maybe.

"Finally," the skinwalker said, sounding rather bored.

Chapter Twenty-One

Well, crap.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked. "*Seriously*, dude. What the hell?"

"Oh, come on," he said with a casual, infectious grin. "Don't tell me you didn't see this coming. You made me look like a fool. I don't forgive that."

"Sure," I said. "I knew that. But *this*? Why not keep things between us? What earthly freaking reason did you have to take it out on every person in Colorado Springs?"

"Because I wanted to," he said. "What more reason do I need?"

"Plenty!" I shouted. "Or you should, at least. You don't declare war on an entire city just because one guy that lives there annoyed you."

He rolled his eyes. "You're one to talk," he said. "Or are you going to tell me the kitsune would do anything less?"

"Oh, screw you," Aiko said instantly. "I mean, sure, I can appreciate the übermensch vibe you've got going. 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law' and all that. I can respect that. But even I have limits. You don't try to murder an entire city because you're pissed off at one person."

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked reasonably. "You and I, we're the same. I mean that to include you, as well, Winter. The only difference is that I'm not in denial. I don't try to pretend that I'm something other than what I am." Still grinning, he turned back to the window and pointed out over the water. "Do you see that boat?" he asked.

I looked where he was pointing. I could, just barely, see the boat he meant, a sailboat out on the ocean.

As I watched, that bright white sail burst into yellow flames. The fire spread rapidly, until the entire boat was burning. I could see a handful of people jump off into the water, and I could imagine the screams. Odd, twisted limbs picked them up and threw them back into the flames.

It only took a few seconds. Even if I'd been able to get there, there was nothing I could have done.

"I just killed those people," the skinwalker said casually, turning back to face me. "Not for any particular reason. They hadn't done anything to upset me. I just wanted to watch them burn. So I did."

I stared at him for a second, then let out a mental sigh. There was no point to trying to get through to him. There was nothing there to get through *to*. The skinwalker wasn't misguided, or

misunderstood. The problem here wasn't that he didn't understand what he was doing, or that he didn't know what it meant. He knew *exactly* what it meant, and he did it anyway.

Falling from grace is a funny thing. Some people look into the abyss and back away. Some people teeter on the edge. Some people slip and fall in. Some people are pushed.

The skinwalker was the kind of guy that *jumped*.

And my mother had, apparently, been his buddy. It was funny, in a not-funny-at-all kind of way. I'd often been embarrassed about being her son. I'd had a lot of awkward moments as a result of it.

But this was the first time I could think of that I'd actually been *ashamed* to be related to her.

I raised Tyrfin, moving the sword into a guard position. At that signal, the jötnar drew their weapons as well, and the ghouls shifted fully into their natural forms, claws and teeth and hooves at the ready. The werewolves bared their teeth and snarled, the kind of quiet snarl that didn't so much threaten violence as state it.

"Are you sure you're ready?" the skinwalker asked mockingly. "I thought you might want to stand around outside for another hour or two first."

"No," I said. "No, I've pretty much had it with you. This is the last time you're going to cause problems for me."

"On that," he said, "we're agreed."

Then the skinwalker gestured slightly with one hand, murmuring in a language I couldn't place. The room filled with yellow light, almost the same tone as the skinwalker's eyes. It was drawn in elaborate patterns on the ground, on the walls, geometric figures and letters and strange fractal designs that hurt my head to look at. The light burned brighter, and it seemed strangely *deeper* as well, stretching off in directions that I couldn't name or place. It was almost like looking at a permanent Way between worlds, a line drawn perpendicular to the world.

I could smell the magic underlying that light, a terrifyingly powerful stench of rot and decay and corruption. As it faded, other smells took over, and they were hardly any better. There was a hint of sulfur, rotting blood and burning hair, shit and death and the sharp tang of ozone, an odd and unpleasant incense.

The light winked out, and I blinked away the afterimages, shaking my head.

When I could see again, I had to work to keep from shaking in sheer terror. The skinwalker was still there, all right, but he wasn't alone. There were three other *things* in the room now, standing between us and him, and from the context I could only assume that they were demons. Not even spirits, like Legion, but physical demons.

The first looked like the classical, typical sort of demon. It was nine feet tall, with red skin and black eyes, a mouth full of long thin fangs, and black leathery wings. It held a whip in one hand, a long nine-tailed whip that twined in the air under its own power. It stank of fresh blood and sulfur and feces, and flames crawled over its skin.

The second was more human in its appearance, if not any more pleasant. It looked like a tall man with skin and hair as white as snow, wearing a gleaming silver crown on its head. It carried a silver scepter studded with diamonds in its right hand, twirling it casually. It was riding on a horse as pale as it was, although I was pretty sure they were one being.

The third was the most abstract of the group. It was vaguely humanoid, but stretched out in ways that didn't make sense. It would easily be fifteen or twenty feet tall if it stood straight, but it was hunched over, its limbs bent in too many places, until it wasn't even as tall as the demon with the whip. Its limbs were too thin, making it look more like an arrangement of lines than a person. As far as I could tell, this demon was the source for the odder scents, the ozone and the incense.

"I hope you don't mind that I brought friends," the skinwalker said. "I didn't want you to feel like I wasn't being hospitable." He smiled. "Why don't you get to know each other?"

I started to rush at him, hoping to kill him before the demons could do...whatever the hell they did. I couldn't even guess.

I hadn't made it two steps when the demon on the horse spoke. Its voice was smooth and melodious, beautiful in an utterly inhuman way, and though it wasn't loud, it was incredibly *penetrating*, filling the space and leaving no room for anything else.

Despite the strange sound of it, though, I could easily understand what the demon said. "I am God," it said with a quiet, alien smile, "and King, and Law."

I felt its magic brush against me, as it brushed against everything in the room, and the world broke.

I was standing in a frozen forest, the trees all around me. The ground was covered in snow, all around. There was no sign of the building I had been in, no sign of the city around me, no sign of the ocean.

But I could smell smoke. Looking around, some of the trees were smoldering, and when I looked up I could see clouds of smoke drifting across the sky. I looked at myself, and I wasn't sure whether I was in the shape of a human or a wolf; it seemed to change from moment to moment, my body's shape and orientation shifting back and forth.

Suddenly I heard ringing, like a dozen bells all around me, too loud and too close and with no semblance of order in their ringing. It was hard to think through the noise, hard to focus.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

I took a step forward and the world changed around me, shifting and twisting. I was standing in the building again, but it wasn't how I'd left it. The walls were burning sickly green flame, and the shadows in the corner were shifting crazily, too dark and with an odd *substance* to them. It smelled foul, unimaginably foul, blood and sulfur and feces and rotting meat and noxious smoke. I thought I was about to vomit, but I knew somehow that throwing up would only make things worse.

Looking around, proportion seemed broken, things not positioned in a way that made sense. The demons, as strange and surreal as they were, looked somehow more *real* than the rest of the room, looming over the madness and the chaos. Their forms shifted and spun in ways that, again, didn't make any sense. Like the shadows, they seemed to have a terrible *significance* to them.

And over all of it was the noise. It was a cacophony of ringing bells, far too loud and chaotic, overwhelming. It was horrible, the noise affecting me like nails on a chalkboard, but far stronger. It was almost impossible to think through the noise, to focus or concentrate. I could barely even move.

A gunshot went off right next to me and I was *grateful*, even though it was nearly deafening, painfully loud. Anything, *anything* was better than that ringing.

Then I was back in the forest, except it was worse than before. Shadows moved under the trees with nothing to cast them, their shapes strange and asymmetric, hideous and disturbing. I could smell fire and death and blood and smoke and death and shit and acid and death and it was vile beyond words. The ground cracked open around me and black tentacles reached out, slimy things as thick around as my torso, covered in fur that moved of its own accord.

The ringing was joined by voices now, chanting and screaming and howling. It was hard to stay standing, hard to stay conscious. If I looked too closely at anything, or if I took a deep breath and really got a good whiff of the stench, I didn't think I would be able to take it.

Back in the room. The fire wasn't there, had never been there, but the shadows were thicker and there were pools of black liquid in the corners of the room. It was too thick, a noxious sludge that I knew was poison like no poison I had ever seen before, and it was spreading. The demon on his pale horse was spinning his scepter in its hand with a broad smile on its face, his teeth broad flat slabs like a horse's. I could smell the poison, in addition to the rest, a harsh caustic smell that made me gag. I doubled over and started to throw up, only managing to choke it back down after I could taste the bitter acrid acid of my own vomit in my mouth.

I heard people screaming and sobbing and moaning, and it sounded *good*. Any noise that could break up the hideous monotony of the ringing bells and the howling voices in my ears was good, was something I was grateful for.

Someone was hitting me, clawing at my armor and trying to drag me down to the ground. They looked like a demon, taller than me and stronger than me and they were trying to hurt me and they were screaming and howling and begging and crying. I panicked and pushed them away reflexively, and they stumbled away and fell. They hit the ground and curled up into a fetal position, moaning and

whimpering. It wasn't until that point that I recognized Thraslaug, one of the jötnar who had followed me here.

I took another slow, shaky step forward. As I did I got another breath of the vile, intolerable odors in the air, and this time I knew it was too much. I fell to my knees, and I barely managed to get my helmet off before I was throwing up. Stomach acid and half-digested food spilled out of my mouth, splashing on the floor and splattering my legs. It didn't take long to vomit up everything in my stomach, but I couldn't stop, dry-heaving and coughing. Every breath brought the stench of demons and skinwalker into my lungs, making me puke even harder. My ribs were screaming agony, and I could barely even hold myself upright on my knees. I heard more gunshots and they were a relief from the clamor in my ears, but it wasn't enough, the noise was still agonizing and overwhelming and I couldn't even think.

And then something snapped, somewhere inside me. It was hard to say quite what it was. All I really knew was that suddenly I couldn't smell anything, not really. My hearing was dulled as well, my vision dimmed.

It didn't completely soothe the agony, the sensory overload that had put me down to begin with. My chest was still heaving, trying to vomit out something that wasn't there. It was still hard to think, hard to concentrate, hard to focus, hard to even process what was going on.

But I was able to push myself to my feet, even if they were unsteady. I was able to look around and see what was going on.

Most of the people I had brought with me were on the ground, curled up into balls or writhing in agony. Some were screaming, but most seemed to have progressed beyond that stage; they were unable to do anything but sob and whimper. A handful of them—Anna, a couple of the ghouls, one of the fire mages I'd brought—were lying on the ground and vomiting.

More interesting were the people who weren't affected as badly. Aiko was still standing, her lips pressed into a tight white line, fumbling as she tried to reload her carbine. Snowflake and Kyra were both standing dead still, their sides heaving as they struggled not to vomit. Selene was seemingly unaffected, striding towards the too-thin demon with a matte-black thornlike dagger in her hand. None of the housecarls were on their feet, but some of them were moving, struggling to stand or dragging themselves forward. Vigdis was one of those, as were Signý and Kjaran.

I felt something strange, my skin crawling. It felt like a thousand feathers being dragged lightly over my flesh, but from the *inside*. I tugged my gauntlet off and saw that it wasn't my imagination. Marks were appearing on my skin like a bruise, except it was drawn in fur and ice rather than color and swelling. The fur and the ice shifted and flowed across my flesh, pressing up and receding again.

I was hoping it was a hallucination, just one more part of the sensory mindfuck this demon was delivering. But I didn't think I was that lucky. I thought I knew what had happened there at the end, why

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I was able to function better than most of the others. I might be wrong, but I didn't think I was. It all fit together so freaking nicely.

I looked at the demon where it sat on its horse. It looked back at me and smiled, still twirling its scepter lightly in its hand. The noise intensified another notch, and despite the block keeping it from having its full effect on me, I winced and stumbled.

That was my first target, then. Now I just had to figure out a way to take it down, effectively alone, when I had no idea what it was capable of or how I was supposed to fight it. And then find a way to deal with its two buddies. And then beat the skinwalker, who was himself a force far beyond anything I'd ever managed to actually fight.

I could do that. Right. No problem.

I gritted my teeth and took another slow, shaky step forward.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The nice thing about being reduced to a slow, half-dazed stumble was that it gave me plenty of time to think. Admittedly, thinking was hard right now, a struggle to get words through the ringing bells and screaming voices in my head, but I was motivated.

The problem was that I had no idea how this demon was doing this. Not even a little bit. Selene was the only demon of this sort I'd ever interacted with, and I was reasonably confident that this kind of thing was well outside of her repertoire. I supposed I could have made more of an effort to learn about them, but I hadn't wanted to go anywhere remotely close to that topic. I was already in too deep with Loki, Coyote, the Conclave, and the Courts; adding Hell to the list was a step I wasn't in any hurry to take.

Except the skinwalker hadn't asked me.

The only thing I could think of to do to figure it out at this stage was to look at who was being affected the worst, and who was getting off light, and see if I could find commonalities. So that's what I did.

Selene, I thought, I could safely dismiss. She was a demon herself, a succubus, and Coyote's granddaughter to boot. She was probably damn near as powerful as I was, and presumably her origin made her more resistant to the powers of other demons.

Similarly, I didn't want to base anything on myself. I was reasonably confident I was still suffering as badly as ever, and probably should have been curled up on the ground shaking and throwing up. It was just that my mind had fragmented, one part taking most of the brunt of it while the other was free to act. Probably it was my more bestial aspect, the wolf inside my skin, that was really hurting.

That left Aiko, who had managed to reload by now and was firing quick, measured bursts at the demon that actually looked like the pop culture image of a demon. The bullets didn't seem to be doing much, but the *sound* was helping, loud enough to break up the literally Hellish noise I was still hearing. Kyra was on her feet, but not accomplishing much right now; Snowflake was managing forward motion, although it looked like she'd have had an easier time if her intestines were dragging on the floor behind her than she was now.

The housecarls were doing better than the ghouls, by and large, and both were doing better than the mages. One of the humans was still on his feet, doing better than anyone other than Aiko, but most of them were solidly down.

I growled a little, the sound lost in the noise. This wasn't getting me anywhere.

Okay, I thought to myself, taking another slow, dragging step forward. Change tack. Look at differences within groups, not between them.

I didn't know the mages or the ghouls well enough to really say much, so I focused on the other groups. Kyra was doing a lot better than Anna, who was lying on the ground and throwing up with her paws over her ears. Of the jötnar, Vigdis seemed to be doing the best, with Kjaran and Signý close behind. I wasn't sure whether that last one counted, though. That might just be her magical protections showing; seithr could do some crazy things, that much was obvious even to someone with my extremely limited knowledge. Admittedly it hadn't helped the rest of us much, but presumably she had more powerful defenses on herself than she did on the rest of us.

So. What did the people who were least affected have in common?

Looked at like that, it was pretty straightforward. I loved Aiko, but she was pretty unhinged at the best of times. Snowflake was worse, a violent psychopath who got off on hunting things down and killing them. Again, I loved her dearly, but I didn't let that blind me to the fact that she was pretty nuts.

Kyra and Anna had a lot in common. But Kyra was brutalized pretty severely when she first made the change to a werewolf; Anna wasn't.

Similarly, looking at the jötnar, what did Vigdis and Kjaran have in common that the others didn't? They were totally nuts. I mean, Vigdis was even more psychotic than Snowflake, and she had no morals whatsoever. Kjaran was...actually, I had no idea what the hell was going on inside his head, but it was safe to say that Kjaran the Silent was not a mentally healthy individual. Even *Aiko* thought he was creepy, and that took some doing. Hell, that might explain Signý, too. From what I'd seen of seithr, a lot of it revolved around rituals specifically intended to break down certain barrier's in the practitioner's mind. Even approached carefully, that kind of thing left a mark.

Taken as a whole, the people who were suffering the least from what the demon was doing were those that were already broken on some level. They were the people who were already mentally damaged to one extent or another. They—*we*—were the people who were already *fucked up*.

In a way, it made a sick sort of sense. It was typical of the supernatural, the sort of Morton's fork I expected from the fae. The demon was driving us mad; the only way to avoid this was to already *be* mad.

I found myself grinning a little. It was funny, in a not-funny-at-all sort of way. We were almost literally damned if we did and damned if we didn't.

But I couldn't think of a way to use that. I couldn't make the people who were out of commission more messed up, or at least not any faster than being exposed to this already was. Given time I could maybe have come up with some kind of way to protect against it, or disrupt the effect, but I didn't have that time and I couldn't have managed to focus enough for that kind of work if I did.

All I could really come up with was to cut it off at the source, and hope they recovered fast enough to help against the rest of the monsters in this room.

I kept moving forward, staggering and stumbling. Another particularly strong wave of stench hit me and, even through the buffering effect keeping the experience to a minimum, I gagged and had to spend a few seconds keeping myself from going into dry-heaves again.

Ten feet between me and the demonic horseman now.

Selene had reached the thin, abstract-looking demon by now, and the two were facing off. I couldn't really process what I was seeing, there. Selene's formfitting black armor seemed to have merged with her flesh, making her look almost like she had through the Second Sight, a void in the world that devoured the light. There was a hint of wings to the shadow, and it wasn't just my imagination saying that.

The thing she was fighting was just as alien, if not more so. It reached out and grasped at her with its long stick-figure arm, a limb so crooked in so many places that it almost looked like more of a tentacle. She cut at it with her dead black knife, cutting deep gashes that didn't bleed at all. The thin demon's flesh was blank and undifferentiated without skin or muscle or bone, like cutting into a mushroom.

The demon missed Selene, hitting the wall of the building instead. Where it touched, the wall began to decay and fall apart, wood rotting away, concrete crumbling, metal rusting into nothing.

I kept moving forward. The noise redoubled itself again, like a dozen noise metal songs being blasted into my ears at a volume far in excess of anything healthy. The demon was spinning its scepter at an unbelievable pace now, the metal not even visible except as a blur. Its long fingers were flickering and dancing like a video of a pianist played at double the normal speed.

Five feet now.

Aiko put a bullet into the red-skinned demon's eye. Apparently this annoyed it, unlike the other bullets, because it finally moved. Its arm moved slowly, almost lazily as it cracked its whip at her. The nine lashes moved through the air independently, and not in a natural way; it was almost like each was a living creature, directing its own movements like a striking snake.

It should have been too far away from her for the whip to reach. Somehow, it wasn't. Four of the lashes wrapped around her carbine and ripped it out of her hands. Two more twined around each ankle and pulled her feet out from under her; the last caught her by the throat before she could fall and held her up, choking off her air.

I took one last step forward and I was within reach of the demon. I brought Tyrping around in a slash at its head, the strike coming so slow it seemed almost like I was moving underwater.

The thing snapped that rod into the path of the blow, and Tyrping bounced off it with a sharp, pure chiming sound. The chime felt good, cutting through the noise in a way that even the gunshots hadn't.

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The horse bit at me, and I saw that its teeth were as sharp as those of the creature riding on it were blunt, a shark's teeth in a horse's mouth. I ducked away, and then had to dodge further to avoid the rider's fist. I had a nasty suspicion that I *didn't* want that thing touching me, not even when I was wearing armor.

I cut at it again and again, and both times it put the scepter in the way without even pausing in its spin. The noise continued, howling and screaming and ringing in my ears, but it seemed like it was getting quieter every time I landed a hit on that scepter. I could think straight again, and my movements were coming quicker.

The demon reached out with its other hand, grabbing at me. Again, I ducked aside, but this time it was a feint, and I'd bitten hard. I ducked to the side, and I ducked straight into the horse's rising hoof.

It hurt. A lot. I got knocked down, and when I hit the ground I didn't move for a couple of seconds.

At least it hadn't kicked me in the head. I hadn't put my helmet back on after I took it off to vomit, and even just knocking my head on the ground when I fell was enough to hurt. If it had actually kicked me in the face, I was pretty sure I'd be wheezing my last few breaths out through a broken face.

To my left, Selene screamed. It was a short and ugly scream, rising towards the end into a sort of breathless shriek before fading out entirely. I couldn't see what had happened to her, but it didn't take a genius to figure that it wasn't good.

To my right and behind me, there was an even more ominous silence from Aiko. There wasn't the sound of a scuffle, not even whimpers or gasps as she fought for air. Not that I would necessarily have heard them if they were there, between the ringing in my ears and the background of screams, moans, and whimpers from the rest of the people in the room. Still, the silence was not a good omen.

I saw a bolt of yellow fire pass over me, leaving the stench of rotting meat in its wake, reminding me that the demons were only the appetizer here. Even if we could beat them, and that was looking less likely with every passing second, there was still the skinwalker to deal with.

For a second, I almost did something rash. It was very, very close.

Then I convinced myself that things weren't quite *that* desperate yet, and pushed myself back to my feet instead.

The mounted demon was still sitting—or standing; it looked like horse and rider were actually fused together, confirming my initial suspicion that they were actually a single conjoined entity—right where it had been. It was spinning that scepter, as fast as ever.

I staggered forward, almost tripping over my own feet, sword raised as though I was planning to cut at it again. It raised the rod to block, still spinning it through that madcap dance.

This time, though, I'd gotten a little smarter. Rather than slash at the rider again, I went after the horse, dropping into a thrust with the weight of my body behind the sword.

Tyrfing slipped into its flesh like it was cutting paper. This one bled, at least, although it was freaking weird blood, silver in color and too thick.

The horse staggered to the side, but didn't fall, though I'd run it through where the heart should have been on a real animal. Further confirmation that this wasn't really a horseman.

I hadn't even seen her get close, but Snowflake was next to me, her teeth anchored in the horse-thing's other side. She set her feet and began pulling; I braced myself, gripped the sword more firmly, and pushed. Between the two of us we managed to topple the horse-thing.

It hit the ground, not as hard as it should have. From how it landed I'd have thought it weighed almost nothing, as though it were hollow and made of paper. It had been as hard to push over as a real horse, though.

I could really get to hate these things and the way they just *didn't make sense*.

The horseman went with its mount, not even trying to get away. The horse glared at Snowflake, while the rider glared at me, the exact same expression on both faces. Despite that, though, it was the horse that attacked me, lashing out with two hooves.

I barely managed to duck aside, and Snowflake jumped on the rider, biting at its hand. She tore a couple of fingers off, recoiling at the taste of blood, and it dropped the scepter to the ground.

It hit the floor with a ringing *clang*, and the noise in my ears cut off, as did much of the vile scent and the nausea, the strange appearance of the shadows.

It growled and reached for the scepter with its healthy hand, swatting at Snowflake with the maimed one. It hit her and she hit the deck, writhing in agony.

I grimaced. I'd scored a victory there, but it would take time for the people who had been put down by the mental assault to recover, and I was guessing it would be able to resume what it had been doing the second it had that scepter in its hand again.

Past it, Selene was losing the fight with her demon. I thought she was, anyway; it was hard to tell. She was moving more slowly, clumsy, and while it had lots and lots of chunks missing it didn't seem to care. It was hard to say at a glance, but I thought that what I could see of Selene's body was warped, twisted and distended in much the same way as that of the demon that she was fighting. Aiko was still worryingly silent; Snowflake seemed to be the only other person in the room who'd recovered enough to fight, and direct contact with the demon had put her right back down again.

Then the tendril of the third demon's whip twisted itself around my ankle, and tugged my foot out from under me. I went down instantly. The whip felt unpleasantly hot and slippery, even though it wasn't actually touching me, and it was strong, maybe stronger than I was.

I growled. It still wasn't working.

It was time to do something rash.

Another lash of the whip was wrapping itself around my throat and hoisting me into the air, but I ignored that, fumbling in my pocket instead. I found what I was looking for and held it up, making sure that they could see it.

Everyone stopped. *Everyone.*

I'd had that reaction from Tyrfin, in the past. It was like when the cursed sword entered the fight, everyone had to take a moment to appreciate that fact.

This was a little like that. Except that this time they didn't start again.

"Put me down," I said, wheezing a little.

The lash around my throat lowered me to the ground, very, very slowly, and then unwrapped itself from around my neck.

I got my feet steady and then looked around again, checking on things.

Selene and her guy had stopped fighting, and both of them were just staring in my direction. The horseman had the scepter in its hand again, but it wasn't spinning it, and it wasn't trying to stand up.

The third demon was standing dead still. Even its whip was just floating midair like a frozen frame out of a particularly odd film. Including the tendril holding Aiko in the air, where her struggles to get free were getting noticeably weaker.

"Put her down," I snapped at it. The demon responded instantly, lowering her slowly to the ground.

"How did you come by that?" the skinwalker asked. For maybe the second time I'd ever heard, he actually sounded scared. "You don't even know what that *is*."

"Oh," I said lightly, grinning. Rash, maybe, but I'd definitely shaken his control of this fight. "I think I have a pretty good idea what this is." I twirled the blank black card in my fingers, and the demons and the skinwalker alike flinched away a little.

"Death," I said. "But not for me." I grinned. "I'm sure I can think of someone else, though."

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I'm sure you know what this is," I said, holding the card lightly between my fingers. "I'm guessing most of you know where it came from. So, you know. Who here wants to test their power against hers?"

None of the demons moved, not even to breathe or blink. Even the skinwalker was totally still. You could have heard a pin drop, were it not for the sound of ragged, labored breathing from those struggling to shake off the effects of what the various demons had been doing.

I grinned. "That's what I thought," I said. "So let me tell you how this is. I can't take you three. We all know that. But the first of you that pisses me off right now is dead. And considering the source, I'm guessing this is the kind of dead that nobody's coming back from. I use this on you and you're done, permanently."

Snowflake pushed herself to her feet. She was staggering back and forth, apparently unable to keep her balance, and she was panting hard like she was about to throw up.

"I've got no problem with you," I said, although watching that it was hard to convince myself it was true. "My only quarrel here is with the skinwalker. The rest of you can leave now, and I won't seek redress for this."

There was a moment of silence. Then the thin, abstract-looking demon Selene had been fighting folded itself up into nothing. I wasn't sure how to describe it better than that. Its limbs started tucking themselves up into its torso, collapsing into a much smaller space than they should have been able to fit into. Once the limbs were put away its torso compacted itself down into a single point that then vanished completely.

The horseman grinned at me out of both of its mouths, then slapped one hand against the floor. Thick, oily shadows gathered underneath it, stinking of poison and corruption. It sank slowly down into the darkness, taking its scepter with it, with a slow, sucking noise like a body sinking into quicksand. After it was gone the unnaturally thick shadows slowly evaporated, leaving behind nothing more than a foul-smelling black stain on the floor and a lingering sense of unease. I was guessing nothing short of burning down this entire building was going to get rid of those.

I looked at the third demon expectantly. It grinned back at me, a mouth full of needle-like teeth crisscrossing each other in a tangled net of pointy bits. It didn't move, but its whip thrashed and snapped with a sound like a dozen firecrackers going off, and the flames crawling over its skin burned a little hotter and more sulfurous.

"Okay," I said, slipping the card carefully back into my pocket and calling Tyrfin. "I can deal with this."

Then the moment of calm in the eye of the metaphorical storm passed, and we all went back to trying to kill each other.

It started with the demon's whip, moving faster than any of us could react. One lash picked Aiko up off the ground again, cutting her air off just when she was starting to get her wind back. Another tried to do the same to me, but I was quick enough to dodge. Snowflake wasn't, and a third lash wrapped around her neck and pinned her to the ground. She struggled against it, squirming and writhing, but it was pretty obvious she wasn't going to be able to get loose.

The other six reached out to the people I'd brought, snaking through their legs and tripping them up. Normally I wouldn't have thought that would be an effective tactic, but people were still dazed and off-balance. More than a couple hit the ground.

I ignored all that, though I wasn't happy about it. I was pretty freaking upset, in fact, but I wasn't stupid. The demon wasn't the main threat here.

I ran at the skinwalker, brushing the whip out of my way. It had been hot earlier, so that wasn't exactly a surprise, but now it was *burning*, nasty yellow-green flames flickering along its length. I touched it through my gauntlet, rather than with my bare hand, and it still scorched me.

The skinwalker was gesturing slightly, and the reek of his magic filled the air around him like an abattoir on a hot day. I got the impression that he would have liked more time to work on whatever he was doing, but I was already getting too close, so he unleashed it on me ahead of schedule.

If so, I was pretty damn glad I'd chosen to charge him when I did. Even at reduced power, the magic hit me like a truck. There was no impact, physically, but agony like I'd seldom felt hit me all at once. My muscles jerked and spasmed convulsively, almost like I'd been hit with an electrical current, although it didn't feel quite the same.

Standing still, I could probably have stayed standing. Moving at a run I tripped over my own feet and went down hard and fast. I landed badly, cutting myself deeply on the shoulder with Tyrfing and cracking my head against the floor. That dazed me for a second.

The demon was fighting now, and it was doing a pretty damn decent job of it. It was using its whip to tangle and trip people, spreading chaos and knocking people down. It had Aiko dangling on one lash of its whip and a human mage on another, and it swung both of them into people, further disorganizing its enemies and making it hard to attack it without risking friendly fire. Aiko was still clawing at the cord around her neck, but her struggles were getting weaker. Her breathing had been restricted for a while now.

But as effective as it was, there was only one of it, and there were a lot of people attacking it. Some of them were getting through. There were ghouls biting, clawing, and kicking at it, growling in pain as they got burned, but not stopping. The jötnar were more effective; with the cold filling the air around them they were hard to burn, and their axes and swords were doing a better job of penetrating the demon's hide.

I saw that, and then got my head in gear again and pulled Tyrfing out of my shoulder. I was bleeding, but I didn't think it was life-threatening. If it was there wasn't a hell of a lot that I could do about it, so I pushed myself back to my feet.

I was a little unsteady, my muscles still twitching and convulsing in ways that made it hard to keep my balance. But I managed to stagger towards the skinwalker, growling under my breath.

He hit me with yellow fire that smelled as bad as the demon's; I cut part of it out of the air with Tyrfing and endured the rest, wrapping myself in cold. It began to spread, burning across the floor hungrily, but I ignored it. I hadn't had any intention of leaving this building intact anyway.

He hit me with force, and it was only because I could smell his magic building that I was able to react in time. I dodged to the side, and only the edge of his magic clipped me as it passed. It knocked me down and I rolled ten feet backwards, through the fire. I growled, picked myself up again, and resumed my slow stagger forward.

He hit me with lightning, forking yellow electricity leaping unerringly across the space between us. I couldn't take much of the credit for that attack not having the intended effect; Alexis had been the one to work a warding spell against electricity into my armor. The skinwalker hit hard enough to overload that protection, and enough got through to really hurt, but it didn't kill me.

I was getting close now. I could hear shouting behind me, people coordinating against the demon, but I wasn't paying enough attention to really notice what they were saying. My focus was on getting to the skinwalker and bringing him down.

He threw more magic at me. A too-real shadow grabbed at me and tried to pull me down; I cut through it with Tyrfing and shredded what was left with my own power. A cloud of harsh-smelling brown vapor filled the air between us; I held a bubble of clean air around myself as I pushed through. An odd yellow light spread onto the floor between us, strange almost-patterns moving within the light; I held myself in the air and walked over it without touching it.

The skinwalker should have been getting tired by now. Everyone had limits, and he should have been coming up against his, with how much magic he'd been throwing around. But his resources seemed inexhaustible, and he was still going strong.

I was almost in reach, and he backed away, conjuring up a wall of howling wind between us. But I used magic and Tyrfing to force a way through his wall, and he had been standing near the wall already. He didn't have far to run.

The skinwalker still looked calm and collected, but he was moving quicker now. He reached into his coat and threw a cloud of dust into the air. I could smell silver, and the magic in the silver, and I pulled up short, not wanting to touch that dust. It was coming towards me anyway, and I grabbed some of the wind right behind me and twisted it so that it blew the silver dust back towards the skinwalker.

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He grimaced and touched something else under his coat, his lips moving although I couldn't hear what he was saying. I felt a surge of power, heavier and muskier than the skinwalker's norm, and then I he worked his signature magic.

It was entirely unlike a werewolf's change. There was no intermediate state, no prolonged and painful process—no real *process* at all, really. One second there was a guy standing there, a Native American man who was expensively dressed but otherwise pretty unremarkable. The next there was a freaking grizzly bear, its shoulder damn near as high as my head. It had to be around two thousand pounds, and it didn't look happy in the least.

I stopped and stared for a second because, really, you had to for that. It was an incredible specimen, and even knowing what it really was, I still had to pause for a second to admire the sheer physical prowess I was looking at.

I didn't think I'd have been fooled into thinking it was a real bear, though, even if I hadn't known better. Aside from its size, which was remarkable even for a Kodiak, its fur had an unhealthy, jaundiced sort of yellow tone. Its eyes were also intensely yellow, the same yellow as the skinwalker's human form.

He roared and lunged at me, jaws spread wide enough to fit my entire skull inside. His breath hit me and I almost gagged, the stink of carrion on it mingling with the foulness of his magic and producing something worse than the sum of its parts.

It wasn't incapacitating, though, and I dodged aside easily. It felt almost *too* easy, even; my muscular coordination had still been pretty crappy a second before, but now I wasn't having those problems. If anything it felt like I was moving quicker and more easily than usual. I felt stronger.

The skinwalker tried to bring a paw into my head as I slipped to the side of his jaws, and I had to bring my mind back to my immediate surroundings. I ducked under it, and slashed his arm with Tyrfing over my head as I did.

I was beside it now, and it was spinning to face me, teeth snapping at me again. I was expecting that, though, and I was ready. Tyrfing bit into his side above the shoulder and hot blood spurted out, spraying my face. His jaws were still a threat, but I was quick enough to get out of the way, dancing back out of reach.

The skinwalker followed me, but he was clumsy. It was kind of hilarious, really. He didn't know what the hell he was doing in this body. He was all muscle and no grace, no real experience fighting as a quadruped.

He was fast, lunging forward, but I was faster, and a lot less massive. I reversed direction, dropping as I did so to pass under his teeth. I slid under him, again cutting above my own head, opening a long slash from his breastbone down towards his tail. More blood poured over me, getting in my mouth and my eyes, although I didn't quite cut deep enough to open his abdominal cavity.

He could have stepped on me and probably done some damage, but he didn't know his body well enough to know that. He kept moving instead, stepping past me and then turning to bite at me while I was on the ground.

Except that I wasn't. The instant he was passed I was on my feet, and then I was jumping. I normally wasn't good at jumping, but this time it felt easy as breathing. It was like I weighed nothing at all; for a moment at the apex of my leap I almost thought I was going to just keep going, never falling back to earth.

Then I landed on the skinwalker's back, sword first.

He screamed, a sound that didn't remotely resemble a bear. It didn't resemble a human much, either; the closest I could come to a comparison was screeching metal in a car wreck. It was *loud*, enough to hurt. Between the sudden pain at the noise and my damaged shoulder, he managed to shake me off. I flew off and hit the ground hard, rolling.

As I pushed myself to my feet, I got another look at the demon. It was surrounded by jötnar now, carving pieces out of its hide. The flames on the demon's skin were struggling to burn, having a hard time in the cold. Aiko was still dangling by her throat, but she'd stopped moving. As I watched Kyra jumped up onto that lash of the whip and dragged it down to the ground, trying to bite through it. Another of the lashes tried to pull her off, but a pair of ghouls jumped on *that* one and tackled it down.

Selene wasn't fighting. Her body still looked not-quite-right, but she was coordinating things, giving everyone directions to make sure they were where they needed to be.

Something hit me from behind before I could get up and turned back around, knocking me sideways to the ground. A second hit sent me skidding across the floor, rolling over and over. This time I was lucky enough not to hurt myself with my own sword, at least.

I managed to get upright in time to dodge the third hit, feeling it coming from the movement of the air, and turned to face the skinwalker.

He'd changed while I wasn't looking. Instead of a massive bear, he was now in the skin of a truly enormous cat. It was the size and general shape of a tiger, although again, there was something subtly *wrong* with it. Its fur was yellowed, almost mangy-looking, its frame weighed down with more muscle than it could really support.

He swatted at me again, aiming for the head to break my neck this time. I knew what I was fighting now, though, and I could behave appropriately. Rather than try and get away, I stepped *in*, getting closer to him. He still hit me, but I was inside the arc of the swing, and he couldn't do much more than bump me off balance a little.

I, on the other hand, was close enough to be effective. I punched him in the face with my off hand. I hit him hard enough to knock him off balance, and his eyes crossed a little.

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

That bought me time and space enough to cut him again, a heavy slash on his upper front leg. I'd seen the skinwalker's healing in action before, but apparently it wasn't up to overcoming Tyrfing's effects, because he was bleeding heavily.

I heard a sound like a thousand damned souls screaming in agony, and for a second I thought I saw fire and darkness in the room. Then the moment passed, and I couldn't smell the blood and shit and sulfur of the demon any longer. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had just happened, at least in the general sense.

I knew how this fight was going to end, and apparently the skinwalker could see how things were going, too, because he went from fight to flight.

Flight was hard, though. He couldn't run through me, not without risking another cut that he couldn't shrug off or heal. He couldn't get past the entire crowd of jötnar, ghouls, and mages, not now that the demons weren't there to distract them.

So he did what I'd expected. He bolted for the large window that looked out over the sea. He jumped through the glass and hung in midair for a moment before the cat melted into a dirty yellow eagle.

The eagle flew off. I watched for a second as it flapped off towards the water.

Then the mercenaries I'd brought opened fire.

Bullets didn't bother the skinwalker. Not really. I'd seen him get shot before, and it didn't do a whole lot.

But that was being shot once or twice, with a shotgun. This was having ten guys open fire with assault rifles.

It was an entirely different story.

Blood and feathers sprayed, and the eagle tumbled to the street. It hit hard and broke.

I jumped out the window, cushioning my fall enough not to injure myself. I walked over to him, still carrying Tyrfing.

He turned back into his human form. It looked pretty abused; most of the bullet holes were already healed, but his clothing was shredded, hanging off him in rags. I could see the numerous, deep wounds Tyrfing had made, and they were bleeding.

"Not bad," he said. "I don't remember the last time someone got me this bad." He coughed. It sounded painful. "Maybe your mother. She must have bit thirty pounds off me. At least I could heal that."

"I said this was the last time," I said. "I meant it."

Emrys Vaughn

He grinned at me as I raised Tyrfing. "I told an army of demons to go wild in your city if I died," he said as the sword started down.

I didn't have time to stop, and wouldn't have if I could.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It took a minute for people to catch up to me. Most of them couldn't casually drop twenty feet from the window to the street at the bottom of the hill, after all. They had to go back to the door and then circle around.

Aiko was the first to reach me. She was breathing hard, more so than I would normally have expected to be the case from such a short run, but at the moment I thought it could be forgiven. "Is it dead?" she said, slowing to a walk.

"Pretty sure," I said, not looking away from the skinwalker. "I cut his head off with Tyrfing; that's usually fairly reliable. All things considered, though, I'd rather not take any chances."

She snorted. "You never want to take chances," she pointed out. But on this one I'm with you."

I nodded and kept watching for any sign that the corpse wasn't quite as dead as it was supposed to be. I'd sheathed Tyrfing, since I'd already been exposed to a lot more of its curse than was healthy in the past few minutes, but I was ready to hit the skinwalker again at a moment's notice.

Unsurprisingly, the canines were the next to catch up. Kyra stopped not far from me and sat down; she was limping a little on the last few steps, and I knew her maimed leg was hurting her. Even with the assistance of the Wild Hunt's magic, she still wasn't fully healed. Snowflake circled around to stand on the other side of the corpse, staring at it with her iron teeth bared; if it sprang back to life and tried to run in that direction, she would be ready. Anna was even more direct, walking straight up and biting one of the skinwalker's arms completely off at the shoulder.

I couldn't really blame her for that. She was still missing some toes thanks that freak. Besides, it was helpful. When the body didn't even twitch during its violent amputation, it was probably dead.

Probably. I still wasn't looking away from it.

"Okay," I said, as the housecarls and ghouls started catching up. "We need to be back in Colorado Springs soonest. Before I cut his head off, the skinwalker said something about ordering an army of demons to attack the city if he died."

"You think he was telling the truth?" Aiko asked.

I shrugged. "Hard to say. On the one hand, he was an untrustworthy bastard who'd absolutely lie about something like that to save his own skin. On the other, he was a vicious bastard who'd actually *do* it."

She snorted. "Good point."

"Anyway," I continued briskly. "Most of us will be going back to Colorado. Thraslaug, I want you to stay here and deal with the corpse. Can you do that?"

She nodded sharply. "Yes, jarl."

"Good," I said. "I have very specific instructions. Listen carefully, because I'll hold you personally responsible if this doesn't get done the way I want it to. I want this body dismembered, into pieces weighing no more than ten pounds each. I want each piece to be burned separately, and the ashes stored in separate containers. Mix the ashes with at least ten percent salt by volume and keep them in airtight containers. Have the ashes blessed by at least three different priests, from different religions. Once that's done, dump a third of them in the ocean and bring the rest back to the city with you. Do you understand?"

She nodded again. "I understand, jarl."

"All right, then. Take two of the mercenaries and two of the mages and make it happen." I grunted and stretched, feeling my shoulder pull a little where I'd cut it with Tyrfing. It wasn't bleeding much, at least. Probably plugged with more ice. At the rate I was going, it wouldn't be long before I was more ice than flesh.

I felt a twinge of dread at the thought. It felt like a tangible indicator of what I'd been feeling for a while, that I was moving further and further away from what I was and what I wanted to be.

As usual, though, there wasn't time to really worry about it. For now I could just be grateful that I wasn't bleeding out, since wounds inflicted by Tyrfing were ridiculously difficult to heal.

"Okay," I said. "Portal time." I took a deep breath and started gathering power.

"I'll do it," Aiko said abruptly. Her voice was still a little hoarse, but she was breathing easier.

I shrugged and let the magic go. "All right," I said.

She was faster than I was, as always. She was a lot better at this kind of magic. I wasn't sure how much it really meant that she had two tails now instead of one, but I was reasonably confident that she was even quicker and more efficient about it now than she had been before. It barely took two minutes before a hole appeared in the world in front of her.

The two of us went through first and moved out of the way as the others came through. It was always interesting to watch from the outside as people went through an Otherside portal. They weren't conscious, but the way they moved wasn't random, either. They were clearly in control of themselves, and on some level they were aware of their surroundings, even though I knew from experience that most people had no conscious experience of what happened during that time.

There was a sizable pile of bodies on the ground by the time everyone made it through. I checked it over enough to make sure that the worst anyone would have to deal with was intense awkwardness, and then turned to start on the next portal.

To my surprise, Aiko was already working on it, spinning the first tendrils of magic between a pair of enormous trees at the edge of the river.

I frowned. It was a pretty typical place for her to put her portal, but normally we traded off when we could. Not to mention that we were using Inari's Wood as a layover, and Aiko almost always took a few moments to just appreciate it when we passed through there.

"Hey," I said, walking up beside her. "Is everything all right?"

She turned her head towards me a little. I couldn't see her face behind the foxlike mask of her helmet, but her voice was tight. "I was useless back there," she said.

I snorted. "You were the only one who stayed standing when that demon hit us with the psychic bullshit," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but then the other guy took me down like that." She snapped her fingers. "Just totally thrashed me. Not even a fight."

"We all have off days," I said gently.

"You don't get it," she said. "I always told myself I wasn't going to be this person. I'm not the fucking damsel in distress, you know? I don't need anybody to come and rescue me. Except that apparently now I *do*." She turned her attention back to the half-formed portal, and for the space of a long breath nothing more was said. "I'm not good enough," she said at last. "You deserve better."

I took a few seconds trying to think of what to say.

Then I sighed. I never had much luck trying for clever wordplay. It always ended poorly for me. Better to just say what I meant.

"You know I love you, Aiko," I said. "But if you keep talking like this, I might have to smack you."

She looked at me. "What?"

"You're seriously going to whine about not being good enough for me?" I asked. "*Seriously?* Because, what? Scáthach kidnapped you and then there was one fight where you didn't do quite as well as you wanted to?"

"It does sound a little stupid when you phrase it like that," she admitted.

"Is there another way to put it?" I asked. "And yeah, I came to bail your ass out. Because that's what we *do*. If you think that makes you a damsel in distress, then I guess I have to join the club too, because by my count I'm still at least two or three kidnappings ahead of you."

"You know," she said, a little testily, "it makes it pretty hard to have a properly dramatic scene when you keep being all logical about it."

"You're just upset because I'm right," I said smugly. "Now come on. Let's go and kill a bunch of demons. That'll make you feel better."

I could practically hear her rolling her eyes. "Well, when you put it like that how could I say no?" A moment later, she said, "Thanks."

I grinned. "Any time."

Snowflake made a gagging sound in the back of my head. *God, you two are syrupy*, she said in a disgusted tone. *If I wasn't feeling nauseous anyway, I would be now.*

"Okay," I said, walking up to the door of the house. "Selene, Kyi, I want information. Talk to the scouts, talk to Luna's network, talk to *anyone* who might know what's going on in town. I want a full report ready for me in an hour. Make sure all our people hear about what might be happening."

Kyi nodded and hurried off, barking orders in a tangled pidgin of English and Norse. Selene was slower to react, and when she did move she stumbled.

I hurried to catch her and keep her from falling. "Hey," I said. "Are you okay?"

She grimaced. "I should be fine," she said. "I'm pretty sure my physiology is already unnatural enough that I should be able to get over what that thing did to me without any permanent effects. It just hurts for the moment."

"If you're sure," I said, holding her steady as the crowd cleared out around us. After a few seconds, I quietly asked, "If this is for real, how scared should I be?"

Selene sighed and shrugged. The succubus must have been feeling better, because the shrug did things to her anatomy that made Aiko whistle appreciatively and reminded me rather forcefully that we were currently in close physical proximity.

"I don't really know," she said. "I mean, it's always possible that he meant the spiritual kind of demon, like your familiar. If that's what it is, you'd know better than I what to expect. If not, it's still hard to say. It really depends on what kind of demons he brings in."

I nodded, letting go of her. "The ones we fought earlier," I said. "Where do they fall in the hierarchy, roughly speaking?"

She shrugged again. "Middle of the road?" she said. "They aren't bottom feeders, for sure. They're higher up than I ever was. But they aren't the strongest there is, for sure."

"Okay," I said. "That's...well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now get me that report."

Selene nodded. "Will do. What are you doing?"

"Sleep," I said. "I'm exhausted, and I don't think things are going to get easier any time soon."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"I'll come with," Aiko said. "I could use a nap after being, you know, mostly strangled."

Selene smirked. "And here I thought the point was to get some rest," she said dryly. "Well, I'll go get started on that. See you in an hour." She nodded to me again and then walked off.

About ninety minutes later, I was sitting at my desk hearing a rather disappointing report.

The good news was that it appeared that either the skinwalker had lied or else his army of demons was pretty slow off the mark. Thus far none of them had shown up that anyone had heard.

The bad news was that the situation was still pretty terrible. The fire was already contained, which had to be a new record, but it had done a lot of damage in the meantime. Vandals and looters had taken the opportunity to wreak havoc in the part of the city Kikuchi had been keeping more or less pacified; there were ten dead that we knew of, and probably more that we didn't. Several residential areas on the west side of the city were burning or reduced to ashes, and while almost everyone had managed to evacuate in time, it was proving difficult to find places for all of them to stay.

And I was the only one in a position to do anything about it. The local government was still in shambles; apparently the mayor had been killed by a particularly nasty-minded fae of some sort, and no one was sure who would replace him. State resources were doing better at recovery, but mostly focused in Denver; the local werewolves there were doing a lot to keep things intact, but they were still struggling with the much larger population.

I arranged to commandeer a few hotels that still had functioning water and power to house the refugees, then turned my attention to the vandals. I didn't have a lot of pity for anyone who would take advantage of the current situation to serve their own ends. If they'd just been stealing to feed themselves, I might have forgiven them. Given that they'd taken to raping and murdering innocent people, I sent a group of housecarls and didn't tell them too much about what to do, beyond that I didn't want to hear about this problem any more.

Then someone knocked on the door.

I looked at it. Kyi looked at it. Selene looked at it. Aiko looked at it.

They knocked again. I said, "Well, somebody better answer that."

Kyi leapt to obey. The person on the other side staggered in and collapsed into her seat.

He looked like a person. But he...wasn't quite right. I couldn't think of any better way to phrase it than that. His features were warped, his face asymmetric in a way I couldn't quite place. The muscles under his skin did strange things when he moved.

It took me several seconds to recognize him as one of my housecarls. Nóttolfr, his name was. One of the few new recruits that Kyi had respected.

He sure as hell didn't look like this the last time I saw him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I was patrolling to the east," he said. His voice was slurred and warbling, barely comprehensible. "Heard a noise inside an abandoned building and went inside. Saw something weird. Tried to kill it, didn't get close. It did this to me."

I glanced at Selene. "Demon?"

She nodded, her lips pressed together into a thin white line. "The same one that got me earlier, or one very similar to it," she said.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Okay," I said. "Did you see any others with it?"

"No," Nóttolfr slurred. "Just the one."

"Okay," I said again. In a lot of ways, it didn't matter. One, a dozen, either way it meant the same thing. It meant the skinwalker hadn't been bluffing, not entirely. Besides which, if it was comparable to the three he'd summoned earlier, one was a threat in itself. One had been enough to incapacitate everyone I had put together.

"Selene?" I said quietly. "How hard would it be for me to get in touch with Iblis?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

I wasn't sure what to expect when Iblis showed up.

I mean, Selene wasn't sure he'd show up *at all*. She was very low in the hierarchy of Iblis's little theme park, even before she got kicked out entirely. He wasn't remotely obligated to come when she called.

I was fairly confident that he would come. I mean everyone *else* seemed quite eager to jump at any chance to screw me over; why would the deity who had deliberately built himself in the image of the devil be any different?

But the problem with using the devil as inspiration was that there were an effectively unlimited number of ways one could do so. Would he go for the mindless, tormented beast of the Divine Comedy? The smooth-talking businessman who held a debate with Mr. Webster, won every point of discussion, lost the battle, and won the war? Or maybe he would end up going full-on *Sorrows of Satan* with a tragic, tormented aesthetic?

There were just so many versions of the role he'd cast himself in that I couldn't predict which one he would go with. That was a source of considerable stress. If he went for the more deal-making style of devil, I was screwed in the long run, but not really any worse than I already was; I already had *Loki* playing that role, after all. On the other hand, if he went for a more brutal, destructive approach, deliberately calling him here might be the equivalent of putting out a fire by dousing it in gasoline.

There wasn't much I could do to prepare for it, though, and my situation was already so precarious that the risk seemed worth it. In the time it took for Selene to call her old boss, we got reports of another three demons in the city. On the north end, one of them had claimed an elementary school and was doing *things* that made even the ghoul who brought me the report a little nauseous. The police had gotten to that one before I did, which turned out to be unfortunate for them, because they were pretty helpless to do anything about it. The squad they'd sent in had been just more puppets for the monster's games, as had the handful of passerby who wandered too close by accident. Now they were maintaining an armed perimeter a thousand feet from the school, and shooting anyone who managed to slip through. It was, by all accounts, much kinder than allowing them to get near to the building.

The second was either a demon in the same vein as Legion, or a denizen of Hell that operated similarly. Its favorite tactic was apparently possessing someone and provoking someone else to violence. It stood there and took whatever they did, not fighting back at all, until its current host was on the brink of death. Then it switched bodies with the aggressor, leaving them to slowly die from the wounds they'd inflicted, while it continued the cycle in their body. It was on the fifth round of this already, and while my people were working with the cops to keep its current host isolated, it could only work for so long.

The third was more of an enigma, if only because we couldn't figure out what it was actually doing. When it got someone, they just...disappeared. Completely. There was no sign that they'd ever even existed. People's memories of the ones that vanished got fuzzy; they couldn't remember having interacted with them, couldn't remember their names. The only reason we even knew about it was that one of Luna's contacts had realized that he didn't recognize the woman in his wedding photos, and he'd managed to figure out what happened.

Of the four demons we knew about, that one scared me the most, simply because it was such a total unknown. It could pick us off one by one and we wouldn't even know until too late. Already I was keeping close track of everyone I relied upon or cared about, making sure that the list wasn't getting shorter, and terrified that I wouldn't know if it was. Hell, we didn't even know what happened to the people it took. I was hoping they were dead, that they'd simply ceased to exist at the same moment that they vanished from everyone else's world. But I had a nasty suspicion that it wasn't anything that merciful and gentle.

Between the four of them, fighting back on my own was out of the question. One demon had been a serious challenge for roughly half of my available forces, when they were fresh and prepared. Four of them against us when we were tired and wounded was not a fight worth considering. Particularly when Selene, our one and only expert on the topic, readily admitted that she had no idea how we could win. She thought we might be able to beat the body-warping one that had gotten to Nóttolfr, and she was moderately confident that she personally was immune to the influence the demon in the school exerted on everything around itself. But we would probably suffer major losses against the first one, and she had no ability to extend her resistance to the second to anyone else.

Against the other two, she was as out of her depth as the rest of us.

Thus, about twenty minutes after first hearing about the demon in town, I was sitting in my throne when the door swung open.

The man that walked in was...well, I wasn't disappointed. He was tall, well over six feet, and very pale. He had black hair, with a prominent widow's peak, and black eyes. He was wearing a black silk suit that looked like it cost more than most cars; the only splash of color was a handkerchief the deep, intense red of freshly spilled blood tucked into his breast pocket.

"Good morning," he said, taking off his black fedora and handing it to Kyi as he walked past her. The jotun took the hat without hesitation or apparent thought, then looked at it like she didn't know what to do with it. The man in the black suit kept walking without breaking stride, his black leather shoes *clicking* against the floor.

"Good morning," I said, watching him carefully. My housecarls moved to surround him, as did the ghouls, though none got within about twenty feet. It wouldn't do a damned thing if he decided to start something, of course, but I could understand why they did it. You had to do *something*.

"You called?" he asked, smiling. His teeth were a little too large, a little too sharp. Nothing obvious, but if a normal person were to see that smile walking by them on the street, I was guessing they'd walk quickly and look behind themselves a lot until they were safely ensconced in their home, and they wouldn't know why.

"Depends," I said cautiously. "Are you Iblis?"

"I've been called such," he said, continuing to walk closer. I could smell fire now, and smoke, with just a hint of sulfur.

Next to me, Aiko was sitting very, very still, and I could practically smell her tension and anxiety. I couldn't blame her. Even by my standards, this was a pretty insanely dangerous thing to do.

"I've heard a story," I said. "I've heard that when you heard about Hell, you thought it was an interesting concept. So you got together with some friends and built it."

He kept smiling and walking. He was pretty close now, within ten feet of me. "That's an interesting story," he said. "Where did you hear it?"

"From one of the friends in question," I said. "But he said that you were the architect, the driving force behind the project and the one that did most of the work."

"How intriguing," he said. "And why do you feel a need to tell me this story?"

"Because I'm having problems with Hell right now," I said. "And it seems like the architect of its design could probably make those problems go away."

"I could," he acknowledged, starting to circle around me. He was still walking at a very slow, regular pace.

I swallowed. "So what's the price?"

"Traditionally I should ask for your soul," he said, almost directly behind me now. "But that would make me a poacher, and I cannot abide a poacher. I could take your tongue, I suppose, but you don't sing so sweetly as the mermaid. The chance to whisper sin into your heart seems redundant." I wasn't turning to watch him—I couldn't afford to, in terms of image—but I could hear that narrow, too-sharp smile in his voice. "We are faced with a conundrum, it seems."

He stepped back into view, and I relaxed a little. Only a very little, since whether I could see Iblis really had no bearing on what he could do to me if he chose, but there was something about having him walking behind me that really ratcheted up the tension level.

Suddenly, without any warning, he reached out and grabbed Selene by the wrist, pulling her close. "Or perhaps I should take all your problems with Hell," he said, watching me rather than her. For her part, Selene wasn't struggling at all, wasn't even breathing. "Including this one."

"No," I said.

"Oh?" Iblis was still smiling. He was close enough that I could see fire in his eyes, behind the black. I didn't think it was my imagination.

"No," I repeated. "Even if that weren't a suicidal trade for me, I don't sacrifice my people."

"Very well," he said, releasing her. The succubus stepped back to where she had been standing, her features so blank and serene that it had to be a mask. "What else? A year of your life...but you don't age. A year of service...but, again, poaching. This is proving quite troublesome. Tell me, jarl, what do *you* think would be a fair deal?"

I swallowed again. This was...well, it wasn't good. If my offer was too low, I might lose my chance at any kind of deal. Too high, and I would effectively have already accepted; I wouldn't be able to haggle it down, not when it had been *my* offer. And I had no idea what to expect from Iblis. I'd never dealt with him before; I didn't know what to expect from him, beyond the vaguest of generalities. On the whole, this was very nearly the worst bargaining position I could have been put in.

And, judging by the quietly malicious quality of his smile, Iblis damn well *knew* it.

"You've already covered most of the traditional options," I said, more just to buy time than anything. "I'm not willing to give my people to you, which rules out mass sacrifice. With a lesser demon, I could offer power, but I don't know that I have anything to offer you in that regard. If you were caged, I could offer freedom, but obviously in your case that is, again, not an option."

"Are you trying to flatter me?" he asked. "It won't make me more amenable to a deal."

"No, actually," I said. "I'm just stating facts. Thinking aloud, mostly. Like you said, this situation makes it hard to come up with something appropriate." I kept thinking, and then a particularly ugly thought occurred.

I thought about it for a few more seconds, and it still seemed like the best idea I could come up with. It was a terrible idea, the sort of thing that always, *always* backfired; people always tried for clever ways to get around it, and they always got screwed in the end. In a way, though, that made it perfect for this. The fact that it was such a classic mistake should make it alluring to Iblis, since he was apparently a traditionalist.

And I, like every schmuck in every Faustian story, thought I was the guy who would actually get away with it.

"Well," I said slowly, "I could always offer you my firstborn child."

He froze in his slow circle. "Oh, now that is interesting," he said quietly. "You did mention not giving your people to me...but, of course, you would plan never to have children. You don't have any progeny yet, so I couldn't simply claim one that's already born. And naturally I would expect that you would make a mistake, or forget, and I would get my prize anyway...oh, you are a clever one."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

Aiko shifted uncomfortably in her seat next to me. "Um," she said. "I don't think this is such a good idea."

"Don't be so hasty," Iblis said. "There are details to work out, of course. I think we would both appreciate a precise legal definition of what would qualify as your offspring. Other than that I think this is a *very* promising arrangement."

"Speaking as the probable mother of the child in question," Aiko said dryly, "I do think I should have a voice here."

"We don't want children anyway," I said reasonably. "We're both pretty clear on that, last I checked. As long as we make the terms clear, we should be fine."

"Many have said as much," Iblis said with a sly smile. "Some have even been right."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay," I said. "I would expect this to be limited to my physical, genetic children. You don't get to claim ideas, intellectual works, physical creations, or any other metaphorical children."

"Fair enough," Iblis said. "Selene, take this down. We'll want a physical copy of the contract. So, literal children only. In return, I would expect you to agree not to adopt a child. Taking on a protégé or apprentice is acceptable, but you can't formally adopt anyone as your heir and inheritor. At least, not until your debt is paid."

"Guys," Aiko said. "I'm serious. This is not a good idea."

"I'm aware," I said dryly. "Okay, no adoptions. I can live with that. That doesn't limit my ability to pass on an inheritance. I can't pass on the title or authority to a designated adopted heir, but I can give my possessions to whoever I want. You don't get anything if I kick it."

"Fair," Iblis said. "Let's see, what else...severance clause and rules for default. If you die without producing offspring, the deal is null and void and neither you nor any inheritor owes me a debt. If you have a child and refuse to give it to me, you'll be considered in default of contract, and you'll owe me any one service of my choosing. If I fail to remove the servants of Hell from this city, I will be in default, and I will owe you similarly."

"Fair," I said. "But let's get more specific. You will remove all demons with an origin in or affiliation with Hell from the bounds of Colorado Springs, other than Selene, as well as any and all entities which were contracted or directed specifically to cause harm to the city by the skinwalker I recently killed. You will do so immediately upon the conclusion of our deal. You will remove them permanently. You will ensure that none of them seek redress from or revenge on me, or for any reason return to Colorado Springs, or send any of their employees, agents, proxies, representatives, affiliates, or associates to Colorado Springs, or exercise any power upon me, my employees, agents, proxies, affiliates, or associates from outside the city, or to encourage, direct, or allow any of their employees, agents, proxies, representatives, affiliates, or associates to do the above. You will additionally take no

action to cause me to produce a child by any means, nor will you direct or allow any of your employees, agents, proxies, representatives, affiliates, or associates to do so. Any child which results from any active interference by you or any of your employees, agents, proxies, representatives, affiliates, or associates will not be regarded as my child, will not be eligible as my heir and inheritor, and will not be applicable as my payment to you under this bargain."

"You're surprisingly good at this game," Iblis commented.

My smile was just about as friendly as his, although it had more wolf and less snake in it. "I've had good teachers."

He nodded. "Very well, those terms are acceptable. You will take no action to destroy or otherwise render unsuitable any offspring you do produce, nor will you allow or encourage any of your affiliates to do so. Contraception is reasonable, but any form of abortion or infanticide is not. Additionally, you will not deliberately produce offspring which are in any way deformed, physically or mentally impaired, or otherwise of lower value than would be expected. If you do, you will be considered in default of contract."

"Fine," I said. "But the clause against harm or destruction applies only to viable offspring which are fertilized and whose existence I am aware of. Gametes do not qualify. I am not responsible for naturally occurring events or force majeure events, nor am I responsible if I do not have reason to think that an action or instruction will lead to these consequences. If I or an associate has reason to believe that carrying the child to term will place anyone in danger, or that the child is for any reason unsuitable, this person may contact you and you will be obligated to resolve the situation in a manner which resolves the danger and any unsuitability without in any way harming me or any of my employees, agents, proxies, representatives, affiliates, or associates. If you are unable or unwilling to do so, that child is no longer covered by the clause against harm or destruction."

"Reasonable," he said. "You may not act or instruct or allow anyone else to act in a manner which would produce such a situation."

I opened my mouth to agree to that.

Then Aiko punched me in the face.

It was not a playful punch. In fact, it really freaking hurt. I'd taken my helmet off for this meeting, and she hadn't taken off her gauntlets. Her gauntlets weren't spiked, at least, but it still drew blood.

"Ow," I said, wiping the blood away with my hand. "What was that for?"

"Winter," she said. "You can't do this. You *can't*."

"You have a better idea?" I asked. "Because I don't. I really, really don't."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

She took a deep breath and let it out. "Get one," she growled. "Because this? This is a *really shitty* idea. You *cannot* agree to sell our firstborn child."

"Whyever not?" Iblis asked reasonably. "It isn't an unheard of bargain to strike, by any means."

Aiko looked away from me. When she spoke, she sounded a great deal less unsure of herself, and not happy in the least. "Because I already did."

Chapter Twenty-Six

I blinked. "Wait a second," I said. "You *already* sold our kid?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "Well," she said. "Not *ours*. Just, you know. Mine."

Iblis broke out laughing. It was a full-throated laugh, unrestrained and unselfconscious, while still managing to sound sophisticated. "Oh, my," he said. His voice sounded completely smooth and normal, even though he was still laughing. "That is choice. Do tell, miss. I must hear the details."

"The details are none of your business," she said testily.

"Au contraire," he said, with the same sharp, snaky smile on his face. "As your arrangement is apparently interfering with my ability to complete a bargain with the jarl, it is quite literally my business. I'm afraid I simply won't be satisfied until I know the full details of this prior arrangement."

Aiko took another deep breath and let it out slowly. "Fine," she said. "Winter, you remember we talked about how I got out of the Courts, right?"

"Sure," I said. "You made a deal with Ryujin. I believe your exact phrasing was that you gave him 'ten years of service, and a few other things.'"

"Yeah," she said. "Well, uh...this is the other thing. I promised I'd let him raise my eldest son. I didn't tell you before now because, you know, not really relevant? Like you said, we've both always been pretty clear about not wanting anything to do with children, so it didn't seem important."

I was still trying to figure out how to respond to that when Iblis beat me to it. "What about a daughter?" he asked reasonably. "I mean, there are ways to take care of these things, yes? I'm sure you know people who could provide assistance, or I could make arrangements at a very reasonable rate."

Aiko cleared her throat. "I, ah. I did also make a deal about that. I promised my eldest *daughter* to a noble of the Daylight Court. I never got entirely clear on what she wanted to do with said daughter, but the impression I got was that I probably wouldn't be seeing the kid again."

Iblis broke down laughing again. I was staring at Aiko. "This is impressive," I said. "I mean, even by your standards."

"What?" she said defensively. "It isn't like you weren't about to do the same thing! I just beat you to the punch."

"I cannot believe you two," Selene commented. She had stopped writing and was now just watching the scene with a sort of amused disgust. "This is...only you, *only* you, could seriously be having this discussion."

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I tried to maintain a properly indignant air, but lost it and started laughing just as hard as Iblis. The absurdity of the whole situation was just too much for me. Aiko kept her innocent facade for a second or two longer before she broke down as well, and the two of us wound up leaning on each other just to stay upright in our seats.

"Okay," Iblis said after a minute or so of laughter, in which even some of the jötnar joined. "As delightful as this is, and I assure you that that is *quite*, business is still waiting. Now, as much as I do enjoy this sort of bargain, I believe the kitsune has a valid objection. You can hardly provide both me and whichever of her creditors ends up with a valid claim to the child with a valid recompense. I am bargaining for the whole of your offspring, not a reduced portion or a partial payment, so a conflict there would be very serious."

"Yeah," I said. "Aiko? I'm guessing you don't want to pay the default clause on your deals?"

She shifted a little. "No," she said. "Definitely not."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. "So there's a few ways I could see this going. First off, we could make the bargain and count on never having to pay up. If the debt ever comes due, we'd have to pick one side or the other to default on. No offense intended, Iblis."

"None taken," he said with a sly smile. "I enjoy this sort of dealing."

"Bad idea," Aiko said. "Eventually something would go wrong. You just *know* it would. Either one is one thing; we fuck up as it is and the worst thing that happens is we have to hand over a baby to the fae. Which, you know, is a horrible thing to do and all that, but we could deal with it. Setting ourselves up to default on one of these bargains is a lot riskier."

"Yeah," I said. "That was kind of my thought, too. So that brings us to option two. We go back to square one and try to come up with something else that I could offer Iblis for his help. But we weren't having a lot of luck with that earlier, and I don't know whether we'd be able to work out another deal."

She grimaced. "And the whole time there are demons laying waste to shit. Pass."

I nodded. "Option three," I said. "Tell Iblis thanks but no thanks, and try to deal with the demons ourselves."

"We would lose," Selene interjected quietly. "I've been trying to think of ways that you could beat them, and I don't have anything. Every way I can imagine any conflict between you and them going ends with your forces being slaughtered or worse. Not taking into account any other demons or allied forces that may be present."

"That's kind of how I see it going too," I said. "Theoretically we could ask someone else for help—Skrýmir, Loki, and Coyote spring to mind—but I doubt they'd be any easier to deal with than Iblis."

"Most of them wouldn't help at all, actually," Iblis said helpfully. "Poaching, again. It was a cooperative affair, but Hell is very much my project. It would be quite rude for my associates to interfere with this situation, particularly given that you've already approached me."

I sighed. "Of course," I said. Then I looked at Aiko and shrugged helplessly. "That's all I've got," I said. "You have any other alternatives? Because I'm open to suggestions right now, believe me."

"Run away?" she suggested hopefully. Then she sighed. "No, I guess not. Your whole actually taking responsibility thing makes things can be so inconvenient."

"You know you love that about me," I said dryly. "I believe the term you used in the past was adorable."

"Well, yeah. But still. Inconvenient."

Iblis cleared his throat. "If we may," he said. "There is one alternative I don't think you've mentioned."

"Please enlighten us," I said. "Because right now I think we're getting nowhere."

"Actually fulfill your end of the bargain," he said. "Give me a child."

I stared at him. "I thought we just covered all the ways that's a terrible idea."

"Not at all," he said impatiently. "We've established that for your bargain to come into conflict with the kitsune's is an undesirable outcome. *However*, those two bargains are not necessarily in conflict. Her deals were both focused on her own eldest children; the one you have outlined is focused on your firstborn. There is nothing whatsoever forcing these entities to one and the same."

I continued to stare. "Are you suggesting that we try to establish the same kid as two different legal entities?" I asked. "Because I don't think that's going to work. I mean, politics get weird, but I don't think you can sell the same commodity to two different people under different names. Unless you work in finance, I guess, but I thought even *you* had standards."

Iblis sighed. "Are you always this slow?" he asked, tapping one foot impatiently. "Let me make myself plain, then. What I propose is the following. You, Winter, conclude the deal we've largely outlined here and agree to it. I will remove the demons, as contracted, leaving your city in a state of relative peace. You then procreate with someone *other* than the kitsune. The resulting child would have no legal or hereditary connection to her; her creditors could make no plausible claim on its life. You would still have to worry about possible consequences from the debts she owes, but nothing any worse than you already have been. Your debt to be would already be paid, removing any possible conflict between your respective contracts."

"I notice," I said, "that this plan entails me giving you a kid."

He smiled. "Naturally."

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I regarded him for a moment, then sighed. "Okay," I said. "I honestly cannot believe I'm even considering this, but...why the hell do you even want my offspring? I only offered because it seemed like a traditional sort of bargain to make. What would you be doing with this hypothetical child?"

"Suffice to say that it need never trouble you again," he said. "I would not be sending it after you as an assassin, if that's what concerns you. You would make a poor Arthur."

"Actually," I said, "that doesn't suffice. What would you be doing with it?"

"Neither you nor any of your associates would be harmed," he said.

"You aren't answering my question," I pointed out. "That makes me think you know that I wouldn't agree if I knew the answer."

He looked around. "Everyone not a demon or involved in this discussion, clear the room," he ordered. There was steel in his voice. The easygoing, deal-making devil was gone, replaced by the General of Hell's Legions, the fallen angel who stood against the holy host and didn't flinch, the being whose pride was so great that he had shattered the world rather than bow. The note of command in his voice was so strong that I damn near jumped to obey myself, and it wasn't even directed at me.

The room was empty within a few seconds. The only people who didn't head for the exits were me, Aiko, and Selene. Even Snowflake got up and left, though I could feel that she was *pissed* at doing so.

"All right," Iblis said once the rest were gone and the doors were firmly closed, settling back into the former persona again. "I'll be frank with you, Winter. Truth is, I don't entirely know what I'll do with your child yet. It's going to depend on how the kid turns out. If you breed true, then yeah, I might get some use out of it. I'm guessing it'll turn out to be a bruiser, but you've got some other skills and influences going on as well, so it might end up filling a different role. Even if it turns out useless, though, it'll still be a status symbol and some new blood. Your bloodline could be pretty useful, actually; we'd have to see how it goes, but I think there are some pretty promising hybrids that could come out of that."

I closed my eyes briefly, fighting back an inexplicable wave of nausea. Even by my standards, this conversation was just...unreal.

"This is freaking bizarre," Aiko said, echoing my thoughts. "Are you seriously talking about *breeding* his kid?"

"Sure," Iblis said. "Why not?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"Why would you even *want* to?" I burst out. "What in Hell, literally, would you want with my bloodline? It's not like I'm freaking pedigreed!"

"Are you seriously asking me that?" he asked incredulously. "You're Fenris's grandchild. All else aside, that alone would make this a valuable opportunity. Add in the jotun heritage, the werewolf in

you, and the unique blend of influences you've been subjected to since birth, and this is easily one of the best chances I've had to add some new blood to Hell in this century. And that's not even taking into account the performance of your child itself, which I fully expect to be respectable. If it takes after you at all, it might be *very* useful."

I closed my eyes again. "Okay," I said after a few seconds. "So...well, that answers that, I guess. Now that I know far more about why you want this than I'm really comfortable with, how would this prospective child be treated? Because, no offense or anything, but Hell doesn't exactly have a reputation for being pleasant to live in. Kind of the opposite."

"It would be treated as the child of one of my allies," Iblis said. "You can ask your employee whether that is suitable."

I looked at Selene, who shrugged. "It isn't a bad life," she said. "There are better, but there are also a lot worse. They wouldn't lack for much of anything, and people would be trying to get on their good side. There's a hierarchy and you're expected to pull your weight, but it isn't terrible. The rules aren't ridiculous, and mostly they only give people jobs they're all right with doing. Starting off with the respect and prestige they'd have for being related to you and being under Iblis's protection, they'd be about as safe as you could ask for, and they'd have plenty of opportunity to climb the ladder if they want to."

I stared at her. "I thought you got kicked out for saying *bless you*," I said incredulously. "That doesn't exactly sound like rules not being ridiculous."

She snorted. "Oh, come on," she said. "Don't tell me you *believe* that. I was tired of the job, and I wanted to move on to working somewhere else for a while. Getting kicked out was a convenient fiction; it made it so that I could leave in a way that left the door open for me to come back if I wanted to. Making it ridiculous and insane was my grandfather's sense of humor at work."

"Oh," I said. "So...you might go back?"

She shrugged. "Maybe eventually. Not any time soon; I like working for you."

"Okay," I said. "That's good. So...you're painting a pretty idyllic picture here."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," she said. "It's still, you know, Hell. It isn't a *nice* place. But the point is more making things miserable for the people bring in than for the actual demons. For the people working there, it isn't half bad."

"So the opposite of a theme park, then," Aiko chipped in.

Iblis cackled delightedly, and even Selene grinned. "Yeah, I guess you could say that," the succubus said. "It's up to you, boss. But Iblis is good to his word, and from what he's described this isn't a terrible fate."

"And the kid could leave any time," I said.

Iblis shrugged. "Sure. It would be the same sort of arrangement Selene has. If it decides to leave, an excuse would be fabricated to let it happen; if it comes back, an excuse would be fabricated for that as well."

"In which case it would be in your best interest to treat them well," I noted. "That way they wouldn't *want* to leave."

Iblis's smile was sly and knowing. "Hell can be a very pleasant place," he commented. "You can get things there that are only available in a handful of places in the world. And we don't even charge the employees for most of them."

I took a deep breath and then nodded. "I'm guessing you have a way of arranging for the child to, you know, happen," I said.

"Naturally," he said. "I have people who would be grateful for the prestige they would be accorded them as a result. They can ensure that it only takes one, ah, *session* to achieve the desired goal. Although their methods are rather...traditional, so you're aware."

"Okay," I said. "I think that's all my questions." I looked at Aiko. "What do you think?"

She looked surprised, although I could tell it was an act. "Me?"

"Yes, you," I said dryly. "Come on. I'm not about to make this decision without asking you first. It feels all kinds of wrong, but I really think this might be the best option. If you aren't willing to go there, though, it's off the table, no questions asked."

"Oh, sure," she said. "Put this on me." She sighed. "Honestly, this sounds like a pretty sweet deal to me. You're the responsible one here, so it probably isn't a huge surprise that I would go for an offer like this one. This is actually a lot better than either of the bargains I made, for everyone involved. I'd probably go for it. One condition, though."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I want in on it."

I must have been staring, because she snorted. "Not the kid thing," she said. "*Hell*, no. I am still solidly opposed to having children of any sort, in any way. But if you're having debauched sex with a bunch of demons, you are not leaving me behind."

"The family that plays together stays together, eh?" Iblis said, sounding amused.

"Something like that," Aiko agreed. "And also it sounds like fun. I've never done it, and I might not get another chance."

"It can easily be arranged," he assured us. "It's a slightly unusual provision, but I doubt it will give my people any trouble."

"Also, Selene doesn't have any involvement in it," I mentioned. "I made a prior agreement not to have any interaction of that sort with her."

Iblis shrugged. "She doesn't work for me at the moment anyway," he said. "But we can add a clause to that effect, sure."

"Good," I said. "Also, if this *session* doesn't work out for any reason, our deal is still over and done. You don't keep hounding me, you don't show up in the event of any other children and exert a claim."

He smiled. "I wondered if you'd catch that one," he murmured. "Yes, that can be arranged."

I took a deep breath, and then nodded. "Okay," I said. "Let me see the contract."

"Allow me to consolidate it for smoother reading," Iblis said, snapping his fingers. A large scroll appeared in front of me, along with a knife and a pen.

I took my time reading over the contract. It looked legitimate. As far as I could tell, all of the provisions and clauses I'd asked for were there. There were even some protections I hadn't thought to ask for, like an agreement to ensure that the blood connection between me and the child couldn't be used to target harmful magic in either direction.

I didn't like that one bit. Being given freebies like that made me nervous and suspicious. But the deal still looked legitimate, and unless I was overlooking something big I wasn't actually getting screwed. As far as I could tell everything checked out.

It took me almost an hour to work through the full length of the contract and read it over for loopholes and vulnerabilities. Iblis just stood and watched the whole thing, silently, with a slight smile.

Finally, I took a deep breath and picked up the knife. It wasn't hard to draw enough blood to sign on the dotted line.

Iblis was next to me almost before I was finished, scrawling something on the line under mine. It was a complicated, twisty sigil that seemed too intricate for the number of strokes he'd made to draw it. The edges were strangely blurry, and it was hard to really look at the symbol; my eyes didn't want to focus on it, and trying gave me a headache.

"This is my copy," he said, taking the scroll and rolling it up. The scroll *also* stayed on the table, identical right down to the signatures. "That one's yours to keep, and I'll also leave a copy with a neutral party. Loki work for you?"

"One with Loki," I said. "One with the eldest Queen of the Midnight Court. I don't like only having one backup copy."

He smiled sharply. "Someone's been taking lessons," he purred. "Well, it's been a pleasure doing business with you, jarl."

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"You'll remove the demons, then?"

He waved one hand carelessly. "Oh, I did that as soon as we started negotiations. I was confident we'd reach a deal, and I felt good faith required that I didn't leave them to continue their depredation through the negotiation process. My people will be along shortly to finalize the process. Have a good day, children. You're both quite welcome to visit Hell."

He sauntered off, whistling "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" as he did.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nineteen hours later, I staggered back into the building and collapsed into the throne.

Selene was there almost before I sat down, handing me a cup of tea and a cheese Danish. The room was otherwise empty. "Where's Aiko?" she asked.

"Sleeping," I groaned. "Which is where I want to be, by the way."

She smirked. "I could have warned you about that one. Leaving the client too tired to walk is considered a point of pride."

I sighed. "Yes, well, they should be very proud." I downed the tea, ate the pastry in three seconds flat, and then rubbed my forehead. "Did I do the right thing?" I asked quietly.

She was silent for a couple of seconds. Then she said, "Well, keep in mind that I used to *do* that job. So to some extent this is the party line talking. But honestly, this kind of deal makes a lot of sense to me. From where I'm standing, you didn't do anything wrong."

"That's kind of what worries me," I said. "I'm agreeing with the party line of *Hell* right now. That seems like it should be grounds to take a serious look at your morals, you know? And on the surface, this feels like it was horribly unethical. But when I try to figure out *how* it was unethical, I keep coming up blank."

"Well," she said slowly, "I'm just throwing this out here, so feel free to tell me if I'm out of line, but has it occurred to you that the problem might be that *you're* talking the party line?"

"I don't get it."

"Look," she said. "You said that it feels unethical even though you can't figure out why it would be. What if that's because you've been taught by society that what you did was wrong, but it actually isn't? That's just years of conditioning talking."

"I think," I said after a few seconds, "that that's a very tempting line of thought. Under that reasoning I could justify anything by saying that the argument against it is just the product of an irrational society."

"No," she said. "Because you still asked yourself whether it was right. As long as you ask the question, you aren't going to dismiss those arguments without thinking."

"And you'd trust my opinion to that extent?"

"Yes," she said. That simple. No hesitation, no doubt.

"That makes one of us," I muttered, rubbing my forehead. "Okay. You know him better than I do. How likely is Iblis to screw me over on this?"

"Not very," Selene said with a shrug. "He's not a bad sort as long as you deal with him on his level. I mean, don't get me wrong, he'll make your life hell if you cross him, no pun intended. If you had decided to never have kids to get around the contract you signed, he'd have found a way to get you on it anyway. Guaranteed. But if you're dealing with him in good faith, and you keep your side of the deal, you don't have a whole lot to worry about."

"That's some comfort, anyway," I said. "So how bad is it? You should have had time to get solid intel by now."

She hesitated. "Are you sure you don't want to get some rest first?" she suggested hopefully. "You know, before you hear the damage report?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. "You know," I said, opening them, "there's not a chance that I'll be getting any sleep before I hear it after you said that. Tell me the damage, please."

"If you're sure," she said dubiously. "You want me to take it one by one?"

"Yeah," I said. "One demon at a time should be fine."

"All right. The first one, the flesh-twister, it got fourteen people before we managed to isolate it. Five of them are dead now. The other nine...if the surgeons are skilled enough, the victims might be able to move on some day. They'll never be what they were, but they might recover to some extent."

"Might," I said. "To some extent. That doesn't sound very hopeful."

She looked me in the eye and then looked away again. "It isn't, jarl. But that's still the best news I have for you today."

I nodded. Not surprising, really. We were talking about demons, after all. Creatures made explicitly to be evil, to be destructive. Small wonder the news wasn't good. "What about Nóttolfr?" I asked. "He was exposed to that demon, correct?"

She didn't meet my eye. "He is...*alive*," she said. "Functional, broadly speaking. In some ways more so than before his encounter. The primary effects on him were aesthetic. It is...unlikely that he will be able to interact normally with others again. His social life is effectively dead."

I nodded. "Okay. Next demon?"

"The one in the school," she said. "It got most of the students, the faculty and staff, two squads of police officers, and quite a few people that just wandered too close. The total count is at two hundred and fourteen."

I winced. "More than two hundred?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, jarl. That situation was not quarantined swiftly or effectively. It would have been less harmful if we had been handling it, probably, but as it was the damage was very considerable."

"Apparently," I said. "Do you have any better idea of what it was *doing* to them? The last I heard, it was still pretty vague."

"We know," she said. "Broadly speaking. Individual details are harder to find out, since only the victims could tell us the full nature of what happened, and most of them are not reliable witnesses at this point."

I winced. "How many are still alive?"

"One hundred and sixty-four."

"Any chance of them recovering?"

"No." Again, it was very simply stated, without any hesitation or the slightest hint of doubt.

"You're confident of that?"

"Absolutely," she said. "That demon was a creature of madness, jarl. Its purpose, its nature, is to break down minds and reshape them to suit its will. Those who were subject to its influence are mad. They are mad, entirely and dangerously insane. It might be subtle, they might seem healthy for the moment, but they are still broken."

I was silent for a long moment. "Is there any way to help them?" I asked at last.

Selene shook her head. "No," she said. "There is a degree of damage from which recovery is not possible. All of those victims which are still alive spent enough time in its presence to cross that threshold and then some."

"Okay," I said. "You're the expert. Where are they now?"

"In police custody," she said. "I tried to convince the police that a merciful death was the best those unfortunates could hope for, but they didn't seem amenable to the idea. For the moment, they're under quarantine for the foreseeable future."

I grunted. "Well, at least they can't do too much harm for the moment," I said. "What's next?"

"The body-riding demon," she said. "We managed to keep that one isolated much more effectively. It only claimed seven victims total, all of whom are dead."

"Well, at least that's something. Is that demon finished, then?"

"Yeah," she said. "Which only leaves the last demon."

"The one that was erasing people," I said.

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Selene nodded. "That one is...very hard to gather information about," she said. "For obvious reasons. We're trying to coordinate an effort to identify all the victims, but it's been very slow going. The only way we can find information about them is that people don't remember them, and it can be harder than you'd think to realize that there's a hole in your memory. We're sure that at least fifty people have been taken, but there might be two hundred or more. We might never know about all of those that were taken."

I sighed. "Fair enough. Do you have any idea what that thing was? Or what it did to those people?"

She shook her head. "You have to realize, I was very low in the hierarchy back there. I only really dealt with my own, ah, department."

I nodded. "So what you're telling me is that I probably made the right choice. If we lost close to five hundred people in that little time, it was worth it."

"I don't see any other way we could have dealt with them," she admitted. "I know you weren't happy about that contract, but yeah, I think it was the right choice."

I sighed. "What about the rest?" I said, changing the subject. "The fire?"

"Contained and extinguished," she said, with a hint of pride. "Minimal damage and very few deaths. Kikuchi's people did most of the work, but we did provide some assistance. He's having some issues maintaining his rule, apparently; he's been withdrawing from some of the areas within town that he had been managing. We've been moving in behind him and adding those areas to the territory that we personally maintain. So far the transition's been as smooth as you could ask."

"Offer to back Kikuchi," I said immediately.

Selene raised one eyebrow. "Are you sure you want to get involved in their internal politics like that?"

"Yeah. We're all in on Kikuchi; there's no point trying to hedge our bets now. Do it politely, though. You know how to handle him."

She nodded. "I'll see to it. I don't think there's anything else pressing, jarl."

"Good," I said. "I'll smooth things over with the police when I'm feeling more conscious. For now, I'm going to go crash. Hold down the fort while I'm gone. Hopefully things should start settling down soon. When I get back, I'll want a full report on what's going on, what possible threats we'll still need to deal with, and how our allies are coping. Coordinate with Luna and Kyi's scouts on that and get it ready."

Selene smiled. "It will be done, jarl," she said. "And boss? Well done. After this, no one will doubt that this city is yours."

"Thanks," I said, and stumbled back out of the building.

Back in Romania, the bedroom was dark and pungent. It smelled of sex, sweat and musk, incense and perfume, with just a hint of stranger things, blood and camphor and candlewax.

We hadn't brought the demons back here, of course. There was no way I was going to tell them where we lived, let alone invite them in. That was what safe houses we had safe houses for, and after what happened in that one I expected it was going to have an unfortunate accident involving fire and large amounts of bleach. But when we got back here we'd both reeked, and Aiko hadn't had the energy or ambition to take a shower before she passed out.

At the moment, Aiko was sprawled in bed, halfway under the covers, snoring loudly. She didn't so much as twitch as I walked in. Snowflake, curled up at the foot of the bed, seemed almost as exhausted. She hadn't had any direct involvement in what happened, of course, but apparently it had been impossible to sleep through it. Considering the source, that was a pretty significant statement.

I undressed and slipped into bed next to Aiko. The kitsune woke up just enough to snuggle up to me and mumble something incoherently before going back to snoring.

It didn't take me more than a minute or two to drowse off myself. I wasn't sleepy, exactly, but I was physically and mentally exhausted, and now that I knew there were no emergencies clamoring for my attention right at the moment, I was quite glad for the opportunity to just turn my brain off for a little while.

The next thing I was really aware of was waking up when Aiko stirred against me. Snowflake was gone. I could feel her in my mind, though, so she couldn't be too far; probably just downstairs getting some food.

"Hey," Aiko murmured. She still sounded pretty out of it, but she was conscious. "So my doppelganger proposed marriage to you, right?"

"Oh, right," I said. "I'd almost forgotten. She started to, I think, but she didn't manage to actually get the question out. We were interrupted. The cops picked that exact moment to arrest me."

She snorted. "Man, that is so typical," she said. "You have the most ridiculous timing."

"Yeah," I sighed. "I know. At the moment I thought it was the worst timing I'd ever seen, but in hindsight they were probably doing me a favor. I don't think I'd have liked what happened if I said yes to her."

"What, to marry a fae impostor who was probably sent specifically to trap you somehow? What makes you think that?" We both laughed a little, and then Aiko asked, "Do you want to?"

"Do I want to what?"

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She gestured vaguely, the motion more felt than seen in the dark. "You know. Get married."

I paused, then said, "I guess so. I hadn't really thought about it. Why? Do you?"

She shrugged. "Sure. It might be fun."

I smiled and held her close. "Well, then," I murmured, as I drifted back to sleep, "let's get married."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Frishberg looked about as unhappy as I'd ever seen her. "Are you sure?" she asked.

I shrugged and nodded. "Yeah," I said. "Sure as I can be."

She grimaced and looked back at the crowd. "Jesus."

I could see *why* she was upset. The people *looked* normal enough. At a glance, they weren't psycho monsters waiting for a chance to happen. They were sitting or pacing with the same anxious, helpless frustration as anyone else. At a glance, the quarantine building could have been an airport.

But if I hadn't believed Selene before, some of the incidents that had already taken place were more convincing than I would have liked. The random violence, the arguments that went from mild words to attempted murder in seconds, would have been concerning enough, but if that was all it was I could have told myself that there was still a chance that she was wrong. Those could be written off as the frustration and pent-up anger seeking an outlet.

No, the incident that really convinced me was the one that was more calculating. An eight-year-old girl had cut herself with a smuggled knife, doing it in a way that would look messy and spill a lot of blood without meaningfully crippling her. When that lured one of the police officers maintaining the quarantine in, she'd stabbed him twice in the neck before he managed to get away and backup got there. As far as I knew, that poor bastard was still in ICU.

That wasn't an act of passion or frustration. That was a calculated attempt at murder, targeted at someone who'd done absolutely nothing to provoke it and carried out in one of the most underhanded, contemptible ways I could think of. And that was an *eight year old*. By all accounts, before the demon she'd been as peaceful and gentle a soul as you could ask for.

If the demon's influence had managed to twist her that far, then I had to assume that Selene was correct. Every one of these people was a ticking time bomb.

"Believe me, I'm no happier about it than you are," I said. "But it's the only way to minimize the damage."

"You're asking me to kill a couple hundred people," she said. "You call that *minimizing* the damage?"

"Yeah," I said. "I do. Look, these people are already dead, in every way that matters. This is just...what's left behind after they're gone."

"Yeah," she said dryly. "Somehow I doubt my people will see it that way when I tell them to pull the trigger."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"I'm not asking you to kill anyone," I said quietly. "Just stay out of the way. We'll take care of the rest."

She glanced at me, then looked back at the crowd. Seen from above, from the other side of the one-way mirror, they felt very distant. Not even really *real*, as such.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

I considered for a moment, then sighed. "Look," I said. "The thing that did this is a literal demon out of Hell. Not in the theological sense, but someone read those stories and thought it would be hilarious to build it. I've got an employee who used to work there, and she says she's familiar with this effect."

Frishberg turned and stared at me. "You have an employee who used to work for *Hell*," she said.

"Yeah. Her name's Selene. I think you might have met her?"

"I've met her," the sergeant confirmed. "She's a demon?"

"Yep," I said. "She used to work as a succubus. She'd seduce people and then tempt them into sin, or convince them to do something that would advance her agenda."

"Damn." Frishberg didn't look surprised, exactly, but she didn't look happy either. "You trust her?"

"As much as I trust anyone," I said, shrugging. "She'd know what she's talking about on this topic, and she's got no reason to lie to me about it that I can think of. It's about as reliable of information as I can get."

She went back to looking at the people. "It disturbs me a little that we're taking advice from Hell on this," she said. "It makes me wonder where we're going after this is done."

I smiled wryly. It was a broken, lopsided sort of smile, without any humor in it. "I don't think either of us has to wonder about that," I said. "I've got worse things than this on my conscience, and I'd be surprised if you don't, too. We aren't good people, sergeant. Good people couldn't do the things we do."

She sighed. "Yeah," she said. "I guess you've got a point." There was a long, sullen pause. "Let's get this over with," she said at last. "Come on."

Most of the exits to the building had been closed up as part of the quarantine effort. Only one door was still open, and it was guarded around the clock by four police officers with guns and riot gear.

The inhabitants could have overwhelmed them and escaped, of course. They outnumbered the guards fifty to one; at some point, numbers will tell. And I doubted the officers would fight back, not effectively. There were a lot of kids in there, a lot of their former coworkers. They wouldn't want to hurt them, not until it was too late.

I wasn't sure why the prisoners hadn't done that yet. Maybe it was a very human reaction to being scared and isolated. People feeling unsure, hesitating in the face of authority, not wanting to be the one to throw the first stone—those were all very normal. And they might be enough to do this. It wouldn't be the first time that a group was cowed by a force they could easily have beaten, if they'd only thought it through and worked together. It could be that was all the explanation I needed.

Or it could be that the demon in them was biding its time and waiting for an opportunity to do more damage. Either way, it was best to resolve this as soon as possible. Nothing would be gained by waiting.

I collected my troops on the way. I'd brought only a very specific selection of people to this job, the people I could trust to carry it out without hesitating or turning aside. Vigdis was there, a broad psychopath's grin on her face. The only other housecarls there were Thraslaug and Nóttolfr; the rest of the jötnar were too honorable, in their own way, for me to be certain they would follow my orders here. Nóttolfr still looked hideous, his body warped in ways that didn't entirely make sense, but as Selene had said, he was as functional as ever. Of the men that Pellegrini had loaned me, a couple of the hardest were accompanying us, and there were more on nearby rooftops with large rifles. One of the mages who'd signed on with my crew recently was there as well; a fire mage with a penchant for flashy and indiscriminate destruction, he wasn't shy about the fact that he was a serious pyromaniac. The thrill was in the burning itself for him, rather than in who got hurt or killed in the fire, but he freely admitted that he didn't care as much as he should about hurting people in the process of getting his kicks.

Matthew wasn't there; the shapeshifter was a lunatic, but he wasn't totally without standards, and he had no taste for slaughtering helpless people. Neither of the werewolves was there, and even Snowflake wanted no part of this, so for once there were no quadrupeds with me. Aiko hadn't come, either. She was physically recovered by now, but she'd made it very clear that she didn't want to be here for this.

I didn't blame her. I didn't want to be here either.

"Clear out," Frishberg said quietly, walking up to the door.

"Why?" one of the guards asked. He sounded more defensive than curious.

"You don't want to know," Frishberg said. She sounded very, very tired. "Trust me on this one. All you need to know is that you're being relieved. Go get some coffee or something."

"These people don't look much like police officers," the man commented. "Kind of the opposite, actually."

Frishberg sighed. "Anderson, I'm going to say this once and once only, so pay attention. You never saw these people. None of you did. They were never here. We clear?"

"I don't understand," one of the other guards said.

"You're happier that way," Frishberg said. "Trust me. Now skedaddle."

They obviously weren't happy about it, but they left. I waited for them to be gone, then waved my merry little band of killers inside. The prisoners drew back a little, recognizing by some instinct that something had changed.

"You don't have to be here for this," I said to Frishberg, staying outside.

"I signed off on this," she said, not looking away as the screaming and the bleeding started inside. "I'm not going to pretend that I'm not responsible. I owe them this much."

"I can respect that," I said.

"Yeah. I thought you might."

The fighting, such as it was, was quick and ugly, and completely one-sided. One of the former cops managed to beat her way out through one of the boarded-up exits, but the snipers did their job. She didn't make it two steps before she hit the ground in a cloud of blood and ravaged organs.

When the slaughter was over, they dragged the few escapees back into the building and splashed enough accelerant around to make the mage's job an easy one. The fire started moments later, and rapidly grew to engulf the entire building. The flames crackled merrily, warm against my face even at a distance. I wasn't concerned about the fire department getting there any time soon. They were still busy with the last bits of work from the wildfire.

"The White House issued a statement today," Frishberg said as we watched the fires burn. "I don't know if you saw."

"I saw." It had been the first thing Selene showed me when I got to the city.

"Apparently the crisis is winding down. In this country, at least. Most of the cities have restored some kind of order, apparently. Even if it is martial law in some places. We've got an estimate of the death toll."

"Oh?" I asked. "That wasn't in the version I saw."

She grimaced and nodded. "It isn't being released to the public yet. Too demoralizing, I think. Close to twenty million so far. They're still getting numbers in from other countries, but the current guess is close to three hundred million dead worldwide. I can't even think in numbers big enough to get at the cost of damages."

"Not surprising," I said. "This is the biggest thing to happen to the world in a thousand years, probably."

She grunted. "Yeah." She watched the fire for a minute. "I asked you to get the city through it in one piece," she said. "Killing a couple hundred of our own citizens and torching a building to cover it up isn't quite what I had in mind."

"Have you seen what's going on in some other places?" I asked dryly. "As far as I can tell, this is a win. I don't have an exact death rate for the city, but I'd be shocked if it's much over one percent. The infrastructure is in good enough shape that it stands out when it *isn't* working. From where I'm standing, things look a hell of a lot better than they do in some places."

"Of course they do," she said. "You're the one who took the opportunity to set yourself up as a tin-pot dictator. I'm sure this outcome *does* look good to you."

Most of my people were still standing near the building, making sure it burned to the ground without damaging the surrounding property. But Thraslaug was nearby, as were a couple of the mercenaries and thugs I'd brought.

As Frishberg said that, they all went dead still and stared at her.

I slowly turned to face her myself, and I could see her flinch back a little as she realized that she'd gone too far. She didn't say anything, though, and her expression was defiant.

"Fuck you," I said, my tone calm and remote. "You think I *wanted* this? You think I wanted this job? Fuck you, sergeant. You have no idea what I've given, what I've sacrificed for this city."

She opened her mouth. "No, let me finish," I said, cutting her off. "I've got something to say. You see those people in there, Frishberg? They died because of *you*. My people contacted you right after you found that thing and offered to help you set up appropriate security measures. You turned us down because you were too concerned with who had jurisdiction to listen to the people that know what they're talking about."

She looked like she was about to be sick. She shut her mouth and looked at the fire again.

"I could have walked away from this," I said. "I could have written this city, this whole fucking *world* off as a lost cause and gone off on my own. I didn't, because I wasn't willing to let that many people die. I stepped up to help, even though I never wanted a position of authority. I spent years wanted for terrorism because I stepped in to stop this entire city from being destroyed. You threw me in prison, you starved me, you beat the shit out of me, you locked silver manacles around my wrists, and I just took it like a submissive little bitch, because I didn't want to murder people for doing their jobs."

I took a deep breath and gestured vaguely at the city around us. "And then this," I said. "Do you have any idea how easy it would have been for me to pitch in on the other side? To just let go and rampage with the rest of them? Hell, I'd probably have been rewarded for it. But no, I agreed to fight for stability and get you guys through the chaos of the transitional period. When those demons showed up, I could have been forgiven for turning my back on you, and they'd have gone through this city like tissue paper. Instead, I made a deal with the devil to get rid of them for you guys."

She blinked. "You made a deal with the devil?" she asked.

"Effectively," I said. "But the point is this. I have given up more for this city than you can imagine. And at every step, I have been met with suspicion and ingratitude. You've heard of biting the hand that feeds you? You people turn it up to eleven, you know that? And now, when I've finally managed to get this under control, you get upset about the methods I've used? You call me a dictator because you don't want to accept that *your* people couldn't deal with this?"

"That's not how it is," she said.

"Bullshit," I snapped. "Are you really going to tell me that the mayor could have found a way to handle a bunch of demons? Do you think the city council would have held its own in negotiations with a bunch of vampires?" I snorted. "You have no idea how to deal with this world. After the insult you just gave me, for example, I could tear your head off in the middle of the street and I guarantee you that none of the people here would be shocked or think I was going too far."

"We'd probably applaud," Thraslaug said helpfully. "And maybe play a game of football. I've always wondered whether that would actually work."

"Is this supposed to be making me feel better?" Frishberg asked.

"No," I said. "I don't really give a fuck how you feel right now, honestly. That's kind of the point. I've had it up to here with this. As far as I'm concerned, this is your last chance to back out. You want me to stop helping you, you tell me right now and I'll go back to just being the jarl of my own little fiefdom, the way I was for years without upsetting you at all. Otherwise, you can accept that this is my area of expertise and I'm doing the best I can. I don't tell you how to do your job; kindly return the favor."

She was staring at me. "You know," she said conversationally, "I don't think I've ever seen you like this."

"You've never needed to hear it before," I said. "But I've lost my patience. Choose."

She took a deep breath and then nodded once. "You've got a deal," she said.

"Good," I said. "Looks like the fire's finished. I trust you'll ensure that there's no legal difficulty?"

"Already taken care of," she said dismissively.

"All right, then," I said. "Things should be quiet for the next few days. I'll be working in the background to set up deals with some other people, establish relations, that sort of thing."

"Thanks," she said.

"You know," I commented, "I think that's the first time you've ever told me that." I waved to my minions and walked off to where a pair of hired drivers already had the vans running.

Epilogue

"Here's the final request from the Denver pack," Selene said, handing me a folder. "Looks like it's just a statement of alliance. 'We stand together against the chaos,' and all that. It's a political move, but it looks like it's about as advantageous for us as it is for them. People who are against werewolves already hate you, so making a formal alliance with the Pack is probably a net gain for us."

"Thanks," I said, taking the folder. "I'll look it over, but for the moment tentatively assume it's a go. You can probably go ahead and start planning our statement."

"Will do," she said, nodding. "We've also heard from those apsaras again. Sounds like this would be a strictly tourism visit. They're willing to agree to some basic rules, including an armed escort and paying tribute for the privilege. I asked around a bit, and it sounds like they're probably on the level. Apparently this particular group are known thrill-seekers. They'll travel anywhere for a bit of excitement, the more dangerous the better. No political affiliations that I could find."

"All right. Give them the go ahead, then. Any word back from the vampires that wanted to move in?"

"Yeah." Selene grinned. "Apparently they aren't so eager to live in your territory now. Something about not thinking it's a particularly hospitable area for them."

I snorted. "Yeah, I'll bet. Can't say I'm sorry not to have to deal with them. I do worry that there'll be some problems without them, though. I don't have much in the way of nice things to say about Katrin, but she *did* keep the vamp population under control." I frowned, tapping one finger on the arm of my throne. "See if Hrafn's still around," I said after a moment. "I don't remember for sure whether he got killed there at the end with Katrin, but if not I'd rather deal with him than any other vamp I know. Also, look into whether I could get some kind of official standing with their political organization. It's probably too much to ask for there not to be any vampires in the city, but I might get them to agree to ask permission from me and pay tribute."

"It will be done," she said, nodding and making a note on a legal pad. Other business. Luna wants permission to officially relocate her business from Pryce's to here. She'll keep doing her business there, especially the shadier deals, but she'd be keeping some of the stock and meeting with contacts here."

"Tell her that's fine," I said. "I'll be just as glad to have her working where we can keep an eye on her."

"Think that's most of why she asked, honestly. Next up. Jibril wants to know when you're going to deliver on your promise to give the ghouls a voice in establishing the new order."

Breaking Point (Winter's Tale)

"I've got that preliminary meeting with the mayor in the works for next week. He's invited, same as all the other faction leaders; I just hadn't told him because I didn't want to get his hopes up in case the meeting fell through. Guess I'd better at least let him know there's a plan."

She nodded. "I'll make sure he hears about it. Through unofficial channels, so that none of the others will be able to complain of unfair treatment."

"Thanks."

"No problem," she said. "Moving on. Tindr says he's too busy with that acquisition on the West Coast to do a full overview of the financials right now, but he should be able to meet with you tomorrow. In the meantime, we're still solidly in the black, although the mercenaries are getting to be a serious drain."

"We can probably let some of them go or shift them to standby," I said. "Now that the crisis is mostly past, you know."

"I'll let him know to start looking into how many he wants to cut," Selene said. "And I'll check in with Kyi too, since I'm sure their numbers won't be agreeing on much. On that note, Pellegrini wants to know when we'll give his thugs back."

"Tell him he can have them back any time. I only even took those guys because they were easy muscle and we were in a pinch."

"Will do. And...looks like that's everything for the moment. You scheduled judgments for Wednesday, so you don't forget. They've been backing up a while and with the courts struggling we've been getting more requests than usual, so expect a full day."

"Thanks, Selene," I said. "This...it feels weird, you know? Going back to running things like it's business as usual after so long running around putting out fires."

She smiled. "That's how you know you won, jarl. Things go back to normal."

"Do you think we won?"

"City's in one piece," she said. "And nobody's arguing that you're the one in charge of it now. Casualties were lower than I would have believed possible—ours and civilian both. There people lining up out the door to sign up with your organization and make deals with you." She nodded. "Yeah, I think I'd call that a win, jarl. Might not have been easy or painless, might not have been the win you wanted, but you came out on top in the end." She grinned, the expression there and gone in a heartbeat. "Good job, boss. I'm going to go and draft these letters for you to read and sign."

I watched her go, holding the file for the deal with the Denver pack in my right hand. With my left I scratched Snowflake's ears where she was curled up around my feet. It seemed like I had a little more mobility in that hand since the Wild Hunt and subsequent insanity. I hadn't really noticed during the chaos, but now that I had the attention to spare it was a welcome change. I still didn't have much

sensation in my fingers, and there was an odd translucency to it that wasn't appropriate at all for human flesh, but I could move it reasonably well. It wasn't everything I might have wished for, but it was far from nothing.

"Can't really go back now," I said quietly to no one in particular. I could feel that Snowflake was really asleep rather than faking it right now, so I wasn't even talking to her. "Guess we just have to go forward and hope for the best."

I sat in the empty throne room and scratched Snowflake's ears as the sun set behind me.