

# **Building Bridges**

Emrys Vaughn

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## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

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This book is dedicated to Mister Vanilla, Incendiary Chainsaw Nunchucks, Pancakes, and everyone else from that chat group. You're all crazy.

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### Chapter One

"Why is it," I said to no one in particular, "*why* is it that these things only happen to me when I try to do the right thing? I mean, I can be a violent, self-serving asshole as much as I want and get away with it. But when I stick my neck out to help someone, *this* sort of nonsense happens."

"I take it the news from the Conclave is not entirely pleasant," Selene said dryly.

*No shit*, Snowflake said in the back of my head. *Do they have any other kind?*

"It isn't sounding good," I said. "Apparently I killed a Conclave member in Russia last year."

Selene cleared her throat. "Ah. Do you mean a clan mage, or an actual Conclave member?"

"The latter."

"Oh. That might be a problem. Um. If you don't mind, how did you even manage that?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. I was kind of tripping on the Wild Hunt at the time. Don't even remember doing it. Which, you know, you'd think that being out of your mind on that kind of magic while trying to save the world would get you some amnesty, but apparently now that they've finally managed to replace her they want to have a long conversation about the whole thing."

*Something tells me this is the sort of conversation that ends with at least one person bleeding.*

"I'm hoping this isn't going to get that ugly," I said. "Won't find out until next week. They actually gave me advance notice this time around."

"You do have the meeting with the mayor in about an hour, though," Selene reminded me.

"I know. I'm heading that direction now. I just felt a need to comment on this, because it's so freaking ridiculous." I shook my head and tossed the letter aside. As usual, it had just randomly appeared on my desk while I was out of the room. That trick had gotten old a long time ago. "You coming, Snowflake?"

*A political meeting where even if it does turn into a fight it won't be exciting at all? Pass. I think I'll go hunting instead, maybe kill some squirrels.*

*Suit yourself*, I sent back, standing and walking out of my office. She butted her head against my thigh as I walked past, but didn't reply otherwise.

Downstairs, there was a quiet buzz of activity in the main room. I'd stopped thinking of it as the throne room a while ago; enough other stuff happened in that room to make the throne much less of the focus anymore. At the moment Tindr was sitting at a desk in the corner, on the phone with someone and looking at several notebooks and a laptop. Kyi was standing by the map table, updating the incident

markers and territory boundaries to reflect the latest changes in the scene. A werewolf and a kitsune that I barely recognized were standing at the water cooler and discussing a television show.

All of them nodded respectfully as I walked briskly across the room. Outside, Kjaran already had the limo running. The paint had been redone again in the past couple of weeks since I saw it last; it was still black, with my coat of arms on one side and Aiko's on the other, but now there was a very subtle pattern reminiscent of frost painted across it in blues and violets barely distinguishable from black. I found I liked the effect more than I would have expected to.

The car was heavily armored and had some of the best defenses money could buy, and in addition to Kjaran there was a human thug riding a very literal shotgun. It was purely for show, of course; nobody in this town was likely to be dumb enough to try and attack me now, and if they did I was perfectly able to defend myself. But as statements went, this one wasn't bad. Particularly when he turned on "Ride of the Valkyries" on the very, very expensive stereo system we'd had installed.

I was reasonably confident that the mayor of the city had intended to put us on an equal footing by setting up the meeting in a hotel conference room. Where a meeting was could do a lot to set the tone of that meeting; putting it in a neutral location was a good sign for it being a neutral meeting. It was equally inconvenient for both of us, and it didn't force me to either come to his space or tolerate him in mine.

Granted, the effect was a little spoiled by the fact that he'd randomly chosen a hotel that I *owned*. I was reasonably confident he didn't know that, though. Tindr had arranged things through a series of shell corporations and money laundering fronts elaborate enough that I couldn't even begin to follow it. I'd be very, very surprised if he had figured it out.

I showed up half an hour early and walked in alone. Bringing in thugs was nice for some kinds of meeting, but some didn't do so well with that kind of message. Somehow I didn't think that it would be the best approach to what was supposed to be a peaceful meeting with a guy I knew for a fact had no violence in his background whatsoever.

Besides, I could take him any time I wanted. John Cohen couldn't be a threat to me on the best day he ever had and I knew it. In a way, having thugs with me to talk to someone like that would be *bad* for my image. Having minions made me look influential; needing them for something like this made me look like I was useless on my own.

To my surprise, he was already in the conference room when I showed up. As usual, the mayor looked very much the part of a beleaguered public servant, his ill-fitting suit rumpled and a little stained, reading something out of a file folder.

"Good morning, John," I said, walking up to him. "You wanted to talk about something?"

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"Winter," he said, looking up from the folder. "Thanks for coming." He juggled the folder and then shook my hand—a little gingerly, since I wasn't about to take off my gauntlet for it, and those spikes weren't just for show. "I was hoping we could talk about your position with the city."

"I thought I didn't have one," I said, casually pulling out one of the chairs and lounging on it. I didn't quite put my feet up on the conference table. "We settled this months ago. I don't claim any kind of official capacity, and you don't get in the way of my people. That setup's been working pretty well for us so far."

He sighed and sat down across from me. "I don't know how much longer we'll be able to get away with that kind of unofficial arrangement," he said. "Politics might be catching up with us." He sounded vaguely disgusted about it.

"I'd have thought you'd be glad about that. I mean, you *are* a politician."

He shrugged. "I won't deny being grateful that the system is kicking back into gear. As much as I appreciate what you've been doing, I would rather see due process and a democratic government take hold in this country again. But in this case, I find the specific things that are being done to be more than a little disturbing. I'm guessing you know about the bill that's being discussed in the House this week?"

"What, you mean the motion to officially list werewolves as not being human, not being citizens of the United States, and not having any of the rights allowed to either group?" I snorted. "Yeah," I said dryly. "Somehow that one stuck out in my memory. Can't imagine why."

He chuckled a little, although it sounded more tired than amused. "Yes, I suppose it would," he said. "You sound remarkably nonchalant about the whole thing, all things considered."

I shrugged. "Hardly seems worth getting worked up over. It isn't going to pass."

"You're confident of that?"

"Absolutely. Enough politicians either *are* werewolves or are *owned* by werewolves that it doesn't have a chance. I'll be surprised if it makes it out of committee."

He heaved what seemed to be a genuine sigh of relief. "Good," he said. "It still sets an ugly precedent, but that's much better than if it were actually to pass."

"Why is it so important to you?" I asked curiously. The mayor seemed to be genuinely concerned at the thought of the bill making it into law, and I wasn't quite sure why he would care.

"Aside from the fact that I've spoken with you, what, four times now and I have no reason to think you're less of a person than I am?" He shrugged. "I guess I'm a little disturbed by anything that hints at making groups of people legally less than human. If we say that werewolves are subhuman, how long before we're applying the same argument to blacks, or gays, or women? I mean, I know that slippery slope is a weak argument, but I think in this case there's enough precedent to make it a legitimate concern."

I considered him for a moment. I didn't usually think of John as black; from my perspective, when I spent most of my time interacting with things that really *weren't* human, dividing people up on the basis of race seemed a little bizarre. But now that I considered it in that light, I supposed that I could understand why he would be personally invested in this bill.

Although he probably would have been opposed to it regardless. I hadn't interacted with the mayor that much, but from what I'd seen he was an all right sort. Not a saint, by any means, but I had a hard time picturing him condoning hate crimes against *anyone*, and it was hard to see this bill as anything other than open license to commit hate crimes against werewolves. But still, I liked being able to connect the intensity of his feelings on this one to a personal motivation. It made the cynical part of me happy.

"Okay," I said. "And this is relevant to us...why, exactly?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Do you really not see this as being a relevant issue for you? Disregarding your confidence that it won't be passed into law, don't you think this would have some serious impacts on your life?"

"You do remember what kicked off the broadcast at the beginning of all this, I hope," I said dryly. "I wasn't willing to go to jail for something I didn't do. I don't exactly think my reaction would be *better* if the government were to literally pass a law saying that I'm not a person and any moron with a silver bullet could murder me in broad daylight without getting so much as a slap on the wrist. Realistically, I'd probably just walk away from the whole system at that point."

"You think it would be that easy?"

I shrugged. "Sure. Why not? I'm really only answerable to your laws because I choose to be, John. You guys need me a lot more than I need you right now. If I were to get really pissed off tomorrow, I could leave and it would be, at worst, a mild inconvenience to me."

"When you start talking like this," he said after a moment, "I have the rather terrifying feeling that I'm living in a fairy tale. We're protected by a powerful and inscrutable force. He operates by rules that we don't understand, and if we break them or do something to annoy him we're doomed and there's not a thing we can do about it." He shook his head. "The world has become a rather scary place in the last year."

"Eh, it's always been like this," I said. "Only difference is now you *know* you're a small fish in a big ocean. Anyway, you're a busy guy and I'm sure you didn't ask me here to talk philosophy. Why does this bill mean that we have to change my 'position' with the city?"

"Well, it isn't the bill itself. It's more that it indicates the bureaucracy has finally gotten its feet under itself again. That means that unofficial arrangements like we have are going to be coming under a great deal more scrutiny, and I don't think we can really go without some kind of legitimate authority for you indefinitely."



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"Lots of other cities have people filling the same basic role I've been playing here," I said. "I've talked to a lot of them. What are they doing about it?"

John shrugged. "Different places are taking different routes right now. Mostly they involve giving the person in question some kind of position within the police force. Or the military, in the places that are still under martial law. Regardless, there's a clear legal authority in place."

"So do that."

He grimaced. "Well, that's where it becomes a problem. See, the charges against you were never actually dismissed, so you're still wanted for a laundry list of crimes. At this point you're basically convicted if they could get you into the courtroom again. I can overlook it, but there's no way I could actually appoint you to any kind of formal position."

"Can't you, I don't know, pardon me or whatever?"

"For this?" He snorted. "That's way above my pay grade. You'd have to deal with the federal government to get the charges of terrorism dismissed." He paused. "You do realize that's going to be a problem, right? Eventually someone will go over the head of local law enforcement and arrest you."

I shrugged. "Of all the things in this world that scare me, that's so far down the list that it doesn't even register. Like I said, my status within your legal system is just not an important part of my life right now."

"Right. Sorry, I'm just not used to people being *quite* so blatant about that attitude. Most of the criminals I talk to at least pretend to care. Although I guess they do have to care more than you do, so that's probably fair enough." He shook his head. "I'm rambling. Sorry; it's been a long morning. Anyway, this isn't an emergency or anything. Take some time and see if you can come up with a solution. I'll get in touch if anything else comes up, or if things get more urgent."

Chapter Two

"You know," I commented, "I was expecting this to be in another conference center or something like that. Not the back room of a Mexican restaurant. Isn't this going to be a little crowded?"

Moray glanced at me. "You're thinking of a full assembly, like the one you were at before. This isn't like that. It's just the Conclave members today."

"Huh," I said. "You get a promotion I didn't hear about, then?"

He snorted. "Not likely. There isn't enough money in the whole world to convince me to take that job. No, I'm just here as security. Making sure that nobody gets in or spies on you guys. I don't even know what they want to talk to you about, and I don't want to know. Not my business."

"Yeah. I don't blame you."

The restaurant was fairly busy. It was lunchtime, and there were people here from the nearby businesses. Office workers, for the most part, although there were a handful of others, laborers and tradesmen. I recognized half a dozen or so of those present as my employees, housecarls and human thugs. I hadn't brought any mages, for obvious reasons. Presumably their side had a comparable number of people seeded in the crowd, but I couldn't pick them out at a glance.

Moray led me through the restaurant to a door labeled RESERVED. It didn't look like it was closed often. He stopped outside and gestured for me to go on, so I did. The doorknob sparked a little when I touched it, something just a little more than static.

I recognized almost all of the people in the room, to one degree or another. The only one I didn't know at all was the man in the green robe. He was thin, with a pinched sort of face that made it look like he was scowling even when he wasn't.

The other eight I recognized. All the members of the Conclave were here. Any one of them was probably powerful enough to turn this entire city into slag. All nine of them in one room, at close proximity, was enough magic to set my teeth on edge, a heavy stench in the air that was impossible to overlook or forget.

"A moment," Prophet said. I felt him work a quick, subtle magic, not terribly powerful, but subtle and very smoothly executed. At first I wasn't sure what he'd done; then I noticed a sort of shimmer around the edges of the room, a barely-visible curtain like a heat haze against the walls and the door.

"Locking me in?" I asked curiously. It wasn't a threat, really. If these people wanted me dead I was dead. There wasn't really any question on that front.

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"You're welcome to leave any time you like," he replied calmly. "But I would prefer that the details of this conversation not leave this room."

I nodded. "Fair enough." Then I looked at the guy in the green robe. "I don't know you."

"No," he agreed. "I'm new. Guide."

"You must have a name. Something other than a job description."

"Guide is my name now," he said. "Any other name I might once have had I gave up when I put on this robe."

I blinked. "Are you seriously saying you gave up your identity when you took that position?"

"Among other things."

I shook my head. "Man. I so do not want one of these jobs."

His lips twitched in a feeble smile, one that died almost instantly. "I don't think we need to worry about that happening."

"Enough," Prophet said sharply. "Our time here is limited."

"Yeah," I said. "Your message said you wanted a conversation about the Conclave member I accidentally, and I feel I should stress the *accidentally* here, killed in Russia?"

"Among other things. We are here to extend you a warning, and an offer."

"Start with the warning," I said lightly. "Otherwise you'll probably get shot right before you can tell me and I'll be stuck sitting here wondering what you were trying to warn me about."

He almost smiled. "As you wish. We do not intend to take any official action against you regarding Guide's death. We are not unreasonable, and we can recognize that what happened *was* an accident. One which occurred only because you were taking risks to assist with our battle, no less."

I snorted "Well, I'm glad *someone* isn't unreasonable. Not seeing how this is a warning, though."

He pursed his lips. "We are not taking any *official* action against you," he repeated. "But she was the Guide of the Conclave. That means it was her task to oversee the less experienced and powerful mages. She matched those who were newly admitted with appropriate mentors, and ensured that their education met certain universal standards. She directed those who didn't already have connections in a clan to one where they would fit, or recommended them to the Watchers or Guards if they were suited to it. Do you know what that means?"

"In the grand scheme of things, not really. But on a personal level, I think that if she was responsible for introducing that many people to the scene, odds are good that some of those

interactions went further than just a nice letter. There will be plenty of people that view her as a personal mentor, or think that they owe her. And they probably aren't exactly thrilled that she's dead."

Prophet regarded me for a moment. "You know," he said conversationally, "for the longest time I didn't understand what Watcher could see in you. I underestimated you. More recently I've come to see that you aren't nearly as stupid as I thought. In your own idiosyncratic, probably brain-damaged way you're really quite clever."

"Um," I said. "Thanks, I think?"

"That wasn't a compliment. In any case, you do seem to have the basic concept I'm getting at. We aren't planning an official retaliation, and I don't think anyone in this room is planning an unofficial one. But I can almost guarantee that at least a few people are."

I groaned. "Can't you do something about this?" I asked. "Like, I don't know, issue a public statement that it wasn't my fault?"

"Certainly," Prophet said, with a sly smile. "Would you like us to?"

"No, he wouldn't," Watcher said in her dry rasp of a voice, before I could reply. "Given that we couldn't do so without explaining what did happen to her, and acknowledging that you did kill her would necessitate a response from us."

"Why?" I asked, exasperated. "You *just* said that you know I'm not at fault."

Keeper, in her saffron-yellow robe, nodded. "We do," she said. "However, that does not mean that you are not guilty under our law. One of our core founding tenets is that anyone who kills a Conclave member, regardless of circumstance and reason, must be subject to reprisal. The only exception is lawful execution, which this was not. As such, if we were to acknowledge that you killed Guide, we would be required to seek that reprisal."

"Whereas now everyone knows, but no one can prove anything." I sighed and nodded. "Okay. I understand. Vengeful mages incoming and there isn't anything you can do to stop them; got it. So I guess that's the warning."

"Yes," Prophet said. "Which brings us to the offer. Guard?"

The man in the scarlet robe cleared his throat. "We are going public in the near future," he said. "And based on the advice of *certain* people, I would like to extend you an offer to be a part of this publicity movement."

"Wait a second," I said. "The Conclave is going public? Are you *serious*?"

"No. The Conclave is going to remain hidden from mainstream society, as it has throughout history. The *Guards* are going public."

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I blinked. "Are you *serious*?" I repeated. "You're coming out to the public halfway? How in hell is this a good idea?"

"What it comes down to is this," Prophet said. "We need to have some public presence. That will let us coordinate our response to external threats. We'll have an official standing with mundane governments and be able to coordinate with them as well, which we obviously need at this point. And, most importantly, a public presence will let us find and train new mages, and sort those who have the talent to join the clans from the minor talents and lesser lights."

I thought about it for a second. "Okay," I said. "I honestly hadn't thought it through to that extent. You're planning things out that far?"

"Someone has to," he said dryly. "And as usual, it falls to me. In any case, the need for an organization to govern and regulate magic as it transitions into an everyday part of normal life is clear. You have, I think, seen firsthand the reasons for regulation and training, and the current state of affairs is a clear argument for why a certain degree of enforcement is necessary. But at the same time, many of the tasks we manage would be impossible if they were not a secret. You are familiar with the Watchers' work, and I assure you that we do have other activities behind the scenes which are just as important."

"Okay," I said again. "So...let me get this straight. You're introducing the Guards to the world as defenders, with training and regulation. I'm guessing you'd be working against outsiders, vampires and things from the Otherside and such, given that my understanding is that's what the Guards do now and you mentioned external threats. And the whole time, you'd have the Watchers acting as a secret police force and the whole system would be secretly run by a small group of incredibly powerful people that the public never knows about?"

"Essentially, yes."

I snorted. "Well, damn. You realize this is basically a conspiracy theory come to life, right? There's no way in hell you could pull this off without magic."

"Well," Prophet said, "it's a good thing we *have* magic, then, isn't it? In any case, this is the plan, and it *will* happen. It's going to start with just the rank and file of the Guards and a handful of clan mages, but we expect participation to increase rapidly, likely spreading beyond mages to werewolves and even vampires. We are offering you the chance to be a part of spearheading the initial group."

"No."

He raised one eyebrow. "Really? That simple."

"Yeah, and you want to know why?" I stabbed one finger at him accusingly. "It's been months since Loki's broadcast. Months of chaos, and pointless destruction. Where was your organization through that, huh? Where were you when all of *that* was going on?"

"It takes time to arrange this sort of thing," Prophet said.

"Bullshit. You could have had people on the ground two hours after he made his announcement, and we all know it. And we know why you didn't, too. You said it yourself. The current state of affairs is a *hell* of a convincing argument for why normal humans need help with things. It's a convincing argument for why the current governments need some kind of help to deal with the supernatural. And something tell me that they'll be a lot more likely to accept you as that help, and accept the terms under which you offer your help. I don't think that's a coincidence. Now, I've done some bad things, but letting all those people die, allowing the chaos and the destruction, for the sake of political expediency? I don't think I can tolerate that."

He regarded me for a moment, then said, "You immature, sniveling child. I have never had the highest opinion of you, but I thought you at least had the spine to do what was necessary. If you don't enjoy it, that's your prerogative; you can feel however you please. But if you're going to claim power, you owe it to the people you claim to rule to acknowledge the responsibilities of your position. So stop coddling yourself, accept that you will have to do things you don't like to get the job done, and *grow the fuck up.*"

I just stared at him. I opened my mouth, then closed it again without saying anything.

He made a noise of disgust and gestured at Watcher. "You know him," Prophet said. "Get this through his skull."

She sighed. "I understand your complaint, Winter," she said, coughing. "And I won't deny that line of thinking played a part in our decision. But you have to recognize that this is the best option we had available. A brief demonstration of why our assistance is necessary is far less damaging in the long run than a prolonged period of unrest as we made the transition."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. "I can go there. I can see your point. And, you know, I can see why *you* would use that line of reasoning. Your whole job is to do bad things for the greater good. And that's why the answer is still no. You go too far, Watcher. You cross lines. As far as I'm concerned, you're *barely* any better than the people you fight. And I can't say I haven't followed that road myself, but I at least acknowledge that what I've done is wrong. I won't sit here and try to defend my choices as having been justified by some greater good."

She coughed again, leaning on her cane a little. "You'd condemn humanity to the predation of monsters to satisfy your ego?"

"I'm one of the monsters, remember?" I smiled, and it was not a very pleasant smile. "I've stopped pretending that I'm human. There's no point in it. So you're not going to get very far with that appeal, I'm afraid. And to answer your question, nope. I'm not *condemning* anyone to anything. You want to help people, you want to maintain order, I won't get in your way. I'll even help you. But when it comes to actually joining you, my response is the same as every other time you've asked me to sign up for your team. You people are a kind of messed up that I don't want to be."

"So fix it," Arbiter said abruptly, the first he'd spoken since I walked in.

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I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You'll forgive me if I'm too blunt, I hope," he said. "But this is something I've noticed from you several times. You're very quick to blame the establishment, Winter, but you seldom seem to do much to *fix* that establishment. If things are ever going to get better, it will only be because people *make* them better. Well, this is your chance. You've got the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a major organization. If you feel that Watcher's tactics cross too many boundaries, if you're concerned that the new incarnation of the Guards will be similarly problematic, don't you think you should at least attempt to influence it for the better?"

I frowned. I wanted to keep saying no, but...Arbiter had some valid points there. For most of my life I'd been complaining about the way things were, but I'd always sort of assumed that was just how it was. It was like the weather; sure, you griped about it when it rained on your parade, but you didn't seriously think about changing the weather. It was something you just lived with.

Except now I really *did* have the chance to maybe make some changes. I could maybe *fix* some of the shit I'd been upset by all these years. And if that was the case, maybe I did owe it to myself to at least try.

What if I could make the new order better than the old one, at least a little bit?

I considered it for a moment, then sighed. "Fine," I said. "I'll hear you out, at least for now."

"Excellent," Guard said. "I'll be happy to go over the details with you."

Chapter Three

"Okay," I said to Guard as the rest of the mages got up and started drifting towards the door. "If this is all about you offering me a deal, why did all of you need to be here?"

"You're not the only one asking that," the pale woman in the blue robe grumbled. Thinking back on it I was pretty sure it was the first thing she'd said. It took a moment for me to remember who she actually was, since I didn't think I'd seen her except for a few minutes while they were trying to decide whether to charge me with murder or not. I was reasonably confident her title—or name, or whatever—was Walker. She'd voted not to kill me, as I recalled.

Come to think of it, Guide had been against me that day. That probably made it a little harder to say that it was a total accident that I'd killed her.

Guard glared at her, then turned back to me with a very badly faked smile. "Some actions can only formally taken by all members of the Conclave together. Technically, offering a complete and total outsider a major position with one of our organizations is one of those actions. I wonder why."

Prophet looked from me to Guard and backed, then grinned maliciously. "Have fun," he said, snapping his fingers. His haze of magic faded from around the walls, and he walked out the door.

I eyed Guard as the Conclave members finished leaving, then shrugged and sat down across from him. "Given that we're already in a restaurant, you actually want to get some food? Because I'm thinking this conversation will be a lot more endurable if I'm stuffing my face during it."

"Fine with me," he said. "Watcher!"

Moray opened the door and poked his head inside. "Yes?"

"Send the wait staff in," Guard said.

The next twenty minutes or so passed in total and uncomfortable silence. Literal silence; I wasn't in the mood to be making casual conversation, and Guard was apparently content with awkwardly intense stares and a fake smile that got even less believable with each passing moment.

Finally, when I was seriously starting to consider actually talking about important things just to break the silence despite knowing how dumb that was, the waitress showed up. And then another half a dozen people following her.

They started laying out plates, and didn't stop until most of the conference table was covered. Moray stood and watched the whole time, which seemed to be creeping the restaurant employees out more than a little bit. I could not in all honesty blame them for that. When you're serving two people an amount of food suitable to a small army while a guy in a three-piece suit watches you work is the kind of thing that probably *should* leave you feeling a little weird.



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They finished and filed out, with Moray following close behind them and closing the door. Guard looked at his one plate of enchiladas, then looked at the rest of the food on the table.

He quirked an eyebrow at me. "Is this really necessary?"

"I'm starving, and the food here is passable. If you don't want to cover the bill, I can handle it." I grabbed a platter of nachos and dragged it close. "Okay," I said. "Details. What kind of work are you expecting me to do?"

"It would entail a mixture of direct action and politics," he said. "To begin with, you would be expected to enforce minimum standards of law and order within your area of influence, particularly upon the supernatural residents. While you certainly *can* enforce the law, it isn't a priority, particularly until the legal system catches up with the recent upheaval. We're more concerned with maintaining basic standards of order and stability, and minimizing destruction and civilian casualties."

I swallowed and then gave him a funny look. "You do realize these are things I already do, right?"

He smiled. It was wider and more mobile than the faked smiles earlier, his teeth startlingly white against the dark skin. The expression didn't last more than a second, but it still conveyed more genuine emotion than I'd seen out of him during this whole meeting. "So now you'll do it for us," he said.

I snorted. "Okay. So that must bring us to the politics bit, I guess."

"Yes," Guard said in a tone of deep, profound distaste. "The worst part of the arrangement, as usual. The gist of it is that you would be building connections and establishing positive relations with other groups. You would have to represent us, both to other political entities and to the citizenry; we would expect you to represent us well to both. As we begin to integrate ourselves with existing political structures, you would also have to work with them. We expect to also begin drawing a great many new recruits; you would be involved with attracting, vetting, training, and coordinating them."

I sat and processed that for a few moments as I polished off the nachos. "So let's start at the beginning," I said, once I'd thought it through. "You realize that I *am* the main political group in the area, right? I mean, my organization is probably the strongest one in the region, and most of the rest are either allied with or explicitly subordinate to mine. So you basically want me to establish relations with myself?"

"Well, that should make it easy, shouldn't it? If you can't manage that, I don't know why my colleagues would be as impressed with you as they seem to be." He sighed. "We wouldn't be offering you this opportunity if you weren't useful. Your political capital is one of the main reasons we're doing so. While your observations on this topic are *amusing* in their own way, this isn't either surprising or accidental."

I nodded. "Fair enough. Okay, point two. You want *me* to represent you in a *positive* light? Are you nuts? Because I'm not exactly on the best terms with a lot of people. There are a lot of them that would probably tell you to screw off as soon as they hear that I'm involved."

Guard considered me for a moment, then sighed again. "Do me a favor," he said. "Consider whether maybe, just *maybe*, we aren't total morons. We *might* even know more about politics than you do. I mean, I'd like to think that we didn't get this position without some degree of qualification."

I chuckled. "Again, fair point. So...what do I actually get out of this deal?"

"What, aside from the chance to completely shape the future of the world in a major way? I thought we already went over this."

"Yeah, I'm just messing with you." I grinned at him. "Quick question, though. I was under the impression that I couldn't hold any kind of official position on account of the whole, you know, internationally wanted for blowing up a decent chunk of a city. Do you have any way around that little problem?"

Guard closed his eyes for a moment and I got the distinct impression he was counting to ten to keep from murdering me. "All of our people will be using aliases," he said, opening his eyes and plastering on an even more obviously fake smile. "The general public should never become aware of who you are. The government will have your identity on file, of course, but we can provide falsified identification for you if you can't manage it on your own."

I blinked. "Really? Just use a false name? It's that easy?"

He shrugged and took a sip of water. "Why shouldn't it be? You already keep your face covered while you're working, and I imagine most of the others will be as well. Many of those who will be involved in this project were raised on superheroes and the like; they're likely to jump on the excuse to wear a costume and use a dramatic name, aside from the practical benefits."

I winced. He laughed.

"Okay," I said. "I think that's the last question I had. Was there anything else you had to tell me?"

"Just one thing," he said with a smile. "You won't be in charge of operations within Colorado Springs. You'll be starting at the bottom and working up, in fact. So to begin with you'll be at the very bottom slot on the totem pole."

"Wait a second," I said. "Why? I'm not exactly a newbie at this stuff."

"Several reasons," he said, smiling. Clearly, Guard was enjoying this part of the interview. "First off, as you pointed out, you have an organization of your own to be running. Expecting you to manage ours on top of that would be unreasonable. Second, you're far too high-profile. If you *were* the head of the local team, it would be extremely likely that someone would figure out who you are. It's also likely

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that you'll be required to meet with the Guards in your capacity as jarl, which would be one hell of a trick if you're the head of both groups. And finally, in this sense you *are* a total newbie. You have no experience with how we operate, no familiarity with the system. There's no way that you could act as a viable leader without even having worked with us in the past."

I glowered at him for a second or two, then nodded. "Fine," I said grudgingly. "But you realize what it would do to my reputation if I'm taking orders?"

"Just one more reason not to let anyone connect the two personas," he said smiling. "So I think that's everything we needed to cover. What do you think?"

"I'll need to consider it," I said, grabbing another plate. "I'm not sure whether I even have time to add this to what I'm already doing. But I'm not going to rule it out entirely."

"Honestly that's more than I was expecting," Guard said, rolling up the sleeves of his robe and grabbing his fork. "You've got a few days to decide. I'll get back to you."

I grunted and stuffed another taco in my mouth. I'd already polished off enough food for a dozen people, but I was still profoundly hungry. I knew that there was no way just eating would make that hunger go away; it was deeper than that, a simplified experience of a more metaphysical need. But there was still a sort of satisfaction in eating.

Guard also started eating. His one plate looked a little ridiculous in comparison to the dozen or so others on the table, but he was fairly enthusiastic at first, stuffing his face with apparent satisfaction.

Then he started slowing down.

Then his face hit the table.

I sat in the hospital waiting room and, shockingly, waited. I'd taken the time to tell Snowflake, Aiko, and my thugs what was going on and not to expect me back soon, but other than that I'd just been sitting here for the past half-hour or so. It already looked bad enough; for me to then disappear from the scene would be a *little* bit suspicious.

Finally, Moray walked into the waiting room and sat next to me. "I hate hospitals," he commented.

"Me too. They creep me out." I glowered at the aquarium on the opposite wall. "And they smell bad. Like, I mean just *awful*."

He snorted. "You would fixate on that."

I chuckled. "Yeah, well. Is there any word?"

He nodded. "Definitely poison, but I don't know enough to understand half of what they're saying. It sounds like he's probably out of it for a while, but the doctors don't think he's going to die."

"Good," I said.

"Is it?"

I nodded. "I don't know if I like him and I don't get the impression he likes me at all, but I don't want him dead. Not to mention that I really don't think it'd have gone well for me if he died."

"Yeah," he said. "It does look pretty fishy. Especially right after another of the Conclave members that voted against you died."

"That would be why it's a good thing that he isn't dying," I said dryly. "You have any idea who poisoned him? Or how?"

"Not yet. There was nothing in any of the other dishes, so it was pretty clearly targeted at Guard. He's got more enemies than just about anyone alive, though, so that doesn't narrow it down much."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," I said. "Have you looked into the restaurant staff at all? Maybe it was one of the waiters that put the poison in, or a cook?"

"There are people investigating them, but I haven't heard what they've found," he said. "Of course, there is another possibility."

"What is that?"

"He did it himself."

"That makes sense," I said. "Oh wait, no it doesn't. What the hell?"

"Think about it," Moray said. "Pretty convenient that he got just enough of the poison in him to make him sick, but not enough to kill him. That's a lucky coincidence, and I'm not a fan of coincidence."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "Even by my standards that's impressively paranoid. Why would he be almost killing himself, again?"

"To make you do what he wants," Moray said. "Think about it. He was making you an offer, right? I didn't hear what you said, but I know how things were shaping up. Well, I think this is a *bit* of a high-pressure sales tactic, don't you?"

I frowned. "Well, I can see how this would influence my decision, yeah. But I have a hard time seeing me being that important to him. This is a pretty huge risk for him to be taking for the sake of...what? Making it a little awkward for me to say no?"

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"It's the kind of tactic I could see him using," he said seriously. "I've known Guard for a long time now. He isn't the sort to shy away from a risk. If he wanted you to take the deal he was offering, I could see him pulling this kind of stunt." He glanced at me over his sunglasses, his expression carefully blank. "Like I said, I'm not sure. But you should at least think about it."

He looked at me for a moment longer in silence, then walked back into the hospital.

Chapter Four

"That's the place?" I asked, looking at our destination. It was a moderately-sized office building in the heart of downtown, all worn concrete and gleaming windows.

"That's it," my escort said. He'd introduced himself to me as David Brunner; I could smell the movement in his magic, quick and light, but beyond that I didn't know much of anything about him. He was a Guard, apparently the person who was going to be in charge of their public branch in Colorado Springs.

"Nice digs," Aiko said. "You own the whole building?"

"Yeah," David said. "No offense, but you aren't actually invited in. We're planning to open areas of the building to the public once we have things up and running for real, but for the moment it's still restricted to members of the Guards. Not to mention that having you around would make it a little too easy to figure out who Winter really is."

"No problem," she said easily. "I think we all knew that I wasn't exactly going to be signing up with this crew. You don't want to let me into your clubhouse, that's fine."

I eyed her for a moment. "Please don't break in," I said. "We know you can. You don't need to prove it."

"Oh, come on," she said. "You don't seriously think I would do something like that, do you?"

"Yeah," I said dryly. "Given that I'm pretty sure you were already considering it, yes, I do."

She sniffed. "Fine. I'll wait outside like a boring person."

"Thank you." I turned to David. "Okay, what do I need to know?"

"To start with, I'm the only other person on the local team who knows about the Conclave, the Guards as an organization beyond what's being developed for the public, or pretty much anything about the political structures you're used to dealing with. As far as everyone else is concerned, none of that exists, and we'd like to keep it that way."

I blinked. "These people are *that* new?"

He smiled thinly. "You have no idea. Speaking of which, I'm also the only one who knows who you are. To the rest of the team, you're Jonathan Keyes, using the alias Shrike. Here's your paperwork for that, by the way." He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and held it out to me.

I didn't take it. "Shrike," I said. "Seriously? That's the name you guys came up with for me?"

"You're the one who put it on the form. It's not my problem if you changed your mind."

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I opened my mouth, then sighed and turned back to Aiko. "Shrike," I said. "You filled out a form saying that I wanted to go by the name *Shrike*."

"What?" she said, smirking. "I told you I wanted to have a pet name for you. It just took a little while to actually make it happen."

"Okay," I said, taking the envelope. "So apparently I'm going by Shrike now. Joy. You said my fake real name is Jonathan Keyes?"

"That's right," David said. "Now, the team does know that you're a werewolf, as well as very basic information about your magic and your skills. So don't worry about keeping any of that secret. But your real identity, your political affiliations, and your heritage are all *very much* secret."

I snorted. "What do you even *know* about my heritage?"

"Enough to know that we don't want them knowing much of anything about it. That means you also have to seem like a different person. So the wolf motif? That's going to have to go."

I stared at him for a moment. "You know," I commented, "I was just thinking that there was not one single thing about this arrangement that I actually *liked*. Thanks for proving me wrong."

"What?" David said. He shook his head a moment later. "No, never mind. Not important. Here's your ID; that'll get you through the security. Now come on, let's introduce you to the rest of the team." He started across the street without waiting for me to answer. I hugged Aiko and then followed.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" I asked.

David glanced at me, then continued walking. "I think you're dangerous," he said. "You're disruptive, destructive, and you have a history of doing stupid things. To be blunt, you're exactly what we're working against here. You just happen to be pointed at even worse things right now."

I took a few more steps, then said, "You smell sort of bad. Like, whatever cologne you're using? It's starting to go rancid. Just so you know."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, reminding me very strongly of Guard. Apparently I had a gift for annoying all of his people, not just the boss.

He swiped his own identification card through the reader at the door. The reader beeped and then the door unlocked with a sharp *click*. He pulled it open and waved me inside.

I paused outside. "This building is warded?" I asked absently, most of my attention on the wards themselves. I sniffed, analyzing the scent of the magic, and felt around at the edges of the spells.

"Of course," he said impatiently.

"These are, like, cookie-cutter wards," I said. "They're ridiculously generic. And the joints between the different wards are weak. A moron could take this apart."

"And you think you could do better?" he asked.

"Of course not," I snapped. "Defensive magic isn't exactly my strong suit, as you're well aware. That's why I hired someone who *is* good at it, rather than try and cobble it together myself and end up with this kind of sloppy, standardized crap."

He sighed. "I'll pass on your recommendation to the higher-ups," he said, sounding tired. "Now come on. The rest of the team is waiting to meet you."

The building was in the middle of some fairly extensive renovations. There was a demolition crew gutting the ground floor, clearing out the walls to leave a large, open space, and David said that there was more work being done elsewhere. Apparently the elevators were down for the time being as a part of the renovations, which I was just as glad for. I've always much preferred stairs.

"The ground floor is going to be the public area," David said, climbing the stairs as quickly and easily as I could. That was pretty impressive, for a human, enough to make me wonder whether he had some means of making it easier magically. "We're going to have a gift shop, a cafe, that sort of thing."

I blinked. "A *gift shop*? That's...*why*?"

He shrugged. "We need cash," he said simply. "To pull this arrangement off, we're going to need a lot of money. We're planning on getting support from the government once we're up and running, and until then the funds from our *donors* should be plenty." He glanced at me as he said that, a silent reminder that the precise nature of those donors was not public knowledge even here. "But we'll want to be bringing in some cash on our own, and a gift shop isn't a bad way of going about that."

"Who in their right mind would be shopping at a gift shop *here*?" I demanded.

He snorted. "You might be surprised," he said dryly. "Remember, this is going to be a high-profile, publicly known organization. People are going to be talking about us. Hell, I'll be surprised if it takes more than a couple weeks for you to be a celebrity."

I groaned. "Oh, no," I said. "I've done the celebrity thing before. *Vastly* overrated."

"When were you a celebrity?"

"First time the werewolves came out to the public," I said. "I was one of the names on the list. I didn't have it as bad as a lot of them, but it was still pretty ridiculous. People barging into my store and ranting about it, or trying to take pictures of me whenever I went outside."

He laughed. "Well, at least you know what you're in for." He glanced at me curiously. "Maybe you can tell me something, though. Why *did* the werewolves pull that stunt? The whole thing seemed a little...random."

"You know," I said slowly, "at the time I agreed with you. Thought it was a terrible idea. But looking back on it, I'd wager the Khan knew that this was coming. The whole supernatural world going



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public, I mean. The first time was a sort of trial balloon, seeing what the reaction would be and who the most strongly-opposed people were. Then when they went back into the closet for a while, they could arrange for those people to have unfortunate accidents before we went public for real."

"That's pretty terrifying," he said after a moment. "That kind of thinking, I mean. And the way you just talk about them having *accidents* like it's nothing. You really think that's right?"

"We're talking about people who were lynching werewolves in the streets," I said coldly. "Or just random people that maybe looked a little like a werewolf if you squinted hard enough. I don't have a lot of pity for them."

"I guess that's fair," David said, though he didn't sound convinced. "Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. The tour. So the ground floor is open to the general public. Then the next couple floors are where we're putting in the support staff and the bureaucracy. Fifth floor is our work area—lab space, workshops, and such."

"I'm going to want to check that out," I said. "Is it fully equipped?"

"I thought you might like that part," he said. "And no, we're still getting it set up. On the plus side, that does mean that you can put in any special requests. I'll show you where after you meet your new coworkers. Speaking of, here we are." He opened the heavy fire door at the next landing and waved me through. "Sixth floor," he said. "This is our common area. Seventh is the top floor, and that's where our personal quarters are."

"Seems a little awkward for us to get to," I commented. The door opened into a hallway, across from the elevators. To either side there were a handful of doors opening off the hall.

"It's also hard for anyone else to get to," he pointed out. "Kind of have to pick one, right?"

"Fair point."

"Glad you think so. Well, here we are." He grinned at me and opened one of the doors.

Looking in, the first thing that struck me was how *cozy* it was. The floor was covered in pale grey carpet, saved from looking institutional by the thick, plush shag. The walls were a warmer cream color, with several paintings, drawings, photos, and posters on them. There were several leather couches and armchairs scattered around the room, as well as a beanbag and some large cushions. Somebody had hung a green-and-black hammock in the corner, which looked like it was made of parachute fabric. There was a television, a stereo, some video games. The result should have been cluttered and chaotic, but somehow it all seemed to fit together into a harmonious whole.

There were four people in the room when I walked in. A man and a woman were curled up together in the beanbag, a skinny guy was sprawled in one of the armchairs, and a girl with an aggressively red mohawk was lying in the hammock.

"Hey, folks," David said, following me in and closing the door behind us. "Last one of the team's finally here. Meet Jonathan. He's going to be our tank."

"Nice to meet you," the guy on the couch said, looking up at me and smiling awkwardly. Now that I looked at him again, I saw that he wasn't much older than the girl in the hammock; he might be in his twenties, but not by much. "My name's Derek. I'm mostly good at making things. Like armor and stuff, yeah?"

"That's an useful ability," I said.

His awkward smile blossomed into a broad, ecstatic grin. "Thanks," he said.

"Yeah, yeah," the girl in the hammock said impatiently. "I'm Tawny and I summon demons. Christ, this is like an AA meeting."

I considered her for a moment. "I think you and I should have a conversation about that."

"What, you want me to renounce my heretical ways and go back to being a good girl?"

"Nah," I said. "Mostly I just want to know what kind of demon you're summoning. Some are a lot better to work with than others."

She looked directly at me for the first time, apparently trying to figure out whether I was serious, and then grinned almost as widely as Derek. She was missing some teeth. "I think I might like you, Jonny," she said. "Tell you what, I'll have that conversation with you. Who knows, I might even learn something."

"I look forward to it," I said.

"Well, not to rush you or anything, but we are on a schedule," David said. "You already know me. I mostly focus on mobility and providing ranged support."

"My name's Anthony," the guy in the beanbag said. His eyes were solidly closed. "But you can call me Tony. Everyone does. I'm good with fire, primarily, although I do a little work with electricity and light."

"And I'm Elyssa," the woman with him said. Despite their physical proximity, they seemed like polar opposites; her eyes were wide open and darted around in a way that made me think she was taking in everything that happened. "I mess with people's perceptions, especially with attention. Now run along; you don't want to keep the bossman waiting."

"Hang on a second," I said. "What's the rush?"

"You have some paperwork to file," David said. "Financial information and such. And then you have a meeting with the public relations team to talk about how your image is going to need to change now that you aren't operating on your own."

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Tawny laughed. "Good luck with that, Jonny," she said. "Play nice with the pencil-pushers."

And on that less-than-comforting note, I was whisked right back out to arrange for the less dramatic aspects of a job that I was already deeply, *deeply* regretting having agreed to.

Chapter Five

"You have got to be kidding me," I said.

David glanced at me. "Was I not clear earlier?"

I stared at the sign, reading it again. It still said PUBLIC RELATIONS. "I assumed you were kidding," I said. "You seriously have a PR guy?"

"We have a whole team dedicated to it," he said dryly. "This is just the guy that calls the shots." His smile was rather chilly as he pushed the door open. "This is the last thing I have scheduled for you today," he said. "You can stay here, go home, whatever. Tomorrow is the first practice session with the full group. Have fun."

He turned and walked away, whistling a jaunty tune. I watched him go, and then sighed and stepped into the office.

The first impression I got was that it was a very *constructed* sort of place. Everything was arranged just so, everything precisely in its place. It was set up to look more chaotic, like it was the office of a busy man who couldn't quite find the time to straighten it up, but the little details gave it away. The open books were a little too neatly spaced out, the disheveled stacks of paper were disheveled in precisely the same ways.

The office's owner, currently sitting at the desk, was much the same. His coat was hung over the back of his chair, his shirtsleeves rolled up, his tie pulled loose. It was a very good act, a very good presentation of the harried office worker who was too busy with his work to pay attention to the little things. But I still got the feeling that it was *artificial*, that it was all very deliberately arranged. It was almost like talking to one of the Sidhe, except he wasn't quite good enough to cover up the hints of artifice.

"Hi," I said, walking up to him.

"You must be Jonathan Keyes," he said. "I'm Frank Gosnell, head of the public relations department here. Pleased to meet you."

"You do know that isn't my real name, right?"

He regarded me for a moment. "In this office," he said at last, "it is. You're Jonathan Keyes, or failing that, Shrike. Whatever you might call yourself elsewhere, here those very much *are* your real names. Are we clear?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Please, take a seat."

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I grabbed one of the chairs and spun it around, resting my arms on the back as I sat down. It was meant to annoy him, deliberately upsetting the carefully ordered layout of his office, and from the way his shoulders tensed I thought it was working.

His voice, though, was easy and relaxed. "You know," he said, "I really have to hand it to you. I think your file is the most heavily redacted, classified one I've ever seen. There are whole pages blacked out in that thing."

"Did you read them anyway?"

He held his hand in front of him and rocked it side to side. "Eh," he said. "My clearance is high enough to read some of it, and I pieced together some of the rest from what I already knew." He lowered his hand to the table again, looking at me seriously. "I won't pretend to understand you," he said. "We both know I don't. But I've got enough of an idea who you are to know that we've got an uphill battle in front of us."

"Why's that?"

"I think it's fair to say that you're used to getting your own way," he said. "You think you know best, and you're accustomed to *acting* on that knowledge, without necessarily getting another opinion first."

I frowned. "Pretty fair," I admitted.

He nodded. "Yes, well, as of now that's not how you do things. You're a part of a team now, understand? And while I'm sure you're good at what you do, this is a very different world you're entering now. You've got to learn to play by different rules than you're used to."

"How so?"

"First off," he said, "no killing. Just don't. You use nonlethal measures unless you've got an explicit order to kill the enemy, and even then you check with me first if you can."

"That's ridiculous," I protested. "That'll just give us a reputation for being soft. Nobody will respect us if we aren't willing to finish the job."

He sighed. "Look, Jonathan," he said. "From your file, I'm sure that you've had to worry about what impression you're making in the past. But I'm guessing you've mostly been concerned about what people like *you* think, correct?"

I hesitated. "Broadly speaking, yeah," I said. "I mean, not *exactly* like me, but people that move in somewhat similar circles."

"I thought so. Well, your approach might work with them, but now we need to think about another demographic. We need to think about what regular people think. The general public, your

average human being that knows nothing about how things work behind the scenes, *that* is the most important opinion for us right now."

"I don't know," I said. "I think they might still prefer the lethal option."

He regarded me for a moment, his hands folded on the desk in front of him. "Let's make a deal, Jonathan," he said. "I won't tell you how to do what you do. When it comes to fighting you've got experience and skill, and I don't. So if you tell me something about what the best way to fight someone is, I'll just assume you know what you're talking about rather than try to play armchair general. In return, you do me the same favor and trust that I know my job. Does that sound good?"

"Sure."

"Excellent," he said. "Then believe me when I say that killing people actually *doesn't* endear you to society. I don't care if it's justified; if the first thing people learn about us is that we have a habit of killing suspects while trying to apprehend them, we'll lose any chance we might have had to earn their trust. So for now, you're using strictly nonlethal methods, are we clear?"

I frowned. "I suppose," I said reluctantly. "But I'm *really* not much good at pulling my punches."

"That's what training is for," he said pitilessly. "Most of the others will be working to build themselves up. *You*, on the other hand, need to learn to hold back. As a part of that, I don't want to hear that you've won any sparring matches with your new teammates for at least a week."

"What? Why?" I demanded.

"Several reasons," he said. "First, it will show me that you're *capable* of holding yourself back. Second, most of these people need a confidence boost; for you to walk in and thrash them all would be the worst thing you could do for team cohesion. Third, you need to get used to not being in the spotlight."

I considered that for a moment, then sighed. "Okay," I said reluctantly. "Fine. But I think we need to go back real quick. This isn't a matter of me *holding back*. The things I do are inherently likely to kill people."

"How so?"

I thought about it, then decided that words weren't likely to get me anywhere with Gosnell.

I summoned Tyrfinng instead, the sword appearing in my hand with a sudden, familiar weight. I flicked the clasp open and dropped the sheath, then thrust the sword straight down into the floor. As expected, it easily punched through the flooring and stood there, sticking straight up into the air.

"Explain how that's supposed to not kill people," I said, not looking away from him.

He pursed his lips. "Interesting. That's the weapon you use?"

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"Usually, yeah."

He nodded. "You'll have to use something else with us, of course," he said. "That's far too distinctive; you'd be recognized easily. We can get another sword for you. Derek can probably do something with it."

"I don't think that's a very good idea," I said, pulling Tyrfing back out of the floor and grabbing the sheath. "Me using another sword, I mean."

It took me a couple of seconds to sheathe Tyrfing. I'd almost forgotten how hard it was to put the cursed sword away without using it first. It wasn't something I'd needed to do all that much.

"That's fine," Gosnell said. "But *that* sword stays out of sight, on these premises and when you're in the field. We can come up with some other weapons for you to use."

I gritted my teeth. I wanted to argue, but he had some valid points. "Fine," I said. "Any *other* restrictions you want to put me under?"

He smiled a little. "Not yet, but I'm sure we'll come up with some later," he said. "That does bring up the next point, though. What's your *look* going to be? There are a couple of things I've been specifically instructed to avoid—wolves and snowflakes, mostly—but otherwise it's fairly open. Going by Shrike, I'm assuming you want some kind of a bird theme, right?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Excellent," he said. "Now, your features are fairly distinctive, so we'll want your face fully covered. Probably a fully enclosed helmet, just in case. Do you have a preference for the rest, whether you want to show some skin or be mostly covered?"

"Covered," I said decisively. "I'd rather not have *any* exposed skin, actually."

He nodded and wrote a couple lines on the corner of one of the papers on his desk. "Okay," he said. "Colors? Any preference?"

"Something fairly bright," I said. "No black or white." I paused. "Not dayglo bright or anything, though."

"Bright without being ridiculous," he said. "We can do that. I'll get back to you with some choices for what colors you like after we settle out how we want to handle color selection for the team. We want to have some similarity between you, as far as appearance goes, but it looks like that'll shape up all right without making you all wear the same color, so there's more flexibility there."

"How are we looking similar without color?"

He paused. "Let's just say you aren't the only one who's going to have some feathers," he said. "Now, this should be enough to get the design people started. We'll want your measurements before we actually finalize the design, but that can wait."

"I can handle this," I said.

He eyed me. "Jonathan. We agreed that you wouldn't argue with me about my side of things."

"And that you wouldn't interfere with *mine*," I reminded him. "This isn't just an aesthetic issue. I wear *armor*, and I rely on it to keep me from getting killed. And I know a guy who I trust to make a decent set more than your designers. You get the look however you want it, and I'll take it to my supplier to get the actual armor made."

"That's reasonable," he said. "You'll have to cover the cost yourself if you get your equipment out of house, though."

I snorted. "Not a problem."

"That's good." He glanced at the paper he'd written on earlier, then nodded. "All right. You won't start actually interacting with the public for probably at least a week, so you don't need to have your public persona down yet. But you should start thinking about how you want to present yourself as Shrike. My understanding is that you're supposed to be fairly reserved, rather than being in the spotlight, but beyond that you've got a lot of latitude in what you want the persona to be."

"All right," I said. "Is there anything else?"

"I don't believe so, no," he said. He smiled again, just as false and artificial as his other smiles. "Thank you for your time, Jonathan. Have a good day."

Aiko listened to me gripe without saying anything, then burst out laughing once I was finished. "Goddamn," she said. "They've really got you whipped, don't they?"

I glowered. "They don't own me," I said.

"Nope," she said happily. "They just sat you down with a PR guy and had him spend half an hour telling you what to do. And you *listened*." She grinned. "Totally whipped."

I sighed. "I'm still not thrilled at the idea of doing this at all," I said. "But they had some valid points about why I should consider it, and it hasn't been *terrible* so far. I just wish it wasn't taking so much of my time. I didn't have a lot of free time *before* signing up for this."

"Not having much time just means you have to play harder when you can," she said. Her sly smile as she glanced at me made it pretty obvious what she had in mind.

"I wish I could," I said. "But I told Tindr I'd be by to go over the financial information tonight, and I've got new reports from Selene and Luna to look at."

"How long's it been since you slept?"



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

I shrugged. "A few days, I think. Why?"

"I know you're a freak of nature and all, and that's terrible. But that part, specifically, isn't bad." She sighed. "Okay, fine. You've got more work to do. I'm going home, and I expect you to come back there before this training tomorrow. I know you don't *need* rest as much as you used to, but not even you can just keep working indefinitely."

"I know," I said. "I'll be home as soon as I can manage it." I hugged her. "Love you."

"Love you too, you oaf," she said, hugging me back. Then she walked away, gathering the magic for the portal around her.

The mansion was quiet as I walked up. It was only a little past sunset, though it felt much later. Between not sleeping much and traveling all the time, my sense of time was pretty disconnected from the clock anymore.

Inside, Snowflake was curled up next to the throne, her paws and muzzle stained a dull crimson with dry blood. She'd gone hunting again while I went to meet my new coworkers, apparently successfully. She twitched a little as I scratched her ears, sitting down next to her, and I could feel a sort of dim happiness from her, but she didn't move or really wake up.

As usual, it was only a moment before Selene appeared next to me. "Good evening, boss," she said, handing me a cup of tea and a sandwich. "How'd it go with the Guards?"

"Well," I said, "the good news is that I still have a job. And the bad news is that I still have a job."

She chuckled. "I understand. Well, for once I've got mostly good news. We're finally making progress on talks with the vampires. They still haven't formally acknowledged your claim on the city, but they're willing to talk. I'm setting up a meeting for next week, around midnight in Rome. Do you think that will work with your schedule?"

"If necessary I can *make* it work. We've been trying to set this up for a couple of months now." I frowned, tapping one finger on the arm of the throne. "Do you think they acknowledged us because Hrafn backed us up?"

She shrugged. "No clue. We still haven't heard back from him. They did change their tune surprisingly quickly after we contacted him, though. He's apparently doing all right, by the way. After Katrin died he went straight to northern Europe, and he's apparently been there since, moving around frequently enough not to draw much attention. That's why it took us so long to find him."

I grunted. "Good. He was an all-right sort, for a vampire. I'm glad he's doing all right."

She nodded. "Other than that, news from the Pack is mixed. We just finished making a formal alliance with the Wolf Creek pack, which means we're now officially on good terms with all of the

publicly recognized werewolf packs in the state. But the Pack as a whole wants to have a long conversation with you about the skinwalker you killed. Apparently he was pretty highly placed in their ranks, and they aren't thrilled to lose him right now."

I groaned and stuffed the last of the sandwich into my mouth. "You've got to be kidding me," I said, swallowing. "Somebody's actually *sorry* to see that bastard go?"

"Apparently. Anyway, we're working to set that up as well, but I don't have a confident date set yet."

"All right," I sighed. "Is there anything else?"

"Nothing major," she said. "Tentative overtures with some smaller groups, but nothing confident yet. We've had a few people contact us considering joining up, but none of them are that serious about it yet. Nothing that needs your attention."

"All right," I said. "Send in Tindr with the financial information, please. And another sandwich."

She nodded. "You've got it, jarl."

I watched her go, and tried to pretend that I didn't feel like things were spiraling out of control.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Six

"Okay," I said, sitting down across from Tawny. "So tell me about these demons."

She grinned and set the book she was reading back on the table. At a glance, it seemed to be some sort of pop science book, less rigorous than an actual textbook but still much more inclined to educational than to entertaining. "Finally," she said. "Thought you'd never ask."

"Things have been busy," I said, shrugging. "So what do you do? Are you actually summoning things from somewhere else, or is it more like a construct or something?"

"I don't know the right terms," she said, shrugging. "But it's like...there's always things wanting in, you know? Wherever you go there's going to be *something* that wants to come through there. So it's not like I have to bring them here or whatever. I just have to open the door for them."

"Would you mind showing me?"

Tawny grinned again. "Of course not." She stood and rolled back the rug under her chair, getting at the tile floor underneath. She pulled a couple of little packets of salt, like they had in some restaurants, out of her pocket and tore them open, pouring out a line in a rough circle on the floor around her. "I don't actually need to draw a circle," she told me. "It just makes things a lot easier."

I didn't bother telling her that was true for most kinds of magic, not just hers. I could already tell that I wasn't going to be passing myself off as being as new as most of them, but I was supposed to be seeming at least a little clueless. If I let on how much I already knew they'd start asking *how*, and that was a topic that would pretty much inevitably lead into discussions I was definitely not supposed to have with them.

I felt her power pushing on the world as she started to do whatever it was that she did. It smelled sort of similar to opening a portal, but a little less focused, like the difference between a knife and a needle. It was also surprisingly strong. Not, like, ridiculously, but Tawny wasn't a pushover in the sense of how much raw power she could throw around.

A couple of seconds passed without anything much happening, then the air in front of her sort of *twisted*. It was hard to say quite what I was seeing; it was almost like a heat haze, but there was also a sense of the image *warping*, something like I was looking through a pane of thick glass. For just an instant I got the impression of lines stretching off in directions that didn't quite make sense, dimensions beyond just the usual four converging onto that point.

Then the moment passed, and things went back to normal. Except now, rather than air, there was a creature in front of Tawny. It was small, no larger than my head, and it looked like the stereotypical conception of an imp. It had red skin, black batlike wings, and a thin barbed tail. It opened its mouth and hissed at me, and its jaws seemed to open wide enough to swallow its own head. Its teeth

were heavy and triangular, like a shark's, but much smaller relative to its mouth, almost like it just had serrated jaws rather than actual teeth.

"Damn," I said, staring at it. "I'm impressed." I was, too. I hadn't seen anything quite like this before, either the creature or the summoning of it. That wasn't a magic to take lightly. I was guessing I could take the imp-thing, but I couldn't help but think of all the scarier things she could have summoned instead.

She beamed. It only lasted a second before she covered it with the tough-girl facade again, but I saw it. "The little ones are harder to bring through," she said, holding her hand out. The imp-thing flapped over and perched on her finger, glowering back at me. "They don't push as hard to get in. But they're easier to control once they get here. I like to use the smallest I can and still get things done."

"You mean physically smaller?" I asked.

Tawny wagged her hand equivocally, causing the imp-thing to flutter its wings for balance and hiss again. "Sort of?" she said. "The size isn't what matters, but it tends to line up with what does. This guy's a great example. I don't think he's really intelligent, maybe not even as much as a dog. There's no real thought there, just a whole bunch of emotion. I don't even have to try to make him do what I want. The bigger ones tend to be smarter, and a lot harder to keep a grip on."

"Huh," I said. "So you mostly use the smaller ones, then?"

She shrugged. "When I can get away with it," she said. "The bigger ones are stronger too, so sometimes I need more than one like that can do. But I try to stick with the smallest I can and still get things done."

I nodded, mostly looking at the imp-thing. Something about the way she'd said that made me think she'd summoned a *really* big one once, and it hadn't ended well for her. When she'd first started developing her magic, maybe, before she'd figured out the rules.

"That isn't a demon, though," I commented. "It *looks* a little demonic, but it isn't a demon."

Tawny looked at me curiously. "How do you know?"

"I'd recognize a demon," I said. "I guess you conceptually could bind a weak enough demon, but this isn't one."

She looked at me for a moment longer. "You know, Jonny," she said, "somehow I'm getting the impression I should be a little scared of you."

"I feel the same about you," I said dryly.

Tawny laughed at that. "Well, I'm glad we're on the same page, then," she said. "It's about time for sparring, though. This should be fun." She closed her hands around the imp-thing, and I felt another burst of magic as she sent it back to wherever it had come from.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Tawny and I were the first to show up for the sparring session, which gave me plenty of time to look around.

The training area was on the fifth floor, with the other work areas set aside for the Guards themselves. It wasn't a huge room, but it wasn't small. The room itself was roughly square, around thirty feet on each side. A circle was painted on the floor, almost touching the walls on each side; one of the corners this left had a few chairs in it, while the others held various targets and dummies.

The space felt comfortable and familiar, which was interesting, because I couldn't remember having been in a similar room...pretty much ever, actually. But the *intent* of the room, the feeling of it, was one that I was very much familiar with.

Tawny didn't seem interested in small talk, so I wandered around the room while she sat and went back to her book. I walked around, getting a feel for the texture of the tile floor and the amount of space I had to work with. If I had to participate in this little sparring exercise, I wanted to be able to do so at least somewhat competently.

The others trickled in over the next five minutes or so. Derek came first, wearing a set of police-style riot gear that he didn't look at all comfortable in. I could smell the magic on the armor, reinforcing and strengthening, but it was somewhat simplistic. David followed a minute or so later, with Elyssa right behind him. Another five minutes passed before Tony finally walked in, yawning and scratching his ass.

"All right," David said, once everyone was there. "Let's get started. Jonathan is new here, so how about we let him start."

I shrugged. "Fine with me. What do you want me to do?"

"We'll start by having you spar with Tony," David said, giving me a significant look. I wasn't entirely sure *what* it was supposed to signify, but it was clearly supposed to be significant. "Remember, this is just practice. Don't do anything that might really hurt your sparring partner, and if they *or* I say to stop, you stop, immediately."

"Got it," I said, stepping into the painted circle. "I'm ready whenever."

Tony grinned, a brash and overconfident sort of grin, and walked to the other side of the circle from me. "Let's do this, then," he said.

"All right," David said, stepping out into the spectator area with the others. "On my mark. Ready? Go!"

Tony started cautiously. He wasn't sure what I was capable of, not really, and it showed in his behavior. He started gathering power, getting ready, but he didn't do anything aggressive right away.

I did. The instant David said *go*, I took off, sprinting straight at Tony. I didn't know any more about his capabilities than he knew about mine, but I knew enough to want it over fast. He'd said he was good with fire and electricity, and I knew from experience that hanging back and trading blows with someone who had that skillset was unlikely to end well for me. Instant and decisive aggression was the best tactic for me to take.

He managed to get an attack off, throwing a fistful of fire at my head, but he wasn't used to being rushed and he hadn't accounted for how quickly I could move. I didn't even need to dodge to be perfectly safe as I kept moving in.

He started to get more fire together, but I was already on him. I threw him to the ground with more muscle than skill—they'd been told I was a werewolf, so they knew I was strong, but they didn't know I was skilled and I had no intention of telling them if I didn't need to. He hit the floor hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and he lost his grip on the power he'd been collecting.

Before he could get his bearings again, I was sitting on his chest, holding a knife against his throat. "We good?" I asked calmly.

He froze, and then very carefully nodded. I got off of him and stood up, folding the knife closed and tucking it back into my pocket. "That was embarrassing," I said. "That was literally shameful. You guys are supposed to be fighting serious bad guys, and if that was a serious fight, you'd just have gotten murdered by a guy with a cheap knife."

Tony flushed. "You caught me by surprise," he said defensively. "That wouldn't have worked if I'd been ready."

"Okay," I said. "Prove it. I'm ready to go when you are."

Tony hesitated, but he couldn't say no without losing face, and it was already quite obvious that he wasn't willing to do that. I wondered idly whether *all* fire mages had the brashness and the ego, or it was just the ones I knew. It seemed like too much of a common trait to be entirely coincidence.

"All right," David said as we went back to our positions. He caught my eye and nodded a little. Approval? Maybe, but why?

Then I caught on, and almost laughed. Of course. He was a real Guard, one with serious power and experience. Odds were good that he was at least as experienced as I was, which meant that he *knew* how dangerously overconfident Tony was. He knew damned well that these kids weren't remotely prepared for the kind of threats they were supposed to be dealing with. They were still riding the high of having magic, of being special, and they hadn't yet processed that they were still very definitely not the top of the food chain.

And they needed to have that bubble burst. Of course they did. As long as they went in with their current attitudes, they were more liability than asset. They'd get slaughtered in their first serious fight.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

But David couldn't be the one to actually do it. He was supposed to be their leader, and that meant that they had to *like* him. This wasn't like my relationship with my housecarls; David was obviously trying to set himself up as first among equals, rather than an absolute ruler. That was probably the best approach with these kids, since they weren't accustomed to the more old-fashioned modes of government that most of the people I dealt with used. But at the same time, it meant that he wasn't able to smack them around and call them morons.

No wonder he'd set me up to fight the most overconfident of the bunch first. He was using me as his bad cop. I was intended to convey the stuff they didn't want to hear, so that David could go on being their buddy.

For a second, I almost didn't want to perform, just to make a point. I didn't like being used like this, especially when he hadn't even had the decency to tell me first.

Then I had to laugh at myself. It was a good plan. It was scheming, manipulative, and underhanded, but it would work I could recognize that it needed to be done, and I wasn't likely to be their friend regardless. I just didn't have a lot in common with these kids. And, if I was being entirely honest with myself, I didn't *want* to. I already knew that this line of work, this entire *world*, would suck any youthful innocence and optimism right out of them, leaving them as bitter, cynical, and psychotic as the rest of us. I'd seen it before. Knowing them better would just mean that I had to care.

So when David said, "Go!" the second time, I didn't hesitate. I sidestepped the blast of fire that Tony instantly and predictably threw at me, drawing cold around myself to mitigate any heat that might have otherwise reached me. As I moved I pulled a flashbang out of my hip pocket, pulled the pin, and threw it in his general direction, turning my own head away as I did. The whole thing looked like a single smooth and practiced motion, mostly because it was. I usually preferred to keep the grenades in my cloak, but this wasn't the only place I couldn't wear it, and I'd practiced with a simple pair of pants as well.

Even with my head turned away and my eyes closed, ready for what was going to happen, the detonation of the flashbang was intense. It was deafening and disorienting, leaving me with little more than afterimages and ringing ears to work with.

Unlike the rest of them, though, I knew how to handle that situation. I knew generally where Tony was, and I knew the feel of the floor, the small irregularities that I had to be careful of. I could run at him almost as quickly blind as I could with full vision. I could track the motion of the air well enough to have a decent idea of his movements, and adjust appropriately.

Again, it was a matter of experience. Being blinded was a common, basic tactic, and one that anyone should be ready to deal with. A more practiced mage would have had some way to detect me without vision, or at least been ready to blast at random, hitting me by random chance or at least keeping me at bay.

Tony didn't, and he wasn't. When the flashbang went off he was disoriented and stunned, and he didn't recover before I reached him, literally jumping on him and dragging him down to the floor.

Once I had my hands on him, it didn't really matter that I couldn't see. Working by feel, I quickly secured him in place and put one hand on his throat. I didn't actually apply any real pressure, just made him very aware that I *could*.

I didn't have a knife out this time—too likely to go badly when I couldn't see where he was with any confidence. But I didn't need one. Again, they knew I was a werewolf. It wasn't a secret that I was stronger than a human. I could break him in half and everyone in the room knew it.

"We're good," he said, sounding just a little choked. It might have been a mental thing, or I supposed I might have put a *little* more pressure on his throat than I thought. I'd only meant it to be a threat, but I might have gone a little bit too far.

I wasn't used to working with humans. They were so...fragile.

I took my hand away and got off him, sitting down to wait for my vision to recover. It wouldn't take long. Those flashbangs were intended for instant but brief incapacitation, and I healed faster than a human on top of that.

"You cheated," Tony said. "You threw a *grenade* at me."

"What, and you think other people won't?" I snorted. "Please. Those things are pretty standard. Human beings are dependent on sight, and everyone knows it. If you want to put a mage down without killing him, flashbangs are one of the first things you're going to go for. So if I were you, I'd get used to it, because I won't be the last one to use them against you."

"I'm with Jonathan on this one," David said. "It's a valid tactic. The only rule for this match was that you couldn't do permanent harm, which this shouldn't, correct?"

"Nope," I said. "It's just a flashbang. You should all be fine in a few minutes. They use these things on civilians."

"It's a valid tactic," David said again. "If you weren't prepared to deal with it, that's on you, not him. Now, I think you could both use a bit of a rest, so when everyone can see again we'll have Elyssa and Derek go a round."

I was expecting to think that the new Guards were rather pitiable and useless. And, in all honesty, I *did* think that, but I was actually fairly impressed with them, on the whole. They were new, and it showed, but they did have potential. They were even making strides to *develop* that potential, which was even better.



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Tony was all offense, all the time. I couldn't really blame him for that, though; when your gift is in fire and your only real backup is a little bit of a knack with electricity, you don't have a lot to work with defensively. He was overconfident, but he seemed like he wanted to make that confidence justified. After I thrashed him, he was pretty quiet for a while, and he gave the impression that he was really pushing himself for the rest of the sparring session.

Derek was almost the opposite, as far as attitude went. He was shy, reserved, and desperate for approval. He practically glowed from any compliment, even halfhearted or mixed ones. In terms of talent, or what role he would play, I couldn't get much of a fix on him. He was the only one aside from me who'd brought any equipment, which made sense if his primary ability was to make things, but he didn't seem at all confident when it came to actually *using* that equipment. There was still a lot of potential there, but he had the furthest to go until he was really functional.

The two females were definitely more of wild cards. Elyssa could blur someone's attention to a degree that was actually a little scary. She snuck up on me and almost had me beat before I took my own advice and just started swinging wildly. Eventually a gust of wind tripped her up and she lost her focus when she fell, and from there out it was my game. She took it well enough. She didn't really seem to have much of an emotional reaction to anything, or what she did have was a little bit *off*. From what she'd said she routinely used her magic on herself, focusing her attention beyond what a human mind could do unaided or spreading it out so that she was aware of her surroundings to a preternatural degree. If that was the case, I wasn't surprised that she seemed a little nuts. I of all people should know that prolonged use of magic to alter your own perceptions and thoughts could make you more than a little strange. I was glad to have her on my side, but at the same time, both her magic and her personality were a little bit creepy, even by my standards.

And then there was Tawny. In terms of magic, she was an almost total unknown. From what she'd said, I got the impression that what things were available to her to let in was dependent on a lot of different things—everything from location and time of day to what mood she was in and who was around. She wasn't willing to summon up anything but the smallest of creatures for sparring, things so fragile and weak that even the other newbies had no trouble taking care of them. At the same time, though, we were all acutely aware that she could probably come up with something that none of us could easily handle if she were willing to face the consequences of doing so. As far as attitude went, she was willing to admit how inexperienced she was, and enthusiastic about changing that. She hadn't even fully recovered her vision before she was asking me about where she could get some flashbangs of her own, how expensive they were, how they could be used, and so on.

David didn't participate in the sparring at all. I still had very little idea of what his magic was, beyond a vague sense of movement. Nothing much of his personality showed through the generically pleasant and genial mask.

The sparring went on for several hours. I paired off with everyone other than David at least twice, and then started fighting them two at once when I kept winning. I made sure to be pleasant about it, not doing anything that would make them really *hate* me, but I didn't throw any of the matches. That

would have been bloody stupid, since I might be depending on these people to cover my ass in the future. I'd rather they not like me very much than that they think they were competent when they weren't.

Finally, just when David was calling it good and the last fight was wrapping up, he got a call. The senior Guard answered his cell phone and listened for a few minute or so, then hung up with a grin. "Well," he said. "Looks like we'll be getting a little more exercise after all. There's a real-life situation going down a couple of blocks away for us to use for practice dealing with real threats."

I sighed. Of course there was.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Seven

David hadn't been exaggerating when he said that the "situation" was nearby. It was literally just a couple of blocks down the road, not even a mile away.

None of us had the armor—or clothing, or costumes, or whatever the hell I was supposed to call it—that we would end up using. For the moment, we were faking it with what we had on hand. Derek was wearing his riot gear, with the transparent shield pulled down over his face. Elyssa and Tony had black balaclavas pulled down over their faces. Tawny went with a more basic approach, but it worked surprisingly well; with her hair down, some heavy makeup, and a pair of sunglasses, she was almost unrecognizable.

David and I, naturally, didn't have any trouble with it. I wasn't wearing my usual helmet—the snarling wolf's mask was simply too recognizable when I was trying to keep people from realizing who I was—but I'd brought another helmet from home. It was fairly simple, not much more than a metal bucket with eyeholes, but it covered my face. David, on the other hand, had his full kit on hand. The clothing looked something like a wingsuit, with an intricate, vaguely feathery pattern in blues and greys. The mask, similarly, was vaguely suggestive of a bird, feathery patterns and a beak.

I found it amusing that the people who least needed to care about concealing their identities were the most capable of doing so. I didn't want people to connect "Jonathan Keyes" to Winter Wolf, but that was more a matter of convenience than anything. If someone did draw the connection, it wasn't like it was a serious problem. I didn't exactly have much of a civilian life for them to target me through. I mean, if somebody was dumb enough to kidnap Aiko, they deserved what happened to them.

Similarly, while I didn't know much about David, I was guessing he didn't care that much about it. He was a Guard back when that actually meant something, and you didn't get to that kind of position without being fairly invested in that life.

Once we were as ready as we were likely to get, and we'd gotten through some mild hysterics on the part of the newbies, we packed into the back of a van and started in the direction of the situation. It seemed a little like overkill to me—there wasn't a whole lot of need to get a van to go a couple of blocks—but I supposed that it could be excused. I was working with humans again, after all, and while none of them was markedly out of shape, they weren't exactly star athletes either.

As I understood it, the situation was fairly simple. Three gunmen had burst into a local grocery store, ranting and raving incoherently. Most of the people had managed to get away, but they'd taken one of the shoppers hostage, and they were threatening to kill her if their demands weren't met. Precisely what those demands *were* was less than clear, but effective communication skills weren't something you really expected from lunatics that launched armed assaults on grocery stores. Apparently the police weren't going to be able to get there for several minutes, and even once they showed up there was no guarantee that they could do anything useful. Thus, it fell to us to deal with things.

I had my doubts about the whole thing, but I didn't voice them. It wasn't important right now.

Instead, as David drove towards the scene, I pulled my phone out and sent a text message to Selene. *Hostage situation downtown. Establish perimeter at 400 ft, remain hidden, do not engage.*

The reply was almost immediate. *Confirmed. Kyi is en route with enough people to set up the perimeter. You are dealing with it?*

*Yes, with reservations. Not expecting trouble, but have them ready to step in if needed.*

"What are you doing?" Tawny asked, leaning in to look.

"Not really your business, is it?" I asked, turning off the phone.

"We're here anyway," David said, before things could escalate any further. "Everybody remembers the plan?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives as I got out of the van. I didn't bother saying anything; he knew that I remembered what to do, and I knew he knew it. There wasn't much point in talking about it.

I was on point going in, for obvious reasons. Even without my armor, I was an order of magnitude tougher than anyone present with the possible exception of David. If anyone was going to walk around the corner and run right into the enemy, there was no question that it should be me.

I felt an odd thrill as I opened the front door of the occupied building. It had been ages since I deliberately went into a fight without my armor; the notion of actually being *threatened* by punks with guns was one that I had become unaccustomed to. Not that I was unprotected—the clothing I was wearing was still moderately reinforced—but I *felt* almost naked. It was an odd experience, especially with a bunch of virtual strangers at my back.

The supermarket wasn't one that I could remember having been in before, but it was fairly typical of the breed. About half the lights were out, casting many of the aisles into shadow. It was almost completely silent, an echoing, cavernous sort of silence. It was eerie, the way silence in a place that *should* have been bustling with activity almost always was. The only break in the silence was a quiet, intermittent conversation from the back of the store.

"This is crazy," Tony said in a whisper. Quieter than he needed to be, really, but I could understand it. The silence in here seemed to demand a matching hush from us, and I was certain he was feeling nervous, terrified of being discovered. "We *just finished* sparring. We're already tired."

"Get used to it," I said calmly, scanning the store for any hint of motion. "People aren't usually nice enough to let you rest before they try to kill you." I didn't see anything moving, no hint of someone watching, so I started forward towards one of the darker aisles. "Sounds like they're in the back," I said.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"Yep," David agreed quietly. "Shrike, you're in the lead. The rest of you stay behind him, watch for anything he doesn't seem to be noticing. I'll be above you." He leapt off the ground without waiting for a response, easily landing on one of the shelves and balancing there.

I almost whistled in appreciation. No wonder he was wearing a wingsuit if he could jump like that. Hell, odds were good he could actually *fly*.

I felt a spike of jealousy at that, but dismissed it easily enough. I couldn't fly, but I was close enough. And besides, there was work to do.

Creeping down the aisle, I could clearly feel it when Elyssa started working on me. It was easy to feel, but hard to define or explain. It was like the feeling I'd had sometimes, where I was so focused on some stimulus that the rest of the world seemed to disappear. Except that right now I was focused on *everything* to that degree. Everything, from keeping track of where the shadows were that I could hide in all the way down to the slightly too-tight fit of my left boot, was in almost painfully clear focus. It should have been distracting, trying to keep track of that many things in that degree of detail, but it wasn't. That was the whole point of her magic, after all.

We weren't silent. Not even close. I was pretty damn quiet, and David was utterly silent overhead. Even Elyssa was impressively quiet, probably because her mind was augmented even beyond what she was doing for me. The other three, though...well, after a minute or so I gave up on wincing when they made noise, because it was happening too frequently to keep up with.

I made it to the end of the aisle and crouched there, wrapping myself in a web of air and shadow. It would make me nearly invisible so long as I stayed in the shadows, and muffle any noise I made as well.

It was surprisingly challenging to maintain my shroud without the cloak. I'd gotten spoiled, having my toys all the time. In a way, it was probably good for me to do without. Which didn't mean that I didn't resent it.

At this point, the plan called for me to sneak in and get the hostage out, since I was actually the *most* sneaky of the group. Again, it wasn't something I'd had much need to do in recent years. Most of my work had been blatant and highly visible for a long time now, and when I did need something done stealthily I'd mostly sent Kyi to take care of it.

I hadn't completely lost my touch, though, and it turned out that being hyperaware of everything around me was a pretty considerable help when it came to moving quietly. I managed to slip up to the meat department, where it seemed like the conversation had been coming from, without screwing anything up.

Behind the counter, I eased through the door into the area where the butchers worked. It smelled like blood and fresh meat, reminding me with an uncomfortable intensity that I hadn't eaten since before the sparring session started. I tried to put it out of my mind, but now my heightened

awareness worked against me, making it pretty freaking hard to ignore. It was distracting, and distracted was a very bad state of mind to be in for something like this.

In the end, I picked up a shrinkwrapped package of steak that had been knocked to the floor, tore it open, and stuffed a chunk into my mouth. It felt embarrassingly unprofessional, and it was actually pretty freaking worrying that I needed to stop for some raw meat in the middle of sneaking up on the enemy, but it was better than being unable to function as well as I was supposed to because I was distracted by hunger.

The conversation was coming from the left, but now that I was closer I could also hear noise from the right, a sort of muffled banging and shouting. I went for that one, since conversation was much more likely to be the attackers.

The butcher shop was a cramped, brightly-lit maze of counters and boxes, with lots of sharp bits of metal gleaming in the fluorescent lights. I crouched low, making sure that I wasn't visible above the counters.

I managed to track the muffled noise down to a supply closet on the edge of the room. It wasn't hard to figure out where I was going; they'd thrown the contents carelessly out on the floor, various cleaning supplies pooling on the vinyl flooring. It smelled harsh, ammonia and rubbing alcohol blending together into a noxious mix that almost overpowered the scent of blood.

Technically, I wasn't supposed to know how to open locks. I hadn't actually asked about it, but given that we were supposed to be some kind of force of law and order, it didn't take a genius that picking locks was a skill I probably shouldn't advertise.

But nobody was watching right now, so I went ahead and twisted the lock open with a bit of hardened air and a slight effort of will. I'd gotten pretty quick at that trick over the years.

I pulled the door open, and as expected I found the hostage inside the closet, tied to a chair and gagged with what looked like a couple of socks. She was young, maybe twenty, and reasonably attractive. She looked like she'd been crying, her makeup smeared, and her expression when I opened the door was one of near-terror.

I started to move forward, planning to untie her, then hesitated. There was something odd about this.

After a second, I realized what it was. She didn't smell afraid. I mean, I couldn't actually smell emotions, but people who were terrified that they were about to die tended to have certain physical reactions. They sweated, and more often than they wanted to admit they pissed themselves or threw up. She didn't smell like any of those things.

I might not have noticed it if I hadn't already been suspicious, or if I hadn't had some lingering degree of magical assistance—my awareness had started going back to normal once I put some physical distance between myself and Elyssa, but it wasn't an instant process.

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Once I caught on to that, though, I noticed some other small details. She was tied up with rope, but she didn't have any rope burns, no abrasions. If someone was really tied up and struggling, they usually rubbed their skin raw and bleeding trying to get loose; she hadn't. Similarly, the gag wasn't pulled nearly as tight as it would have to be to really be effective. She hadn't struggled with it, trying to get loose so she could really scream.

I paused, then it clicked into place with the suspicions I'd already had. I almost laughed, but managed to restrain myself. This wasn't about me, not really, and it would have been the height of rudeness to ruin it for everyone else.

I was grinning as I cut the ropes off her wrists and ankles, but it shouldn't matter; nobody could see my face anyway. The placement of the ropes was, once I thought about it, another tipoff. She could have unlocked the door, maybe even managed to untie herself from the chair completely if she were flexible and motivated enough. The fact that she hadn't even tried was rather telling.

"We're going to get you out of here," I said quietly, playing along. "But I need you to be quiet. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded frantically, eyes wide and teary, flexing her hands and rubbing her wrists where they'd been tied. I untied the gag and pulled it off, and while she worked her jaw, she didn't actually say anything.

"Okay," I said. "Follow me, and stay quiet." I opened the door and started out without waiting for a response.

The emergency exit was closest, but it wasn't a good idea. The power hadn't been cut, so the alarm was probably still active, and triggering the alarm would kind of negate the purpose of sneaking in in the first place. Furthermore, now that I was getting a better idea of what was going on, I thought I knew what was expected of me. I was supposed to go back the same way I'd come in, leading the girl past the waiting Guards. I could play the role I was assigned.

She followed me almost exactly, even crouching down in the same way I was. She was shaking, breathing hard, and crying silently. It wasn't the smoothest exit I'd ever seen, but in a way that was probably a good thing. Her obvious emotional reaction would make my casual stoicism stand out, giving it more *impact*.

As expected, nobody challenged us on the way out. Outside, I hurried her into the aisle, well away from the gunmen, then sat her down and told her to wait. She nodded, still crying a little. She clutched at my hand a little when I went to leave, but I tugged free and went back without waiting. I did snag a can of beans off the shelf on the way, though.

Unsurprisingly, the others had noticed me leaving, and they'd already left their own positions and started for the meat department. I fell in with them and quietly said, "Turn left inside. Didn't see them, but I could hear them talking over there."

"Got it," David said back, just as quietly. "Let's do this."

Inside, we turned left and made straight for the sounds of conversation. It cut off as soon as we were inside—there were reasons I'd come in alone when I wanted to be sneaky, after all.

There were three of them, as we'd heard, two with pistols and one carrying a shotgun. They were standing around in a stockroom arguing about something, but when they heard us they came out into the main area of the butcher shop, looking around. They weren't as good as she was; there was a stiffness to their movements, a hesitation, that gave the game right away.

Not that it probably mattered. The rest of these people did *not* give the impression of being comfortable with people pointing guns at them. They were probably so freaked out that they wouldn't have noticed if the gunmen were wearing frilly tutus.

It took them a second to really key on us, probably because of Elyssa. I didn't think she could screw with somebody's head enough to really make us invisible, but she could slow their reaction down a little, buying us that crucial second to act.

Once again, I was the first to respond, the quickest trigger finger. I chucked the can I was holding at the guy with the shotgun. I threw it *hard*, and I put a tailwind behind it, propelling it a little faster and keeping it on track.

Left to my own devices, I'd have thrown it at his head. But I'd killed people like that before, and I hadn't forgotten that killing was Not Allowed. So this time I aimed at his abdomen instead, just in case I was wrong. It would hurt like a son of a bitch if it hit him, and it *might* still rupture things inside him, but he'd live long enough to get to the hospital, and they could probably fix him there.

As expected, though, he didn't really have to worry about it. The can swerved ever so slightly off course as it flew, and smashed into the wall next to him. I glanced at David, and while I couldn't see his face, his *posture* was a little stiff, and he was looking in that direction a little bit too intently. Enough confirmation for me.

Tony was only a little slower on the draw than I was, hurling a stream of fire at the shotgun-wielder. It hit, and singed him, but there wasn't enough power behind it to really *burn*. A second or so later, Tawny poured out another packet of salt around herself—not actually reaching for anything yet, but getting ready to.

The gunmen ran, bolting for the emergency exit I'd noticed earlier. Tony and Derek both started to follow, but I caught Tony at about the same time David grabbed Derek's sleeve. "Let them go," I said. "The hostage is still here. Getting her to safety is the priority here."

"Yeah," David said. "The police can take it from here."

Tony didn't seem too thrilled, but he didn't argue.

I didn't miss that David gave me an almost appraising look on the way out.



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Afterwards, we had a celebration of sorts at the base, in the living quarters. There was music involved, and alcohol, although I was reasonably confident that at least a couple of the younger Guards weren't legally allowed to drink. I didn't say anything. I didn't care that much.

Instead, I found an opportunity to talk to David alone. The senior Guard was back in his civvies, standing on the periphery and sipping the same beer he'd been sipping for the past hour.

"So where'd you find the girl?" I asked, quietly enough to be masked by the pounding of the beat. It wasn't hard. They were blasting the music loud enough to get noise complaints if we'd been in a residential neighborhood.

He glanced at me. "Excuse me?"

"The girl," I said again. "She's fantastic. Is she local, or did you bring in your own talent from out of town?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "And she's local. Works with a theatre troupe out of Denver."

"Damn," I said. "I need to go to the theatre more, apparently. She was excellent. Easily one of the best actors I've ever seen."

"What gave it away, then?"

I shrugged. "Critical thinking, mostly. I mean, come on. You just *happened* to get a call, right as we were wrapping up the sparring, for something that just happened to be right down the street? And wasn't a real threat to us, but could maybe feel like one if you didn't know better?" I snorted. "You aren't that lucky. Then the actual scene wasn't quite *real* enough. She's a great actor, but it was still just an act. Then there was the way all of the gunmen just happened to run, thus ensuring nobody was in real danger and everybody got away clean. They were your guys, I'm guessing?"

"Mercenaries who work with the Guards sometimes," he confirmed. "We could have hired actors for that too, but I don't like trusting civilians with weapons."

"Fair point," I said. "It was a good game, by the way. Very nicely arranged."

"We do something similar for all our new recruits who don't have combat experience," he said. "You have to ease people into it, you know?"

I nodded. "I get the idea, yeah. It's not how I do things, but I'm a bit of an asshole. And I mostly only work with people who already have at least some grounding, so I guess there are different needs there."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Although even most of the people who already have some experience don't catch on that it's a sham. You're a bit paranoid, aren't you?"

I snorted. "More than just a bit." I paused and pulled my phone out as I got another text message. I read it over, then sighed. "I have to go," I said

"Why?"

"Let me put it this way," I said dryly. "When I get urgent messages, it actually *is* a crisis. Right now, for example, some of your people are apparently down at my place trying to kill me, and my associates are having a hard time dealing with it on their own."

He sighed. "All right," he said. "Let me get my stuff, and I'll come with you."

I paused. "Why?"

"You're one of us now," he said. "At least a little bit. That means something for me. If you're having trouble with 'my people,' I can at least make an effort to help you out with it."

"Why am I having a hard time believing your motives are really that pure of heart?"

He snorted. "Because you're more than just a bit paranoid, maybe?"

I had to laugh at that. "You might have a point," I said. "All right, I'll wait a minute for you. My ride will be here around then anyway."

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### Chapter Eight

The black SUV pulled up in front of the building almost exactly as we walked outside. I wanted to think that it was great timing, but considering it was Kjaran driving, it was more likely that he'd been waiting outside for several minutes and just timed the final approach to suit. For a guy who didn't talk, he had a surprising appreciation of the dramatic.

Kjaran was driving, and Kyi was in the passenger seat. There were more of my minions in the second row of seats—Nottolfr for sure, along with Jack and a ghoul I didn't recognize. That left David and I to take the very back row.

"You have a driver?" David asked, buckling himself in.

"Not specifically, no," I said. "People swap out for the job. But Kjaran does it most often, because he's the best at it."

There was a thump and some muffled shouting from the cargo area behind us. I didn't react.

David did. He pushed himself up in his seat and looked back there. "What the hell are you doing?" he shouted a moment later, fumbling with the seat belt.

I glanced back. As expected, the three gunmen from earlier were back there, hogtied and gagged with heavy black duct tape. "How was I supposed to know they were in on the game?" I said irritably. "You should be glad I told my people to be fairly passive or they'd probably have been in an incinerator by now."

One of the guys twitched at that, as best as he could. It wasn't much. They'd been very effectively restrained.

"It was just a training exercise, for God's sake," David said. "There was no need to bring 'your people' in at all."

"Well, then, maybe you shouldn't have played it up like it was a real problem," I told him. "You wanted me to take it seriously? Well, you got your wish."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You need to learn to trust us."

I snorted. "Trust you? Maybe. The rest of them? Let's get real. Have you *seen* those people? I wouldn't trust them to prepare a sandwich without screwing things up. They're still in the equivalent of *boot camp*. I don't think it's unfair of me to hesitate a little before trusting them to keep me alive."

"And how are they going to learn if you don't give them a chance?"

I shrugged. "I'm giving them a chance. I told my people to hang back and stay out of sight. They were there strictly as a safety net, and the newbies don't ever have to know the net was there, any

more than they have to know the whole thing was a drill. I'm *trying* here, David, but you've got to meet me halfway if this is going to work."

He stared at me for a few seconds, then sighed. "We'll talk about this later," he said. "For now, you said you had a crisis?"

"Yeah," I said. "Kyi? Details, please. Oh, and I guess we might as well take the tape off."

"I've only heard this secondhand, since we've been here waiting," she said. "But the report is that four mages showed up around fifteen minutes ago asking for you. Selene kept them outside and put them off for a while, but once they realized that you weren't there, they got aggressive. No casualties as of three minutes ago, but there's some structural damage and things are getting tense."

"Why can't they deal with it on their own?" I asked, trying to think about who was there. I couldn't remember all of them, but from what I *could* remember, there was a reasonably substantial force at the mansion. Selene was there, obviously, since she'd been the one to contact me, and she had several housecarls with her, a few ghouls, at least a couple of low-power mages, and probably a couple of human mercenaries. The last I heard Aiko and Snowflake were planning to hang around there, too. Not an army, but it should have been enough to scare off four people.

"I don't know," Kyi said. "Selene wasn't all that clear. Things were a little rushed on her end."

I grunted. "Yeah," I said. "Well, I guess we'll see soon."

It was easy to see what Selene had meant by "structural damage." The jötnar and ghouls were about as good in the dark as I was, but some of the people working for me were human, and in any case I'd felt that it was better to not take any chances we didn't have to. So there were floodlights tucked away unobtrusively on the mansion's exterior in case of an attack in the night, and currently they were turned on, lighting up the snow like it was broad daylight.

Thus, it was easy to see that some of the trees around the building had been reduced to charred stumps. There were some burn marks on the walls of the mansion as well, although it didn't seem like the fire had been able to find any real purchase there. No surprise; we'd prepared for fire pretty extensively.

A couple of the windows were shattered as well, which had apparently prompted the residents to close the shutters. Heavy sheets of steel worked with geometric patterns in silver, they were tougher than the walls around them.

The front door was broken as well, cracked in half and lying on the ground fifteen feet from the door. But again, that hadn't gotten the attackers much of anywhere. The gap in the wall was blocked by the security door, a slab of steel a foot thick with a silver core. I didn't think they were going to have

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much luck getting through that door. I'd based the design on the vault doors they used on werewolf safe rooms, and built up from there.

It was impressive that they'd even managed to get that far, though. The windows and doors were still behind the wards, and we'd beefed those wards up heavily since Loki's little announcement.

The attackers were also pretty easy to see. Selene had reported four of them, but there were only three in sight when we pulled up outside the building, two men and a woman. One of the guys was surrounded by vaguely canine shapes woven out of darkness, little more than vague shapes and gleaming teeth. Constructs, I was guessing, but not the sort I was used to dealing with. These were more temporary, the pattern of their construction not tied together as tightly. They were meant to be *used*, not to be kept or sold.

The woman, on the other hand, was surrounded by a nimbus of flame. It was a dull crimson in color, clinging tightly to her skin and flickering across her fingers. I noticed that it wasn't actually touching her clothing, which looked to be a loose silk shirt and pants. She had impressively fine control over the fire, then. Odds were good the flames around her were as much a demonstration of that as anything.

The other guy had no obvious demonstration of his magic. He looked like just a normal guy, a fairly short fellow wearing a cheap suit and glasses with plastic frames. He actually had a *pocket protector*. I hadn't realized they even *made* those anymore.

Of the three, I was by far most concerned about the third. The first two, I had some idea what they could do, what I had to worry about from them. Fire was a bitch to defend against, but I had a decent idea of how to go about it. I'd had lots of practice at it. It was probably the most common talent out there, after all. Constructs were a bit trickier, since they were potentially a lot more versatile. I'd never actually fought someone who specialized in making them that I could remember, and I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the real thing. But the constructs I'd fought in the past had been pretty wimpy, and while I was guessing these things were going to be tougher, I didn't really expect them to be a serious threat.

The other guy, though? I didn't know what to expect from him. Not at all. He didn't *look* like much, but neither did most of the really terrifying people I'd dealt with. There were exceptions, but generally speaking, the people who you really had to worry about didn't look like anything much.

"This one's your show," David said, handing the binoculars back to me. "How do you want to handle it?"

I grimaced. "Do you recognize any of them?"

"The guy with the dogs, I think," he said. "His name's...Bob, Bill, something like that. I've seen him around a few times. Seemed all right, as far as I could tell. I don't know the other two."

"Damn. If you know him, that probably means they're legitimate." I frowned, staring up the hill at them. "I can't kill them out of hand, not if they're really with a clan," I said. "Not without getting myself into even more trouble. And I can't afford to leave them be. That'd be hell on my rep, plus they'd probably do some serious damage to the house. So I guess that leaves talking."

I wasn't sure, but I thought I heard a disappointed sigh from one of the minions.

"You're with me, please, David," I continued. "Having you around will make look a lot better, and hopefully they'll hesitate to just set you on fire. Kyi, Nóttolfr, I want you somewhere they won't see you and you can do some damage if necessary. On my signal, go after whoever I target first. After that, use your own best judgment. The rest of you, with me, hang back ten feet. Same instructions, bring down my first target fast and then use your own judgment. Jack, you're playing defense; keep them off us if you can. Everyone clear?"

David said, "Clear." The others just nodded.

"All right," I said. "Let's go."

I felt almost naked as I started up the hill. I hadn't thought to have Kyi bring my armor; I was so used to *wearing* the stuff that the notion of having someone else bring it for me was foreign.

Not that it would necessarily have done much *good*. My armor was good for a lot of things, but stopping heat transfer wasn't really one of them, and in the past it had never really done me much good against fire. If those constructs were powerful enough to matter, and from the guy's attitude I thought they were, odds were very good that they had a way to deal with it as well.

But still. It would have been nice to have it along. As a security blanket, if nothing else.

I didn't have it, though, and there wasn't much point in standing around wishing I did. So I tugged my shirt into place, made sure the knife on my belt was very obviously visible, and hiked up to where they were standing just outside my door.

"Hi," I said, once I got close enough that they could see me. "Can I help you guys?"

Apparently I'd been quieter than I thought as I got close, because all three of them startled and turned in my direction. One of the constructs tensed as though it was about to charge me, but the guy standing with them put his hand on its back and it relaxed again.

"I don't think so," the man in the suit said. "Move along, please. This is none of your business."

"See, it actually kind of *is* my business," I said dryly. "On account of you're standing outside my house."

He turned his attention fully to me. "Are you Winter Wolf?" he asked.

"That's me," I said cheerfully. "And you are?"

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"So you really weren't here," he said, ignoring my question completely. "It seems I owe your employee an apology. I had assumed she was lying in hopes that we would go away."

"Nope, she was telling the truth." I paused. "I mean, probably. I don't know exactly what she told you, but I'm guessing she probably wasn't lying. Anyway, I'm here now, so you can go ahead and leave."

"I don't think so," he replied. "We'd like to have a chat with you about certain *incidents*."

"More specifically, we'd like to pull out your guts and strangle you with them," the guy with the dogs added helpfully.

"Ah," I said. "Any chance I could talk you out of that?"

"I don't think so," he said, stroking the back of one of the constructs. It didn't react. "I really, really don't."

The woman hadn't said anything. But I noted that she was flexing her fingers rhythmically, and the flames around her were moving in time with that rhythm, flaring up and then dying back down to a slow, intermittent smolder.

"Hold up," David said, stepping between us. "This man is doing good work. He's making things better. Don't you think you should at least hear him out?"

"You're with the Guards, aren't you?" the man in the suit asked him.

"Yeah."

He nodded. "I thought so. I saw you back in Russia. You did a lot of good in the early stages of that mess."

"Thanks," David said cautiously. "I got taken out pretty early on. One of his creatures had a rifle, and I didn't see it in time."

"Happens to the best of us," the man in the suit said sympathetically. "That's a little disappointing, though. I thought you were a decent guy. I'm sorry to see you working with this man. Do you know what he *did*?"

"He hasn't been convicted of anything that I know of," David said. "And the only thing he's even been accused of was killing someone who earned it ten times over."

"He killed my grandmother," the guy with the dogs snarled.

"And my mentors," the one in the suit added. "*Both* of them, which is fairly impressive, when you think about it."

I raised my hand. "Um," I said. "Do you mean, like, a metaphorical grandmother?"

"No," he said coldly. "My actual, literal grandmother."

"Oh. Well, shit. Sorry?"

"Even if that is true," David said, cutting off the inevitable and disastrous reply, "it's beside the point. He hasn't been convicted of anything, and he joined the Guards specifically to improve things. I think it's the least you could do to let him have a fair trial."

"We won't get justice in a court," the man in the suit said. "The system is corrupt, and he has too many friends in high places. The only way he'll get what he deserves is if we do it ourselves." He looked at David seriously. "Walk away, Guard. We don't have anything against you."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you've obviously been deluded by a dangerous criminal. And I won't be responsible for what happens to you as a result."

David nodded slowly. "So you want me to stand by while you illegally lynch a man who hasn't been found guilty of anything, and who I've accepted as a comrade in arms, with all that implies. And you're threatening to kill me as well if I don't allow you to do this."

"Pretty much," the man in the suit said. "You seem to have an admirable grasp of the situation."

"Well, I think there's only one way to respond to that," he said. Then he threw his arms forward, accompanied with a sudden, massive surge of power.

I'd seen air magic in use before. I considered it one of my stronger suits. I could do some fun tricks with it, and occasionally it even came in handy. I wasn't spectacularly good at it, but I was decent.

That being said, nothing I'd ever done had come anywhere close to this. The sudden tide of air was more like a hurricane than a heavy breeze. It physically knocked people over, sent them sprawling and rolling across the ground. One of the constructs was actually lifted off the ground and thrown through the air, where it hit a tree and shattered into drifting shadows before dissipating entirely.

David staggered to the side a little, the effort of moving so much air so quickly obviously exhausting even for him. Then he started running for the door, a little bit unsteady on his feet, with the rest of us close behind him.



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### Chapter Nine

"That door doesn't open from the outside!" I shouted at David, peeling off to the side.  
"Window!"

He instantly veered off to follow me, running impressively fast for a human. He practiced, regularly. The jötunn kept pace easily, of course, and the Guard mercenaries were pretty quick on their feet as well.

Just not quick enough. A burst of fire caught the hindmost of the mercenaries, wrapping him in the same dull scarlet flames the mage had been shrouded in until the wind blew them out. Except he didn't have her control over the fire, and she wasn't inclined to be merciful.

He died too fast for screaming, long before any of the rest of us could do a thing about it.

Well, *that* didn't bode well. I could get through the window, sort of, but we still had the wards to contend with, and I hadn't designed those with the intent of letting people through the windows easily. Not even me. I could break through them, but I couldn't do it clean, and I couldn't do it quick. I'd kind of been counting on that blast of wind buying me a window of opportunity to get inside the house, where we'd be in a much stronger position than we were now.

Except that I didn't need that window, as it turned out. As we got close, I realized that the wards were gone. Not broken, not nonfunctional. *Gone*, like they'd never been there at all. And not just on the window, either. A quick sniff, even the most cursory of inspections, showed that there were no wards on the entire building.

Well, that wasn't good. I mean, it meant that I could get inside more quickly, which might mean the difference between life and death right now. But it was very worrying in the long term.

And wasn't *that* just my life in a nutshell? Bloody hell, this game was getting old.

But right now it was a good thing, sort of. It meant that Tyrfing chopped through the shutter over the window on the first try, rather than the third or fourth. I slashed at it again, planning to cut it out entirely, but I smelled more magic and there was screaming behind me and I could smell cooking meat and there was no more time to spend on this. So I bodily threw myself into the shutter, counting on physical strength and momentum to get me through.

Somehow, in the rush and the chaos, I'd forgotten that I didn't have a shell of metal to protect me from the consequences of my own dumbassery right now.

It turns out that breaking down a heavy security shutter with your shoulder hurts. Rather a lot, in fact. I picked up some burns where I brushed against the silver inlay, and that hurt too.

Then I landed on the shattered glass of the window on the floor inside. That was worse. The clothing I was wearing was reinforced enough not to get cut, but it didn't cover my hands, or my face. And even in the places that were covered, it still hurt landing on a bunch of small points. They might not break the skin, but that didn't mean they were anything like comfortable.

I just lay on the floor for a few seconds, pondering what a foolish decision I'd just made. It was worth pondering. Although I supposed that I was still alive, just not very happy. Seen from that perspective, diving headfirst through a secured window onto broken glass actually *might* have been the best option.

And again, wasn't that just typical?

After I indulged myself with a couple of seconds of self-pity, Aiko gave me a hand and I pulled myself to my feet. That drove a couple of the shards of glass further into my flesh, making me glad that I still didn't have all that much feeling in my left hand. The pain that did get through was more than enough for my liking.

"That was a stupid thing to do," she said, still holding my hand. I was leaving small, bloody marks on her armor. It didn't stand out that much against the red and gold, but there's no red quite like fresh blood.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," I said. "Who's the fourth guy? We only saw three out there."

"He's good with illusion," she replied. "Making you see things that aren't there, or not see things that are. Took us a bit to catch on to what he was doing."

I tensed. "So he could have snuck in with us. He could be standing right next to us."

"Maybe," she drawled. "Or maybe he's not actually as good as he thinks he is." She reached out almost casually with her other hand, holding her tanto. I hadn't quite noticed when she drew it.

I stood there looking silly for a couple seconds. Then a skinny man with features that made me think of a rodent faded into sight right behind me, with her knife in his abdomen.

"How?" he gasped, seeming more upset at having been caught than at having been stabbed. The pain hadn't really set in yet.

"This is my game," Aiko said, sounding almost insulted. "You didn't seriously think you were going to beat me at it, did you?" She pulled her knife back out and then flicked it up and across his throat. He dropped like a puppet with its strings cut. Which, from some perspective, I supposed he was.

"Jesus Christ," David said, staring. "You just killed him."

"He was in my house, concealed, after announcing his intent to kill me," I said. "If the clans want to challenge my claim that this was legitimately in defense of my life and territory, they're welcome to

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try." I looked at the body, confirming that it actually *was* a body. I was pretty sure it was. It looked very, very dead, and if it was an illusion this guy was one of the best I'd ever seen. "Throw him out the window," I said. "It might make them hesitate. And someone work on closing that window. You should at least be able to hold that shutter in place, or nail it to the wall or something."

"Jesus," David said, as my minions hurried to comply. "That's cold."

"Yeah, well, so am I," I said, as Snowflake hurried up to me. I scratched her head, smearing blood on her ears. Her jaws were already wet with...not blood, but whatever those constructs had instead. "Working for the Guards, I'd have thought you'd be used to killing by now."

"I've killed people," he said. "But I've never taken it that casually. And I usually at least try to solve things without murder."

"We haven't all had that luxury," I said. A pair of the canine constructs jumped in through the open window, but they were cut down in seconds, and Kjaran slammed the shutter back into the opening a moment later, holding it in place by main force. Fire magic hit it a few seconds later, but with at least four jöttnar actively focused on keeping it cold, she'd have a hell of a time heating it past mildly uncomfortable.

"I'd like to think that you could at least make the attempt," David said.

I met his eye. "You've read my dossier," I said. "You have an idea of what I've done. The people I've brought down. Do you really think I could have managed those things if I hesitated to solve problems in the most efficient way available to me?"

He blinked first, and looked away. "Was that guy telling the truth about you killing his grandmother?"

"How the hell should I know who his grandmother is?" I asked.

"That's not an answer."

I sighed. "David, let's get real. I've killed a lot of people, okay? A whole lot. Some of them were probably *somebody's* grandmother. It isn't like I ask them first."

"You're still not answering my question," he commented. "That worries me. Those people seemed to have something very specific in mind."

"I killed Guide," I said after a few seconds.

He blinked. "Wait. You mean, like, *Guide*? The one on the Conclave?"

"That's the one," I said. "I'm surprised they didn't tell you."

"*How*?"

"I don't really know," I said, feeling very tired, and very hungry for something I couldn't quite name. "This was back in Russia, towards the end. I...kind of called the Wild Hunt. I didn't mean to, but it happened."

"The *Wild fucking Hunt*?" he shouted. "How in hell did you call the Wild Hunt and *not mean to*?"

"It's a long story," I said defensively. "Loki kind of did it on my behalf. I don't remember a lot of what happened after that, the things I did. It's just a blur. We got the necromancer, but apparently somewhere along the way I also killed Guide."

He just stared at me for about thirty seconds. Outside, the sounds of violence had stopped. Apparently, the mages were trying to figure out a new angle of attack.

"Jesus motherfucking Christ," he said at last. "You know, they offered me double pay to come here. This was before you were joining up. That was just to work in the same *city* you live in. And I'm suddenly feeling like that isn't *remotely* enough in the way of hazard pay."

"I'm not *that* bad," I protested.

He stood and stared at me.

"Okay, I might be kind of bad," I admitted.

He continued to stare at me.

"All right, fine," I said. "Double pay isn't nearly enough for getting dragged into the mess that is my life. Happy now?"

Aiko laughed. So did Snowflake. And Selene. And most of my employees, actually.

David just looked back at the window. "They aren't attacking," he said. "They might be giving up."

"Maybe for the moment," I said. "What happened to the wards, anyway?"

"Don't know," Aiko said. "The guy in the suit walked up to the building with a bunch of the dogs to cover him. We took out the dogs from the window, but he touched the wall and the wards just unraveled like that." She snapped her fingers. The gauntlets made it a somewhat difficult gesture to perform very well, even for her, but it got the point across.

"Wolf!" a voice shouted from outside, just barely loud enough to be heard through the shutters. It took me a second to recognize it as belonging to the guy in the suit. "We're leaving now. You have the advantage here, and we all know it. But we'll find you again, and we'll kill you. You *will* face justice for what you've done. I promise you that."

I snorted. There was an empty threat if I'd ever heard one. If justice existed at all, the world would look rather different than it did.

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"Are they actually leaving?" I asked.

Kjaran pulled the shutter away from the wall, just a little, and Selene peeked outside. "Looks like it," she said. "There's the portal, and...yep, they're gone. Took the dead one with them, too."

"Good," I said. "Start working on taking the house off lockdown. David, thanks for your help. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Bullshit," he said, without any particular anger. "You'd have figured something out."

"Yes, but I couldn't have done it in this specific way without you, so that statement is still technically true. Anyway, your help *is* appreciated. Thanks."

"You're welcome," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow for training. Probably best I get going, though, now they're gone."

"Yeah," I agreed. "We don't want too much of an obvious connection between you and me. You want to wait for the door to be open?"

"The window's fine with me," he said. Kjaran pulled the shutter away as he got close, and he jumped out the window. Just as he hit the apex of his leap a roaring wind caught him under those wingsuit-style flaps of cloth, carrying him up and out of sight. I'd been right. He could literally fly.

I felt that spike of jealousy at the sight again, then turned to Selene. "I'm worried about how easily they took out the wards," I said. "If he can do that, we're going to have a hard time keeping this place secure. I'm thinking we need expert assistance with this one."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I want you to call Alexander," I said.

It took more money to get Alexander to come out to the mansion than a lot of people made in a year. Even at that, I was guessing he only came because he liked me. Cash really didn't mean a lot to someone like him.

When he did arrive, he and Legion spent around half an hour talking shop. I tried to participate in that conversation, thinking I could contribute something or at the very least learn something, but demon and wizard both brushed me off.

Not that I was missing a lot. They were talking about things a lot more abstract and theoretical than I was accustomed to working with. They lapsed into Greek and Latin sometimes, and even when they were speaking English I didn't know a lot of the words they were using. The parts I did understand sounded like they were borrowing from a fairly impressive range of fields, everything from magical theory and philosophy all the way to computer science and information theory.

Finally, Alexander walked over to me. He was wearing a ratty old bathrobe, rather than the formal robes he wore in his role as the Maker of the Conclave, but there was still no missing the authority he carried. There was a sort of precise, calm confidence to his movements that spoke of power more clearly than any ostentation could. He held himself like a man who carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, but who *could* carry that weight.

I wondered idly whether he'd hid himself better when I was his apprentice, or I just hadn't known to look.

"Looks like your guy is a specialist with abstract energies," he told me. "His magic works on energy before takes it a physical form."

"So...what? He can pull wards apart before they do anything?"

"Among other things," Alexander said. "Odds are good that he'll be able to unravel anything you build. You probably won't be able to touch him with magic, either. You aren't good enough to get anything through the kind of defenses this style of magic can put up." His voice betrayed nothing but a detached interest, as usual.

"But he can't actually do anything physical," I said.

He shrugged. "It isn't in line with what he did here, anyway. I wouldn't count on him having no skills in other fields at all. But that isn't really what you have to worry about from someone who can work with energies on that level."

"What is?" I asked.

"What he breaks, he can also build. You tell me what you have to worry about from someone with that degree of control over the basic building blocks of magic."

I thought about it, then groaned. "He can make people stronger, can't he," I said. "Other mages, I mean."

Alexander smiled thinly. "Yes. Not literally, he's feeding them energy to use rather than actually changing their capabilities, but the end result is much the same. That's a basic enough application of this sort of thing that I would be very surprised if he can't do it."

"How much stronger are we talking here?"

He shrugged. "It depends on many things. The exact nature of his approach to magic, how much he and his partner have practiced together, how neatly their respective powers fit together, efficiency of transfer...it isn't something that I can quantify or predict. But if he's any good at it at all, it's a substantial difference."

"Wonderful," I said sourly. "Okay, priorities. Wards. Can you set them up in a way that he can't just take them down?"

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"I can tie them to a physical structure," he said. "That will make it considerably more difficult for his approach to affect them, and if he does unravel them it will be much, much easier to put them back in place. But it will take time, it will take materials, and it will be expensive."

"Talk to Tindr," I said. "The money can be arranged. In the meantime, I have to go pull some glass out of my skin."

He smiled. "Good luck with that." Then he turned back to Legion, going back to the conversation they'd been carrying on earlier. I felt a little like a child being told to go and play while the adults talked about business.

Which I was fine with, honestly. Abstract theory and mathematical modeling had always been my least favorite parts of magic. If I could spend a fortune to get Maker to do that work for me, it was a fortune well spent.

Astonishingly, the next few days passed without much incident. I did the training with the Guards, and while the others were clearly not *comfortable* around me, we were learning to work as a unit. We were getting more efficient. That was all we could really expect, I was guessing.

I got jumped by constructs a handful of times, but I didn't see the actual mages again. The constructs were no threat to me, of course. I broke them without even really paying attention to them. I knew I'd have to deal with their maker eventually, along with his associates—I didn't for a moment believe that they'd given up. But for the moment, it wasn't too much of a problem.

Alexander got to work on the wards, although other people were doing most of the work. He drew up the plans, and the housecarls did the grunt work of installing the physical structures that would act as the skeleton for the wards. He put in around an hour a day, which was still more expensive than the material cost—and that wasn't cheap. But I could afford to throw a few million at this project. If it worked, it would be worth it and then some.

And then, finally, the day I was supposed to meet with the Pack rolled around. We took a portal to Chicago, then bought a car to drive to the suburb where the meeting was being held. I wasn't doing public transportation. I hadn't ever liked public transit at the best of times, and from what I'd heard, Chicago after dark was pretty far from the best of times.

Aiko drove about three times faster than was safe for anyone involved, and skidded to a stop out front of the warehouse. She grinned at me and shut off the stereo.

"You know," I commented, "it isn't that I have anything against songs about insane asylums being converted into brothels, exactly. But did they actually have a little girl doing the vocals for it? Because that would be fairly messed up."

"Nah," she said. "That was just the nightcore remix. So are we going in?"

"You're sure you want to come?" I asked dubiously.

"Hey, I'm allowed," she said. "Kitsune are technically allied with the Pack. And I have two tails now, so I'm not a total chump. They don't want to let me in, they can suck both of them."

"As much as that mental image is now dominating my thoughts," I said, "that wasn't actually what I meant. Do you *want* to come? Because odds are good this is going to be ridiculously boring and aggravating."

"See, here's the thing," she said. "Mostly I only get to see your unique ability to turn any situation into a total clusterfuck while we're actually fighting. I'm looking forward to seeing it in action in a diplomatic setting, and I'm not actually allowed into diplomatic settings all that often."

"If you say so," I said dubiously. "Just don't say I didn't warn you. Let's do this, then."



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### Chapter Ten

The warehouse was quiet, in a neighborhood that looked abandoned. Chicago had fared better than almost any major city in the madness, from what I'd heard, but it hadn't been totally unfazed by things. Although I supposed it was also possible that this was just the product of standard urban decay, without any need for magic and monsters. The weeds growing through the sidewalks, the bricks in the buildings across the street beginning to crumble...there were numerous signs pointing to this area having been at best depressed since long before the world went to pieces.

*No other cars around, Snowflake reported, moving back into sight after circling the building. And the windows are all blocked with blackout curtains.*

*Not necessarily suspicious, all things considered, I said back, walking up to the door. These people have some very good reasons to not want anyone to realize they're here.*

*Think I'm still going to assume that they want to kill us all, she said.*

I snorted. *Well, duh. Let me know if anyone comes in after us?*

*Yep, she said, slinking off into an alley.*

I smiled grimly and opened the door. Having Snowflake around wasn't anything like perfect insurance, and there was still a very good chance that things would go horribly wrong. She knew that at least as well as I did. But making the attempt made both of us feel better, if nothing else.

Aiko rested her fingers on my arm as we walked in, more for style points than anything else. Given that we were both fully encased in armor, the image was probably more than slightly peculiar. Inside, the warehouse had been partitioned out into multiple rooms. The first room inside was a sort of foyer, a transitional space between the outside world and the building's interior. The door was open and we strutted inside without hesitating. Hesitation could easily be seen as weakness, and given that we were quite literally walking into a meeting of monsters and predators, weakness could easily become death.

The next room was fairly large, and hollow. I wasn't sure what purpose it had once served, but it had been gutted, left as nothing more than an open space defined by open floor and empty walls, concrete and brick without decoration of any kind.

I was a little surprised at how informal the setup was. There were a couple dozen small tables around the edges of the room, with one or two people sitting at each. The only one I recognized was Conn, sitting at a square table on the other side of the room. He was wearing a suit so black it made his hair look pale, and for once he seemed exactly like what he was. Just sitting there, not even looking in my direction, his sheer *presence* was so imposing that it was hard to keep from staring at the floor in reaction.

Other than that, there were a wide variety of things in that room. There were a couple of werewolves; I didn't know them, but the day I couldn't recognize a werewolf when I smelled one, they could put me to bed in a hole.

A couple were shapeshifters, mages who had a talent for magics of flesh and bone, artists that used their own bodies as the canvas; I could smell it on them. One looked and smelled like a kitsune. Another had a distinctly fae scent about it, and its face moved strangely, like a mask that wasn't quite attached to the face underneath.

Most of the rest, though, I couldn't have put a name to if my life depended upon it. I was guessing most of them could eat me, though. That seemed like a safe bet here.

I didn't want to let them see me flinch, though. Confidence was nine-tenths of what was needed here. The Pack had always attracted mostly predators, and predators had some common traits. One of the big ones was that when they went hunting they wanted a *meal*, not a fight. If they got the idea that you were easy prey they'd be on you like white on rice. It was much, much safer to seem like an arrogant jackass than to give them any reason to think that you were weak.

So, while I was probably supposed to stand in the open space in the middle of the room, I walked straight to one of the tables on the periphery and sat down. There were plenty of empty ones; these people valued personal space, to the degree that they left four or five times as much room between themselves as they needed.

They couldn't see my face—unless they could see through metal, I supposed, which a couple of them might actually be able to do. Either way, I was smiling behind the mask, a broad grin like I owned the place and I dared anyone to tell me otherwise.

"Hi," I said, leaning back in my chair as Aiko lounged in the one next to me. "Anyone mind moving this along? I've got things to do."

"As do we all," a slender Central American man said.

"Agreed," one of the werewolves said. Not Conn; this one was female, and sounded French, though her English was very, very good. "Moving along, then. You killed a member of this Pack."

"With cause," I replied. "*Very good* cause."

"Be that as it may," a shapeshifter said. He had a thicker accent than the werewolf, something Middle Eastern. "We survive because we are pack, and not each alone, yes? We must stand together. Now more than ever."

"Well, then somebody should have told *him* that," I said, exasperated. "The guy tried to kill me three or four times, at least. He called up an army of demons to lay waste to my territory. I'm telling you, polite conversation wasn't going to get anywhere with him."

"He has a point," Conn said. "He's got a right to defend his territory."

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"You're biased, Conn," the French werewolf said, not unkindly. "The boy's practically your kid." She paused, turning her attention back to me. "Normally, that would be a valid point," she said. "But this situation is an unusual one. More than any other point in recorded history, we cannot afford any weakness now, and the man you killed was a powerful asset. You should have sought some means of peaceful resolution, rather than killing him."

I gritted my teeth. "You're not hearing me," I said. "He was *evil*, and that is not a word that I use lightly. He was messed up on a level that puts *me* to shame, which is not something that I can say about many people. Peaceful negotiation was not going to get me anywhere with him. Nonlethal measures were not going to work with him. Literally any means I had to plausibly resolve the problem entailed permanently removing him."

"I can vouch for that," another woman said. She drawled the words, lingering over the vowels like she didn't want to let them end. "He was not a man to be swayed once he had settled his mind. Having decided to set himself against our young friend, he would have broken any agreement to the contrary that he made."

I opened my mouth to thank her for backing me up, then paused. As nice as it was, it was also a little...odd. I supposed it was technically possible that she had risen high enough in the world to be at this meeting while still being nice enough to help a total stranger out of the goodness of her heart. Possible. But not likely.

I only had to consider her for a moment to figure out what was going on. Her appearance was similar to the Middle Eastern guy, broadly speaking, with tanned skin and dark hair. But she had startlingly orange eyes, an intense orange color that looked more like a pigeon's eyes than anything that belonged in a human face. And she was wearing a coat that looked like it had been made from a wolf's pelt.

I'm not that fond of math, but I can add two and two and come up with the right number. I was pretty sure I knew *exactly* what the story was here, or at least close enough for my purposes.

There was no sense in taking a needless risk, though, so I focused on the magic in the room for a moment, trying to get a feel for hers. It was hard to get an accurate read on things with so many competing auras in the room, but I managed to taste the edges of her power, enough to get some idea of what it was. There were smells of death, blood and sweat, and a hint of something more chemical, formaldehyde and alcohol. The scent was awful, nauseating, and strangely fascinating.

Good enough. It wasn't quite the same—a more clinical, removed sort of awful, preservation rather than decay—but it was close enough.

"And how would you know that?" I asked her. It had only taken a couple of seconds for me to sort things out. Long for a casual pause, but not ridiculously so.

The skinwalker smiled at me. Her teeth were very even and very, very white. "We knew each other as children," she said. "A long, long time ago. We were friends once. We'd drifted apart since then, but I know what sort of a man he was."

"I see," I said. "I suppose I should apologize for killing your friend, then."

I didn't actually apologize, though. I regretted a lot of things, but chopping that bastard's head off was one of the few things in my life that I had no regrets about at all. I couldn't think of any apology I could give that wouldn't require me to lie through my teeth, and lying here was a bad idea. Considering the people I was surrounded by, I was nearly guaranteed to be caught.

"Don't worry about it," the skinwalker said with a casual, charming smile. "You saved me the trouble of doing it myself."

She was already pretty high on the creepy scale, just by dint of her nature. I'd seen enough out of the *last* skinwalker to have a healthy fear of the breed.

But that line bumped her a few notches along, both what she said and the delivery. Even Aiko stared at her for a couple of seconds, her posture suggesting that she wasn't sure whether to be impressed or terrified, and was settling on half of each.

"Okay," I said, once I was confident I could do so without embarrassing myself. "So, again in the interest of moving things along, does anyone have anything else to add to this? Because from where I'm standing, it seems like we've pretty much covered everything. I killed him, nobody's arguing that. I also had cause, which again, nobody's arguing that point. If your concern is that I'm a liability to the Pack as a whole, all I can really do is say that I've got no intention of killing anyone from the Pack. We won't have any trouble unless you start it, and even then I won't kill you unless I don't have any other way of resolving things."

"And we are to take your word for this?" someone asked. A werewolf, I thought, but not one that had spoken so far.

"Yeah," I said. "I think I've earned some credit, here. I've helped the Pack in the past. I've gone out on a limb for you, and I've never really asked anything in return."

"That's true," Conn said. "He's helped me take care of some problems before. And even now, he's been helping the werewolves around his territory. Establishing political connections and alliances."

"So he helps werewolves," the kitsune said. "Why should the rest of us care?"

Before anyone could respond to that, Aiko rattled off something in Japanese. I had no idea what she was saying, but from the expressions on some of the faces I could see, it was worth hearing. Maybe I could get her to repeat it for me later.

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He opened his mouth, but Aiko just kept going, talking right over him. She ranted at him in Japanese for a solid minute, while those who knew what she was saying got increasingly amusing looks on their faces.

When she finally fell silent, still glaring at him from behind the mask of her helmet, the silence was resounding. "Objection withdrawn," the other kitsune said after a couple of seconds, his voice choked.

"Anyone else feeling a need to officially discipline the jarl?" Conn asked.

*Winter?* Snowflake said a moment later in the back of my mind. *There's something odd...oh shit!*

And then the building blew up.

Chapter Eleven

I had some warning, some reason to expect things to get ugly. Not a whole lot of warning, but it's amazing how much difference even a couple of seconds can make when it comes to that sort of thing.

It was enough time for me to brace myself. It was enough time to be ready for something bad to happen, even if I didn't have any real idea what it would be.

The explosion wasn't that large, but that was the kind of phrase that had to be appreciated on a relative scale. It didn't level the building. It didn't instantly kill anything and everything inside. It only really took out one wall.

But even a small explosion was still a force to be reckoned with. It threw me to the ground, knocked the wind out of me, and generally took the fight right out of me.

I was dazed for a second before I started pushing myself to my feet. Next to me, Aiko was also struggling back to her feet, grabbing for a knife as she did.

It was hard to figure out what was going on. The air was filled with smoke and dust, and most of the lights were out. The ones that were still on were flickering, casting the room into a chaotic mess of light and shadow.

About half the people in the room had been knocked out of their seats. It was worst next to the wall that had been demolished, a short distance to my right. Very few of the people sitting there were still sitting there, and a couple of the ones that had been knocked down didn't look like they'd be getting back up. It was hard to say whether that impression was accurate—this was a Pack meeting, after all. Werewolves had a well-earned reputation for being quite hard to put down for good, and they weren't the toughest creatures in the Pack. Even the people that looked like they'd been *shattered* by the force of the blast might be running around good as new in half an hour.

Maybe ten seconds after the explosion, people started rushing in through the gap in the wall. They moved like they knew what they were doing in a fight, and they were well-equipped. Each of them had some sort of bulky goggles strapped to their heads, and they carried assault rifles.

When they walked into the room, they started shooting.

They weren't just spraying the room, the way amateurs would have. This was skilled, disciplined shooting, laying down tight, focused fire. One of the bullets glanced off my armor, and I felt a spike of pain even though it hadn't penetrated. Silver, and *heavily* charged with magic.

The moment that happened, two things passed through my mind. The first was that I was sitting in a room with a hell of a lot of backup, for once in my life. Without even factoring in the people whose nature I wasn't clear on, there was enough firepower in this room to level a city.

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The second was that with the poor visibility, they didn't necessarily know where to direct that firepower.

When I looked at it like that, it was pretty easy what I should do. I reached out and called the wind.

I wasn't David. I couldn't whip up a gale that shredded people like razors, or crushed them with the sheer force of its passing. I wasn't walking artillery.

But I had something of a knack with air magic, and I had my bracelet to use as a focus, making the process much quicker and more efficient. And I was willing to throw a lot of power into this. The wind I conjured up wasn't really a weapon, but it cleared away most of the dust and smoke in a couple of seconds, making it much easier to see what the hell was going on.

There were fifteen or so of the people with guns. They were identically equipped, and they were moving as a unit. These people had worked together before, enough to work together *well*. Between that and the quality of their equipment, I was fairly confident these people were professionals.

A couple of seconds after I cleared the air, one of the shapeshifters gestured, and sent a wave of fire at the gunmen.

It washed over them without so much as singeing their clothes, though the building around them was left smoldering in its wake.

"Your sorcery can't touch us," one of the gunmen said, with a surprising amount of swagger in his voice for someone who'd just come within inches of being set on fire. "We're protected."

The skinwalker stood. I wasn't entirely sure why I was aware of that. I could barely see her out of the periphery of my vision, and it sure wasn't like she was the only person moving. But there was something about her that drew the attention, for no discernible reason. Elsewhere I might not have tried to put a label on the feeling, but here I could just label it dominance. She wasn't a werewolf, but many of the same concepts applied, and I had the distinct impression that she'd have been one hell of a dominant wolf.

"You're warded," she said, sounding totally casual and confident. From what I'd seen of skinwalkers, I didn't think that confidence was unjustified. "But not well enough."

She didn't gesture or otherwise show any sign of effort. But the guy that had been bragging *broke*. I couldn't explain it any better than that. It was hard to see from where I was standing, but I was pretty sure that every joint in his body bent backwards, all at once.

He crumpled to the ground, instantly. He didn't scream. I got the impression that his body probably didn't have the structural integrity to breathe anymore, which made it pretty hard to scream.

But he tried.

After that, the fight was short, ugly, and entirely one-sided. Most of the mages didn't seem able to get through whatever wards the gunmen had. I didn't even try. Most of the people that preferred to mix it up in hand-to-hand were still dazed, off-balance, and too far away to take full advantage of their physical superiority. The gunmen had practically the perfect position.

But they'd tried to attack Conn Ferguson with just a handful of guys with rifles.

They never had a chance. I wondered whether they knew it.

The terrifying thing about Conn, on the very rare occasion that he let his real face show through the harmless mask, was that he didn't look half as terrifying as he ought to. He didn't turn into the Incredible Hulk, didn't transform into a monster. He still looked like a teenage kid, short and slender, closer in build to a mildly athletic geek than a bodybuilder.

Right up until you looked at his eyes. Conn's eyes had always shown the truth behind the lie he told the world. His eyes looked old, and full of a bitter wisdom that no human had ever matched.

Now, I saw all of that, and also the violent wrath of the most dominant werewolf on the planet with someone trespassing on the territory he'd claimed.

I met his eyes for maybe all of a quarter of a second, then I looked straight at the ground, my head bowed. I damn near knelt, and if there hadn't been a fight I probably would have. Conn typically didn't care about open displays of submission; he was the boss, and he knew that with a certainty that made display unnecessary. But just now, I wanted to make it very clear that I was *not* his enemy.

He didn't seem to be moving particularly quickly as he crossed the room. He wasn't moving in a way that suggested he was running, his attitude wasn't terribly rushed. But somehow he crossed the distance in less than a second.

They tried to shoot him, which almost made me laugh. I could have told them that was a waste of time. They couldn't hit him on the best day they ever had, and even if they somehow pulled it off, it was just an assault rifle firing silver bullets. That was something you used on a werewolf, and this was the *Khan*.

He walked through them, and then he walked out the other side, not slowing down.

After he passed, they were dead. All of them. He hadn't even grabbed a weapon. He didn't need one. His bare hands were more than enough to get the job done. He shattered spines through their body armor, crushed skulls under their helmets, and he wasn't even trying.

Conn continued out through the hole in the wall. A few people joined him—the French werewolf, the skinwalker, a couple of people I didn't recognize. I didn't bother following. Anything that crew couldn't handle was so far out of my league I couldn't even be a credible annoyance.



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Aiko stared at the wreckage left behind for a couple of seconds. "*Damn*," she said, putting the kind of weight on the word that was usually reserved for names of deities. "Überwerewolf has his angry hat on today."

"That wasn't angry," I said. "Not really. You can tell by how the building's still standing."

She grinned. I couldn't see her face, but I knew her well enough to see it in her posture. When Aiko really *grinned*, she did it with her full body. "You aren't laughing," she commented after a moment.

"I wasn't joking," I said. "Come on, we should check on the injured."

There were only three dead, which was probably a minor miracle. One werewolf had taken a silver bullet in the eye in the first barrage of gunfire, and died instantly. Werewolves were tough creatures, but there were limits. A shapeshifter had been caught in the crossfire between two of the attackers, and took a couple dozen rounds in two seconds. Shapeshifters were tougher than humans, from what I'd seen, but again, there were limits.

The last corpse was the kitsune who had spoken up earlier. Aiko paused by that body, looking down at him.

"Did you know him?" I asked, more out of a vague feeling that I should say *something* than because the question made much sense.

"Nah," she said. "Like, I knew who he was, but we never really talked. I just feel a little bad for threatening to tell people his son raped me when I was nineteen. Probably not a great experience to go out on."

"Did he? Rape you, I mean."

"Nope," she said cheerfully. "But he didn't know that. It was a pretty believable story. That kid was the kind who'd have done it if he thought he could get away with it. Nobody cried when somebody stuck a needle in his ear."

"I thought people were laughing when you reamed this guy out," I said after a moment. "Nothing you've said so far sounds funny in the least."

"I said other things too," she said.

I considered her for a moment. "You know what?" I said at last. "I'm not even going to ask."

She grinned. "Smart move."

And then we moved on, leaving the dead kitsune on the ground behind us.

There were more injured than dead, and I spent a minute trying to figure out what I should do for first aid, or triage. Then I realized how silly that was. These people were shapechangers, of one stripe or another. That was the whole point. That was what the Pack *was*. That particular talent wasn't *universally* tied to a superhuman capacity for healing—Aiko was a great example of that. But there was a lot of overlap, and it looked like all the injured here were in the category that didn't spend a lot on medical bills. If they weren't already dead, they'd probably be fine.

So we just sat and waited for the people who'd gone out hunting to get back. Snowflake came in and sprawled across my lap, more for comfort than anything else, I thought. She tended to get stressed when things happened while she wasn't around. She thought things went poorly for me under those circumstances. Considering how often she'd been right, I didn't have a lot of grounds to argue with her.

After a few minutes, Conn walked back in, followed by the other people who'd followed him. He'd managed to get the blood cleaned up—I wasn't even going to ask how he'd managed that—and looked like his usual self once again.

"Seems like it was just this group," he said, taking me and Aiko off to a quiet corner of the room. "We've tangled with these people. They're paramilitary, a bunch of people from police and military backgrounds with a hate on for magic. As far as we can tell they're mostly going after werewolves, probably because it's a target they don't instantly lose against."

"How did I not know about this?" I asked.

He shrugged. "There's a lot to know about right now," he said. "And these guys are new. Small-scale, so far, and they weren't on the scene before things changed. You've had a lot on your plate since then, from what I've heard."

"We all have," I said dryly.

He chuckled. "Yes, well, I can't argue with that. In any case, these people aren't that much of a threat. They're small-scale, and I don't really see them hanging around that long. Too much opposition, not enough numbers. They've been more of an annoyance than a problem so far."

I frowned. "Do they usually have warded armor?" I'd managed to track the protections down to spells woven into the body armor. It was solid work, generic and mass produced, but solid.

"That's new," he said. He didn't say that he'd have known if they were wearing it before. Some things were just a given.

I nodded. "I thought so. And how'd they even know where this meeting was being held? No, I think there's something more to it than that. At a guess, some people I annoyed were using them to get at me."

He narrowed his eyes slightly. "Something you need a hand with?"

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

I shuddered. "God, no. I'm already on thin ice politically, here. The last thing I need is to get in more trouble by bringing werewolves into mage business. No, the only thing you can help me with right now is making sure I don't have to worry about the Pack too, I think."

"That should be dealt with," he said. "You'd mostly convinced people already, and then when we were attacked, you instantly started helping. That says a lot. I talked to some other people while we were out chasing accomplices, and I think you're in the clear."

I relaxed a little. "Good. Thanks. I've got enough people after me without adding you guys."

"Yes," he said. "You're leaving, then?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I think we've both got enough things to keep us very busy right now."

"Yes," he said again. "Good luck, Winter."

Chapter Twelve

The outfit was a hell of a lot more badass than I'd been expecting. The base was a dull crimson bodysuit, something that was meant to fit close to the skin, made of some slick, smooth fabric. Layered over that were layers of fabric and metal, cut in ways that suggested feathers without outright *being* feathers, in every shade of red. The gloves were made of the same material as the bodysuit, and tapered at the fingers, hinting at claws without actually being sharpened. The helmet was similarly suggestive, something about its shape reminding me of a bird. I couldn't have said quite what it was; it wasn't like it had a beak or anything. There was just something about it that said *bird*.

Wearing that, my identity would be at least as well concealed as with my usual helmet. Everything was covered but my mouth, and even that was masked by several strips of metal. The eyes were concealed behind yellow lenses.

"This is a bit more aggressive than I was expecting," I said. "Don't get me wrong, I like it, but I thought you guys were going for the 'friendly' look."

"We're marketing you as edgy," Gosnell said. "Not that we have much choice as far as that goes. You're not exactly kiddie-friendly. But we should be able to sell you to the teenage crowd, play up the rebel angle and give you an aesthetic as the outsider. We'll want you to play to type, by the way. Argue with David in public, that kind of thing. We're expecting you to push some limits regardless of what we tell you, so you shouldn't have much of a problem with that."

"This feels so weird," I said. "The way you're talking about setting up this persona. It's bizarre."

"It's no different than what you've done in the past."

"Well, yeah," I said. "But that was working to my own ends. Now I'm supposed to be taking instruction from someone else. It's a hell of a lot harder to match my image to someone else's idea of what it should be."

"Speaking of which," Gosnell said, unsympathetically. "You've been having a hard time following instructions, apparently."

"What?"

"I clearly told you *not to win* during your sparring sessions with the team," he said. "From what I've heard, you haven't done much *else*."

"David wanted me to win," I said.

Gosnell raised an eyebrow. "Oh? And he told you this, did he? Walked up and said, 'You know what, Jonathan, I want you to ignore all the things Mr. Gosnell told you to do?'"

I gritted my teeth. "No, but I'm not an idiot. I know what's going on."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"You don't know best," he said. "That is what I am trying to communicate to you, Jonathan. You are not dealing with the world you're accustomed to. You are not playing by the rules you know. The sooner you figure out that you need to change your ways of thinking, the better off we'll all be."

"Okay," I said, in a tone of badly forced cheer. "Well, as much as I would *love* to stay and talk about what rules you think I'm supposed to be playing by, I really only stopped to pick up the model of this suit. I'll drop it off with my guy and probably have a finished version in a couple of days. Right now, though, I've kind of got a meeting to be going to."

"I don't know of any meetings on your schedule," he said.

"Yeah," I drawled. "This meeting isn't so much for me as it is for *me*. I've got a lot of things that aren't on your schedule."

"I see," he said. "Well, in the future, you should at least notify us. Otherwise there will be issues with scheduling conflicts. Tonight, for example, you're supposed to be starting your patrols."

"I'll see what I can do," I told him. "No guarantees, though. I've got a lot of obligations, and I don't always get a lot of notice when something's coming up."

"All right," Gosnell said. "But you have to meet us halfway here, Jonathan. We really are trying to accommodate your needs, but if we're going to make this work you're going to have to make an effort as well. I hope you have a pleasant meeting."

"I sincerely doubt it," I said, folding the prototype up and stuffing it into my bag. "This meeting is sort of the opposite of pleasant. But thanks anyway."

The stairs were closed down at the moment, due to the renovations. I didn't know what they were doing, but it was supposed to take several days, during which we were stuck with the elevator.

I seriously considered jumping out the window, but in the end I decided I wasn't *quite* that irresponsible. I was pretty sure we were still supposed to be keeping a low profile, and jumping out of the window on the third floor was kind of the opposite of that. Even if it would have been much quicker, and considerably less painful.

I regretted that decision when I got into the elevator and saw Tawny already there. She had her hair up in the violently red mohawk I'd seen her with the first time, and she was dressed to match, with a black tank top, black jeans with a few carefully placed rips, and heavy black combat boots.

"Hey, Jonny," she said as I got in. "Where are you going?"

"Meeting some friends," I said, which was technically true. I hadn't said what we were doing afterwards. "What about you?"

"Just going out to look around a bit before we go patrolling tonight," she said. "I haven't been in town all that long, so I figured I'd probably better know my way around."

I nodded. "Where were you before, if you don't mind my asking?"

"No, that's fine," she said. "We lived in St. Louis up until about a month ago."

"St. Louis," I said, thinking. "They aren't doing well right now, from what I've heard."

She looked away. "No," she said. "No, they aren't doing well at all. That was part of my signing bonus. They relocated me and my family out here."

"Ah," I said. "Well, if you need a hand settling in, just ask. I've been around a while."

"Are you from here, then?"

I shrugged. "I've been all over the place," I said. "Oregon, Wyoming, North Dakota...I actually even lived in Europe for a while. But I've been here for a few years now."

She looked at me oddly. "You don't look that old."

I smiled. "Appearances," I said, "can be deceptive. What the hell is with this elevator, anyway? It's ridiculously slow."

"Stalled, actually," she said brightly. "Apparently it stops for a minute or so between the second and first floor. Something about them doing work in the elevator shaft, and they have to clear things out before we can go through."

I closed my eyes for a moment. "I should have taken the window," I muttered.

She chuckled. "Yeah, maybe." After a momentary pause, she said, "About that offer. Do you mind if I come with you? I feel like I should try and meet some people around here. I like you guys and all, but I want to have some kind of life outside of this stuff."

I sighed. "I really can't," I said.

"I get it," she said, nodding. "You don't want me along while you meet with your friends. That's fine."

"It's not that," I protested. "It's...well, that. But it's not because I don't like you. It's more that these people aren't so much friends as *acquaintances*, and not very nice ones. Trust me, you don't want to have anything to do with them."

"So why are you meeting with them?"

"Because sometimes we have to do things that we don't want to do," I said, sighing. "Look, I'll show you around later. I know some people that I think you'd like. But for tonight, I really can't."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

About that time, the elevator doors finally slid open with a soft *ding*. I stepped out and found Aiko waiting for me, already in her full regalia of armor and weaponry. She was leaning against the wall, and tapping her foot impatiently.

"Cupcake," I said, eyeing her. "I thought I told you to wait for me outside."

"What, and you thought I'd *listen*? What are you, new?"

"Is this on of your friends?" Tawny asked.

"Nah, Cupcake actually is a friend. Something tells me you two will get along pretty well. But for now, we're running late, so I *really* need to get going."

"That's cool," she said, looking from me to Aiko curiously. "I'm going to hold you to that promise, though, Jonny." She tossed a mocking salute in my direction and sauntered out the door.

"Cupcake?" Aiko asked, watching her go.

"You stuck me with Shrike," I said. "It seemed like the least I could do to pay you back."

She snorted. "Let's get going," she said. "Oh, and here's your stuff." She picked a black duffel bag off the floor next to her and threw it at me. It clanked when I caught it.

Outside, we walked around the corner while Aiko looked for a good doorway to craft her portal in. Once she was satisfied, she started working while I pulled my armor and cloak out of the duffel bag and got dressed. I stuffed the outfit I'd picked up from Gosnell into the empty bag.

We left it there as we stepped into another world. One of my housecarls would be along to pick it up and deliver it to my supplier.

Rome was an interesting city. It had been around forever, pretty much, and every era to pass had left its mark on the city. Driving south from Milan, it felt like we were traveling through time as much as space. Most of the city was firmly in the modern era, but every now and then I glimpsed a building that looked like it had been standing since before the fall of the Roman Empire.

Rome was probably in the top ten cities in the world, as far as simply not being affected by the chaos. Not surprising, really. It had thousands of years of history behind it. In addition to giving the residents lots of time to build up defenses, it also gave the city a sort of *presence*, a sense of tradition. Even for the fae, Rome was an old city. Having been around so long gave it a sort of momentum, an expectation that it would continue to be around into the future. Nobody was going to lightly go against that weight of history, and if anyone tried it would probably go very, very poorly for them.

And that wasn't even mentioning the church. The Catholic Church didn't have the power it once had—it wasn't the single most powerful organization in Europe, the way it was for a lot of the medieval and Renaissance period. But they still had quite a bit of clout. Probably more now than before, now that

I thought about it. With how bad things were right now, I was guessing a lot of people would have turned to religion to try and make sense of a world that seemed to have gone mad.

For a moment, I wondered what would happen if we were to walk up to the Vatican and start doing obviously magical things. Would they take us more or less seriously there than elsewhere? Hell, maybe they'd try to exorcise us. There was something bizarrely amusing about the thought of a priest doing a full *vade retro satana* on Aiko.

It probably wouldn't work, of course. They had armed guards there. They probably had some competent mages, too; magic and religion had always gone hand-in-hand, in one way or another. But it was an amusing mental image.

Not that it mattered, because we weren't going to the Vatican right now. That was entirely the wrong sort of venue for a meeting like this.

No, we were going to the Colosseum. The history and the atmosphere there were much more to a vampire's liking than one of the strongest religious centers in the world, I was guessing. I wasn't entirely certain whether vampires were actually repelled by religious faith, but it seemed likely enough. I'd seen the effect it could have on demonic spirits, and my understanding was that vampires were similarly vulnerable to ideas which were inimical to their nature.

The Colosseum was closed, of course. It was almost midnight, and visiting hours had ended with dusk. There was basically a citywide curfew when the sun went down, the same as in most cities, and for good reason. *Less* affected by the chaos wasn't the same thing as *unaffected*, after all, and scary things came out to play under cover of night. Things like vampires, and demons, and us.

Visiting hours had never been much of a deterrent to Aiko or me, though. She parked the rented car in the middle of the huge, empty lot, and we walked over to the ancient building. We probably could have gotten in through the public entrance—I'd never met the lock that could keep Aiko out indefinitely, and if all else failed I could just cut my way in—but that might have attracted the wrong kind of attention. And in any case, it wouldn't have been nearly as dramatic as what we were intending.

We'd had a week get ready for this meeting. The entrance we had planned was appropriately grandiose.

We walked over to the exterior wall, still standing tall despite the almost two millennia weighing down on it, and started climbing.



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Thirteen

The stone was rough, affording plenty of handholds. It was easier than I'd been expecting to get up it. Despite the rather impressive height of the wall, we reached the top in just a couple of minutes.

We didn't use any rope in case of a fall, of course. I could catch myself, and the notion of Aiko using a safety rope was enough to bring a smile to my lips.

Inside, the open space of the amphitheater was illuminated only by the moonlight. It was bright enough to see—for us, at least; a human might have had some issues—but the relative dimness softened the edges, lending a touch of mystique to cover the harsh realities of time's passage. Standing there, looking down from high above the ground, I was forcefully struck by the sheer *magnitude* of the building. Never mind the games that had gone on here, the structure itself was incredible.

Even in ruins, the Colosseum seemed to tower above the rest of the world in some way. It was a constant reminder to the architects and engineers who raised their towers of steel and glass around it that it had stood long before they came to be and would stand long after they died.

What had it been like in its glory days, I wondered? Back when Rome really was the capital of the world, when a passing whim of the emperor could change the course of nations? What an awe-inspiring statement of power, to raise something like this just for entertainment. Just to show that you could.

No wonder people hadn't wanted to attack this city. Even the faded echoes of that legacy were enough to give you pause.

And they *were* faded echoes, there was no arguing that. Much of the floor below was gone, exposing the tunnels underneath. Back in the day those had been the equivalent of backstage, a place meant for the workers rather than the public eye. The practical reality that sat behind the glamorous facade. Now it was torn open, exposed to the outside world. It was like looking at a corpse on the dissection table, skin peeled back to show things that were supposed to stay hidden.

The people we were here to meet were standing in a small group on the intact section of the floor. It wasn't hard to pick them out in the otherwise empty space, but even if it had been thronging with crowds, I would have known who I was looking for. They had a gravity to them, a *presence* that drew the eye. It was reminiscent of Conn, or Scáthach, or even Loki when he got going.

Powerful people, and a definite sign that they weren't anyone to cross lightly. Not that I hadn't known that already, of course, but if I'd had any doubt this was a nice confirmation.

Even more than the Pack, though, vampires and their ilk were predators. More to the point, they were predators that were optimized for the hunting of humans. I wasn't human—hell, at this point humans probably had more in common with *chimps* than with me, in some ways. But we had enough of

a resemblance to humans to trigger those instincts, which made this a delicate situation for us. If we behaved like humans—like *prey*—there would be a large part of these people that didn't care about the fact that we were here to make deals. It would just want to eat us.

Which is why were on top of the wall, instead of walking through the freaking door like normal people.

I gauged the distance between us and them, making sure that the initial plan would work, then offered Aiko my arm. She rested her fingertips on it, purely for style points, and we started walking.

I wasn't David. I couldn't actually fly, however much I might want to—because really, who *wouldn't*?

But one of the tricks I *had* figured out was how to support my own weight with air and magic. It was difficult and exhausting, even with the focus I'd built exactly for that purpose, but I could walk on air for short periods when I really wanted to. It didn't come up nearly as often as I'd expected it to, really, but when it was useful it was *really* useful. So I'd kept in practice, making sure that I could still do it when I needed to.

I'd created a similar focus for Aiko. It was more challenging for me to support her weight than my own, for several reasons. It was further away, for one thing, and distance was power when it came to magic. With a ruinous rate of exchange, too, to the point that working at a distance of even a couple feet could be noticeably more difficult. I wasn't nearly as aware of her movement as my own, either. With my own body I knew exactly when and how I was walking, letting me adjust the magic to suit on an instinctive level. With Aiko, even though I knew the ways her body moved, even though we were in physical contact and I could *feel* that movement, there was the tiniest delay. It wasn't much, but it added up.

And then there was the weight, plain and simple. Aiko was pretty short, and she was slender. But between her and the armor, it was over another hundred and fifty pounds that I had to lift. That wasn't easy.

The bottom line was that I could do it, but only barely. It would be a steep descent, somewhere between going down stairs and a controlled fall, and even that was taxing. Under the circumstances, though, that was pretty much exactly what was called for. If we got it right, it should look intentional.

It was a little tight, but I'd gotten the angle right, and we ended up dropping onto the floor about fifteen feet away from them. I landed smoothly; Aiko stumbled the tiniest bit, not having as clear of an awareness of our positioning, but she was quick enough to make it look like she'd just deliberately taken a fancy step upon landing.

We took a few steps closer to the group, just enough to get within comfortable range for a conversation, and I said, "Hi."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Now that we were closer and I didn't have to concentrate on not falling to an embarrassing and splattery death, I could get a better look at who I was dealing with.

There were three of them, of whom I recognized one. He was a vampire, his dark coloration offset by a flaming pink suit. He called himself Lucius, and while I didn't know much about him, what I did know was the sort of thing to inspire terror. He'd made references to being an emperor, and ruling an entire continent, the one time I'd seen him before. It sounded like grandiose nonsense, but from Katrin's reaction I wasn't entirely sure that he hadn't been telling the literal truth.

Of the three, though, he was the one I feared least. I had some idea of what he was capable of, what I had to worry about. The other two were total unknowns. They were both female, or at least they looked female, but beyond that there wasn't a lot in common between them. The one to the left had tan skin and dark hair, and she was painfully beautiful. She didn't have the physical beauty of, say, Scáthach, and she didn't have the intensely sexual manner of Selene. But there were elements of both there, along with a barely-veiled *hunger* that elevated it to a weapon.

The other one was more ethereal, almost ghostly. She was very pale, maybe even albino, and wearing a simple robe as white as her skin. Even her lips were pale, almost blue, leaving pure black hair and eyes the only color about her.

Lucius was the one to answer me. "Good evening," he said, smiling. "The surroundings are rather more hospitable than the last time we spoke. Less impressive than when it was young, of course, but I think it's aged quite well, on the whole."

"Are you telling me that you were around when the Colosseum was new?" I asked.

"Would it be so unbelievable?" he asked.

"Not really, no," I said. "I've talked to people that are older. It just puts it into perspective, I suppose."

"Oh? How so?"

"From my perspective," I said, "it's hard to really conceptualize watching several thousand years pass. It's hard to see it as anything but an abstract number." I gestured at the ruins around us. "This gives it context. If I think about it as being long enough to watch this crumble, that gives me some grounding as far as what it actually *means*."

He considered me for a moment. "That's an interesting way to look at it," he said. "And an insightful one. I'll have to think about it more. In the meantime, however, I haven't introduced my associates. How terribly rude of me. This is Lily," he gestured at the tanned woman, "and Yumi."

"Charmed," I said. "You know why we're here."

"You want status," he said. "Recognitions. Or perhaps insurance would be the better word for what you're asking."

"It's got elements of all three," I agreed. "It raises the question, though. Is this even something you're equipped to offer?"

"I do think so," he said. "I am the most influential of my kind in Africa by a rather wide margin. Between that and my connections to others of similar influence, I could easily sway my people to agree with me on such a relatively minor matter. Lily holds a similar role among the succubi, and Yumi has some sway among...other types."

"It's a yuki-onna," Aiko said, watching the pale woman closely. She seemed...not afraid, precisely, but *wary*. Coming from her, that was practically as good as outright terror from most people.

"Someone knows her stories," Yumi said. Her voice was flat and androgynous, not seeming particularly human.

Aiko snorted. "With my mother?" she said. "Please. I couldn't have gotten away with not knowing. I'm surprised you'd be hanging around with these guys, though."

"We all have mouths to feed," the yuki-onna said.

"In any case," Lucius interjected, smoothly taking control of the conversation again. "We've established that the bargain can be made. But I have to question whether what you're asking for even makes sense. I confess I don't see how you could keep our respective affiliates out of your territory when it has so many people within it, regardless of whether it's officially allowed or not."

"The point isn't to keep them out," I said. "It's to establish that it *is* my territory. They can come, but I want it to be very clear that they're there on my sufferance, and I expect them to obey certain rules."

"Again, pointless," he said. "There will always be rule breakers."

"Ah," I said, smiling. "But if there's a rule that they've broken, they can be punished. Rules can be enforced. If there's no such rule I can't exactly say that they've done anything wrong, can I?"

"And you think that you can enforce these rules? Really?"

"I already have, haven't I?"

He smiled, thin and sharp. "Ah, yes. Dear *Katrin*, struck down in her own home. She always was lacking something. A certain ruthlessness, perhaps."

And that really said all I needed to know about Lucius. If he thought that *Katrin* wasn't ruthless enough, if he was seriously going to criticize her for not being willing to go far enough in pursuit of her goals, that was a pretty damn meaningful statement. That was the equivalent of someone telling me that I was too trusting for my own good.

"So what rules would you impose upon us, then?" he continued. "Please, regale us with your legal brilliance."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"First off, your people would have to contact me when they come into the city of Colorado Springs," I said. "I'd give them a grace period, say three days, but after that if I find them in my city and they haven't talked to me, I'll assume they're working against me and treat them appropriately."

"That's basic courtesy," Lucius said. "Get to the meat."

Aiko started to make a smart remark, but I nudged her in the ribs, hard enough that she'd feel it through the armor. I didn't know what she was about to say, but considering who we were talking to, I was about ninety percent sure it would have been a bad idea. She turned it into a cough, and while I was confident she was glaring at me, she didn't say anything.

"The primary issues have to do with degrees of activity within the city," I said. "Nothing so overt that it attracts attention. I expect that living people won't make a fuss, and dead people won't be unusual enough that they draw notice. They don't interfere with my employees or personal associates. If they have a problem with one of my people, they bring it to me. If there's a major threat or problem within the city, they're expected to help out or get out."

"I'm surprised," Lucius said. "Not going to try and ban us from hunting in your city?"

"He is a hunter himself," Yumi said softly. "He knows the nature of the hunt. Enough, I think, to know better than to do as you suggest."

"Pretty much," I said. "It's basic ecology, really. Where there's a niche, something's going to fill it, right? There are a lot of people in the city, and there are a lot of things that want to eat people. I don't really think I can keep the one away from the other. But if I acknowledge that it's going to happen, I can keep it under control and make sure that it stays within certain limits."

"Interesting," he said. "You know, Wolf, coming here I really wasn't expecting to take this seriously. But what you're outlining is actually fairly reasonable. I think we could make this happen." He smiled thinly. "But why would we? So far I'm hearing a great deal of benefit to you, and nothing much for us."

"What do you want?" I asked. "That's a serious question, by the way, not me being snide. I don't really know what you guys would want, so it's hard for me to offer you much."

"I will speak to my associates without personal reward," Yumi said. "The jarl and I have certain things in common."

"How charming," Lily said sarcastically. "I'm afraid I'm going to require a little more in exchange for my assistance, though. You'll owe me one."

"Details," I said instantly.

"You'll owe me a favor, to be redeemed at a time of my choosing," she said. "One service, which you can perform without extraordinary risk or expense."

"Fair, but I want the option to veto your requests if I think that they're excessive or they'd require me to do something I'm not willing to do."

"And what's to stop you from rejecting everything I ask, so that you never have to pay at all?" the succubus asked skeptically.

"That's how you get a reputation for not keeping your deals," I said. "And that isn't a good kind of reputation to have."

"And you expect me to rely on your desire for a good reputation to that extent?"

"Pretty much," I said. "I'm guessing you'll take that as collateral."

"Good guess," she said after a moment. "All right, then. That's good enough for me."

Which just left Lucius to convince. I turned to him, tense and a little worried. I was guessing that he was going to ask for something that I *really* didn't want to offer, and I was fully prepared to agonize over whether this was worth the price.

What I got instead was a casual smile. "I want you two to come to a party I'm hosting," he said. "Day after tomorrow, Alexandria, dusk."

I hesitated. "Is this an effort to lure me into a trap or something?"

"No," he said. "It's a good-faith invitation. I'll even offer you my personal guarantee of safety while you're there. If anyone starts a fight with you, I'll ensure that they regret it."

"Why?"

"I'd like to have a personal conversation with the pair of you," he said, shrugging. "And while I do appreciate these environs, this is neither the time nor the place for that conversation."

I glanced at Aiko, who nodded slightly. "All right," I said. "It's a deal."

He was smiling thinly as we shook hands. I was sure he could crush my fingers into jelly if he wanted to, but his grip was only moderately firm.

As we left, I tried not to think about how much easier of a time I'd had working with the monsters than with the Guards.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Fourteen

I felt awkward standing around with the Guards. I imagined it was something like a veteran cop might feel at a Neighborhood Watch meeting. I really was that these people were only playing at being.

The ridiculous costumes were probably not helping things. David was wearing his wingsuit, and I had on the weird feathered thing that Gosnell had designed. The armor was almost as effective as my usual set for most purposes, at least. I'd tested it first thing, and while it wasn't quite as good as my real suit, it was still decent.

Unsurprisingly, though, those were actually the *least* absurd of the set. Tawny was in a dull maroon bodysuit with a ballistic vest and a luchador-style mask that left only her eyes exposed, with a featherlike pattern in black. Elyssa was in a similar getup, but lighter, without the vest, and in colors of green and violet. Tony was wearing heavier armor and a police-style helmet in shades of orange—less mobility, but more protection.

Unsurprisingly, Derek's armor was the best except for possibly mine and David's. It looked something like mine, with overlapping layers of scales in the general shape of feathers. The feathers were made of steel, with here and there one of silver, and they had lines etched on them. Individually the patterns on each feather were fairly simple, but as the individual feathers slid over each other the lines formed elaborate, shifting geometric designs.

I could feel that the lines were more than just decoration. They were a physical representation of the magic he'd integrated into the metal, a sort of mnemonic guideline he'd used for the magic. It was a clever design, in a lot of ways; each feather was built with its own protections, which were designed to overlap and mesh with each other. The result was marginally weaker than the reinforcements I had on my set, but they were also a little broader, and a lot harder to get around with clever tactics.

All told, it felt more like I was at a costume party than getting ready to go out and search the streets for evildoers. The costuming had a certain style to it, I supposed, and in its own way it looked fairly intimidating. But it just felt like it was trying way, way too hard. I was used to people who could scare the piss out of someone with an expression of mild disapproval. By comparison, this kind of display seemed tawdry.

"All right," David said. "Shrike, you're with Crimson going southwest. Spark and Razor, southeast. I'll take Chainmail and head north. You've all got radios; if you run into trouble, use them and we'll get there as quickly as we can. Any questions?"

"Nope," I said casually. Everyone else followed suit a moment later, and we started splitting up. David grabbed Derek and started walking north, and a moment later Tony and Elyssa walked off as well, leaving just me and Tawny.

"Guess it's just you and me now, Shrike," she said. "You nervous at all?"

I shrugged and started heading southwest, setting a slow enough pace that a human could keep up without too much trouble. "Not really," I said. "You?"

"A bit," she admitted. "We didn't see anything last time out, so I'm still pretty nervous about what'll happen the first time we have to actually interrupt something."

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry to miss the last one."

"You didn't miss much," she said, walking along beside me. "The boss kept us so far away from trouble we couldn't have found it if we wanted to."

I snorted. "Yeah, I'm not surprised. Hey, Crim, maybe you can answer a question for me. What the *hell* is up with the codename bullshit? It sounds ridiculous."

"We have to use *something*," she said reasonably. "I mean, I know Crimson isn't great, but it beats nothing."

"Why not just use real names?" I asked. "Jonathan is fine with me. Dressing up like a bird is bad enough, but image is important, whatever, I get it. Calling myself Shrike? That's just bizarre. It makes me feel like I'm in a comic book or something."

"I can't afford to use my real name for this," she said. "It's tied to things that couldn't handle it. Don't you have a family?"

I shrugged. "Not one worth mentioning. No parents, no siblings, couldn't care much less what happens to my aunt. I guess I'm married now, but anybody dumb enough to try and get at me through her deserves what happens to them."

Tawny—*Crimson*—stopped dead and stared at me. "You're *married*?"

"Yeah," I said dryly. "I didn't see it coming either, believe me. Anyway, no, I don't have a family, as such."

"Well, I do," she said. "And I can't afford for them to get mixed up in all this. They're just people, you know? They aren't like us, they aren't transhuman."

"Hold up," I said. "Transhuman?"

"People like you and me," she said. "Werewolves, or people with spooky powers. You know, human, plus a little bit extra."

I grimaced. "That's not what that word means. Not quite."

"Yeah, well, it's the word I've heard used to lump us all in together," she said. "And my family, they *aren't*. My mom, my brother, if something from our side of things goes after them, they don't stand a chance. And I can't let that happen."



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"You're not concerned about your father?"

"He's dead," she said stiffly.

"Ah," I said. "I'm sorry."

"No problem," she said, although there was very obviously a problem. "It was a month or two ago. I'm starting to get over it, I guess." Which she very obviously wasn't, but I wasn't going to call her on it. We all have our own ways of coping.

I wasn't in the mood for an awkward silence, so I decided to keep digging on the off chance that it would get me out of the hole rather than make it deeper.

In a way, it was nice to be working with people who didn't matter all that much. It meant that I didn't need to be too paranoid about what I said. If I offended Tawny, it wasn't the end of the world. The nature of her magic was a little unsettling, in terms of what fighting her would entail, but it wasn't like I was talking to Loki, or even to Lucius. Worst case, I could always just walk away.

So rather than try to backpedal, or shut up and hope she forgot about this, I said, "My parents are dead. I don't remember them."

"How'd that happen?" she asked.

I shrugged. "My father was a stranger," I said. "Never met him, don't think he knew about me. By the time I even learned who he was he'd been dead for years. My mom killed herself a couple of months after I was born."

"Bitch. You want to die, that's on you, but to do that to a kid? Total bitch."

My lips twitched. "You have no idea. Anyway, I guess I get what you're saying. I've just been a part of all this for so long that it's hard for me to remember that some people have a life outside of this."

She looked at me oddly. I couldn't read her expression behind the mask, but between the eyes and the posture, it was easy to see that she was looking at me oddly. "You don't look that old," she said.

I snorted. "You should have learned by now not to pay too much attention to that," I said. "Looks don't mean much here."

"Yeah," she said. "So how old are you?"

I smiled a little. "Old enough," I said.

We kept walking for a little while in silence. There was no one else on the street, beyond the occasional passing car. It was almost midnight, and people were reluctant to be outside after dark anymore.

"Okay, I don't get it," she said after a minute or two. "What the hell is up with you? You're working with us, but you really don't seem much *like* the rest of us. Like, most of the time you do, but then you start talking about how you've been mixed up in transhuman things for ages."

"Hm," I said. "Have you ever seen the film *The Dirty Dozen*? It's an old war movie about a bunch of convicts who were recruited by the military to go on a suicide mission back in World War II."

"Yeah," she said. "I had to watch it for a class, I think."

"I'm kind of like that," I said. "I'm something of a bad guy, and under normal circumstances the Guards would probably want nothing to do with me. But I'm also *useful*, so they gave me the option to work against even worse people on parole."

"I thought it might be something like that," she said. "When you say you were a bad guy, how bad are we talking?"

"Bad enough," I said, chuckling a little. I didn't point out that I hadn't been speaking in the past tense. "I mean, I'm not a serial killer or anything. But...yeah. Bad enough."

"I *see*," she said. "So...Jonny Keyes is...?"

"Not the name I was born with," I said. "Or anything much like it, really. I'm not supposed to tell you who I really am. They're concerned about me corrupting the youth or some such nonsense, I think."

"Wow," she said. "So I get that you can't talk about the details. But when you say bad, you mean *really* bad, don't you?"

"Let me put it this way," I said. "If the authorities find out who I am, they'd almost certainly give me a death sentence. If they could prove that you knew who I was, I'd lay decent odds on you spending the rest of your life in a cage for having not turned me in. It's *that* kind of bad."

"You know how I said I was a little scared of you a while ago?" she told me. "I think I should have been taking that feeling a hell of a lot more seriously. Is it too late for me to run?"

I snorted. "Oh, come off it," I said. "You aren't exactly a paragon of sweetness and light yourself, now, are you?"

She froze. "How do you know about that?" she said, sounding stricken.

I shrugged and kept walking. I'd noticed something a block or so west of us through a stray dog's ears, and started angling in that direction. I was thinking we were probably going to get some action after all.

"I didn't know," I said, answering her question as she started walking again. "It was more of an educated guess. In my experience, this lifestyle doesn't attract normal, well-adjusted people. You have to be at least a little bit fucked up to voluntarily get into this business, you know? For that matter, just about every transhuman I've ever talked to has some kind of trauma in their background. It's the nature

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of the world we live in. I usually work under the assumption that everyone's got skeletons in their closets, bad things that have happened to them, bad things they've done to others. Some of us just hide it a little better than others."

"That seems like a pretty fucking dismal way to look at things," Tawny said.

I shrugged. "I see it more as a reasonable extension of my experience. Are you going to argue with me? I mean, think about it. From the way you just reacted you're not an exception, and whatever's weighing you down, I'd lay good money that I've got something worse. I've talked to David, and I'm not going to spill his secrets, but I can definitely vouch for him being as much of a mess as you and me."

"And the others?" she said. "You think they fit into this theory?"

"Frankly? Yes, I do. I'm still collecting dossiers on them, but think about it. Spark has a temper, he doesn't have the best control, and he doesn't have the best *self*-control. I'd wager he's burned someone in the past, probably badly. Razor's a sociopath, plain and simple. She's used her magic on herself to the point that it's warped her mind. Someone like that, with the power to be basically invisible? Not a chance that she hasn't used it for something ugly somewhere along the line. Honestly, the only person I'm not sure about is Chainmail, and that's only because I haven't spent as much time with him."

"You make it really hard to like you, Shrike," she said. "Good job remembering the names, though."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "And I didn't make the world this way. I just live here. Besides, as I see it the important thing isn't what you've done and what crimes you're guilty of. It's where you go from here. It's trying to be something better tomorrow than you were today. As long as you remember that, as long as you keep trying, I don't think you can really turn into a monster. You might lose track every now and then, you might slip up, but you'll never be so bad you can't get better."

"For a bad guy, that's actually a pretty optimistic philosophy," Tawny said. "Thanks. I...I guess I needed to hear that."

"No problem. Now, listen up. There's a mugging going down about fifty feet in front of us, in that alley." I pointed. "I'm not expecting us to have any trouble taking care of things. It seems like it's just a guy with a knife. You might want to be ready just in case, though. It's possible he's a transhuman."

God, I hated using that word for this. The word, the whole *implication*, it scared me. Talking about mages and werewolves and vampires as being human plus some reminded me uncomfortably of the things Shadow said, about how mages deserved to have power over normal humans. And *that* was one hell of a slippery slope, paved with good intentions and everything.

But it was apparently the word to use, and even if I could change it, it wasn't going to happen tonight. So for tonight, I could play along.

Tawny—no, I reminded myself, she was *Crimson* right now. Crimson's eyes widened slightly before she nodded. "Okay," she said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stay behind me," I said. "Follow my lead. And if things get too serious, be ready to summon...something. I don't know, whatever you think's best. It's your magic; I can't really tell you how to use it effectively."

"Okay," she said again, picking up her pace. She sounded almost excited now. There was still an edge of fear there, but it wasn't overwhelming.

I sped up as well, staying ahead of her as we got closer to the alley. As expected, there were two people inside. She looked scared, and had one hand in her purse; she was wearing a moderately expensive dress and high heels, one of which was broken. On her way to or from a party, I was guessing.

He, on the other hand, had a black ski mask and a knife as his main fashion statements. The message painted by the scene was rather clear.

"Stop," I said, walking into the alley. Crim stood near the entrance, one hand in her pocket.

The guy in the mask froze and then looked back at me. "Walk away," he said. "This isn't your problem."

"See, it kind of is," I said. "Now, I'm going to lay things out for you in simple terms. I'm not allowed to kill you right now. I'm supposed to be turning over a new leaf, and not killing people is a major part of that. My bosses were very clear on that." I grinned behind the mask. "On the other hand, my bosses aren't here right now, are they, Crimson?"

"Nope," she said back. She was grinning as well, I could hear it in her voice. Getting into the game. I'd thought that she was the type who would.

"So I can make you disappear, and they'll never have to know," I continued. I pulled a knife out of its sheath and started toying with it. "What do you say, buddy? You wanna go? Or do you wanna walk away now, and we can all just pretend that this never happened?"

He glanced at the woman, then started walking away. He stepped around me, staying well out of reach.

I almost thought he looked familiar when he was walking. I couldn't see his face—even his eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, which was pretty ridiculous at midnight—but something about his gait was familiar. I couldn't place it, though, and it might have been my imagination. So I turned back to the victim as he got past me and started for the alley entrance, where Crim was standing and watching.

"Sorry for the trouble," I said to the woman, waiting for the guy to get further away. I wasn't going to let him go—our instructions had clearly stated that we were supposed to *apprehend* criminals—but I wanted to make sure he wasn't in a position to take her hostage.

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"Me too," she said, smiling at me. It was an odd smile, self-satisfied and not nearly as frightened as it should have been.

Then she flicked her fingers, and a blast of fire and force hit me right in the face.

I was caught completely flat-footed, without a chance to doge or chill the air around myself to get ready. There were things I could do to mitigate the effects of fire, but I had to actually *do* them, and that meant I had to be at least a little bit prepared for the fire to happen.

This time, I wasn't. I just ate the fire, and it *sucked*.

It didn't kill me. It wasn't hot enough or prolonged enough for that, particularly not when the armor was providing some insulation.

But I hit the ground, and I was dazed for a moment afterward. Burns *hurt*, and while numerous previous exposures had left me somewhat blasé about the pain, I couldn't completely ignore it.

By the time I was starting to stand, she'd already kicked off the heels, and she was pulling her hand out of the purse. It had a heavy, ugly handgun in it, the sort of weapon you used when you wanted to put someone down and you didn't particularly want them getting up again afterward.

I glanced over my shoulder, and saw that the "mugger" had his sunglasses and ski mask off as well. I probably still wouldn't have recognized him, but I could smell his magic on the air and I saw the shadows beginning to twist into the shape of hounds by his sides.

Of course. I *knew* I recognized him from somewhere. I hadn't keyed on the woman as much when they attacked my house, or I'd probably have recognized her as well. All we needed now was the guy in the suit to show up and complete the set.

"*Die*," the woman said, more flames kindling around her hand as the first of the constructs lunged at me.

Chapter Fifteen

"Don't you want to talk this one over," I said, backing away a little. "I know the other guy said no, but he's not here. You could stop for a chat, I could explain things...."

"Not interested," the woman with the fire said. She flexed her fingers, and the fire flared up brighter and hotter.

"Not even a little bit," the guy added, as another shadowy dog-thing began to weave itself into shape beside him. This time I felt him pulling matter in from the Otherside, infusing the shadows with enough *reality* to let them take on a physical form that could have some semblance of an independent existence.

"Okay," I said. "Suit yourself."

Then I lunged forward and slammed my knife home to the hilt in the nearest construct's chest. I'd rather have gone for one of the mages, but they were out of easy reach, and likely to be protected against such a simple attack anyway.

But I stabbed the one construct, and then slashed through another's neck, and in just a couple seconds both of them were collapsing into darkness, dust, and a trace of slime. At the same time I was gathering the cold around myself, and I slipped a thin piece of slate out of my pocket with my off hand. I was already twisting out of the way as the next blast of fire came in, the cold insulating me from any heat that might have managed to hurt me even if it hadn't hit. I threw the knife as I dodged, in time with the movement, and while it wasn't half so impressive as it looked in the movies, I at least managed to cut one of the constructs.

All of that happened in just a couple of seconds. I was rather pleased, all things considered. I might be outclassed, but I was still *good* at this game.

I drew a quick design on the slate, arming it, then threw it at the woman's feet. It exploded in a burst of sound and noise not unlike a flashbang. She cried out and staggered away, and I was already turning back to the constructs, drawing another knife. One of them bit my left arm, leaving bruises even though its teeth couldn't penetrate the layers of armor. I stabbed it in the eye and tried to shake it off, but its jaws were still clamped down tightly even as its body started collapsing in on itself. The weight slowed me down, threw me off, and another of the creatures managed to pull my left leg out from under me.

I hit the ground, fairly hard, and more of them started piling on. I tried to slash with the knife, but they were pinning me down, and one of them managed to knock the knife out of my hand. They still weren't getting through the armor, but those things hit *hard*. They were leaving bruises as they bit and slapped at me, possibly even breaking bones, and the woman wasn't going to be incapacitated much longer.

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Then Crimson finally got her bearings and kicked into gear. She pulled a fused loop of rubber out of her pocket and threw it on the ground, stepping into the circle it formed as she gathered her magic. It was a surprisingly quick, fluid series of actions, considering how little time she'd had to practice it.

She threw her power against the world, and tore a hole in it a moment later. From my angle I didn't get much of a glimpse at what came through, beyond that it was small and red. One of the constructs leapt up and bit it out of the air, and it squawked like a chicken made out of scrap metal as the dog-thing tore it to pieces.

I recognized the next thing she brought through, a barely-present wisp that was visible only as a slight distortion in the air, and smelled like rushing wind and freedom. It was an air spirit, a creature from the Otherside that had only a marginal physical presence. They were weak, but hard to detect and harder to stop; there were few barriers that an air spirit couldn't get through with enough trying.

The constructs didn't even have to get involved this time. The man who made them flicked his fingers, and a cord of shadow and force formed in the air to follow the motion, lashing through the air spirit. It dispersed, and by the time it was reforming it was already slipping sideways from the world. It wanted nothing to do with him, and Crimson wasn't remotely powerful enough to keep an air spirit somewhere it didn't want to be.

A moment later, the other mage stepped into view. She wasn't fully recovered yet—she was leaning on one of the constructs to stay standing, and even so she was staggering quite a bit. But she was there, and the fire was burning all around her, sliding across her skin much like it had been the first time I'd seen her.

I grimaced, and got ready to call Tyrfing and just start swinging. I knew I wasn't *supposed* to use the sword in this persona, but this situation was getting too real. If it came down to a choice between losing my position with the Guards or dying, it was a pretty easy choice for me to make.

Then Crimson said, "All right, you assholes, you asked for this."

We all turned to look at her. I wasn't entirely sure why; there was just something in her voice, a note of confidence that made me take notice.

And then I saw what happened when she opened a door that *wasn't* so small.

It started the same way. The air in front of her seemed to warp, and twist, and then there was something *else* there.

This was just...a rather more impressive something than the last few.

It looked human, in its general shape. Two arms, two legs, and a head, even of more or less the right shape and size. It was about my height, and even thinner than me, which took some doing anymore.

That was about it, though. Once you got past the surface level, the most obvious features, it looked nothing like a human being. Its skin was grey and rough, something like an intermediate stage between skin and *granite*. One eye was sort of normal, though also rather greyed; the other was a pale, featureless sphere that looked something like bone or ivory. Its limbs were long, and they moved strangely, in a way which suggested something very odd beneath the surface. When it bent its legs, they *creaked*, in a way that sounded something like stone under strain, and something like the shocks of a car.

And yet for all of that, it was clearly not *totally* alien. It was dressed, wearing a heavy coat that had been worn to rags, and skins that looked like no animal I could name.

I'd seen some crazy things in my life. I was pretty much more comfortable in the presence of monsters than people. And if I'd seen this thing on the street, I'd have given some serious thought to turning and walking the other way.

The reaction of the mages was instant and violent. The woman blasted it with fire, easily as intense as the first hit she'd thrown at me, and the man directed three of his creations to leap at it.

None of it did a thing to the creature. The fire left some of the clothing smoldering, but that was about it. What good was setting fire to something that might very well be made of stone? Similarly, the constructs had no luck. They were strong, but they hadn't been able to get through my armor, and I was getting the impression this creature was nothing *but* armor.

It looked slow and lumbering, with the stony skin and the odd limbs. That impression was dangerously mistaken. When it moved, it was faster than me, and it hit like a freaking truck. Its fist caved in the skull of the first construct in an instant, then it threw the next one against the wall of the alley so hard it *splattered*, then picked the third one up and shook it, like a dog shakes a rat. I could hear things break inside it, and when it dropped the construct, it was already dissolving into nothing.

As I struggled to get out from under the constructs on top of me, I found myself almost idly trying to figure out whether I could take the thing Crimson had called up. I thought so—I had the advantage of reach, and I was guessing that my armor and natural toughness could take a hit from it more easily than it could take a hit from Tyrfing. But it wasn't a foregone conclusion, by any means; if I slipped up, that was a fight that could turn against me very, very quickly.

The woman threw more fire at it, stronger this time, but it didn't do a whole lot more. The creature's skin cracked and scorched a little, but it didn't seem to feel any pain. It wasn't slowing down, anyway.

The man muttered to himself, drawing more power together into something that felt a good bit more substantial than the dog-things. Before he could finish, though, the creature pulled something out from under its tattered clothing and threw it at his face.



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It looked like a lizard, in about the same way as the other thing looked like a human. It was about as big as my head, with scales the brilliant, vivid colors of precious stones. It was clawing at his face, and it was drawing blood. More blood than claws that size should have been able to draw.

He screamed and pulled it off, and it pulled chunks of skin with it, leaving small bleeding holes in his face. He threw it at the wall, but it twisted in midair, hit the wall feet-first, and *stuck*. It raised a ruff of skin, something like that of a frilled lizard, and hissed. Its teeth were disproportionately long.

More of the constructs jumped at the humanoid creature, some even leaving me behind to go after it instead. They died, insomuch as *death* was a valid concept for something that had never lived.

The mages started to run. They were understandably reluctant to go past Crimson and her minion, but I was still down, and they managed to get by me. I tried to reach out and grab one of their ankles, but ended up just getting one of the constructs.

I pulled it down and broke it as the others ran away, mostly just to reassure myself that I *could*. I was feeling a little insecure after watching that performance.

The lizard leapt over to the humanoid creature, who stroked its neck delicately before tucking it back under its clothing. They started after the fleeing mages, with Crimson looking like she was thinking about following.

"No," I said, standing. "Let them go. You don't want to chase them."

I could tell that Crimson wasn't so sure, but she didn't fight me. "All right," she said. "Time for you guys to go back home."

"No," the humanoid creature said, startling me a little. It sounded so...*normal*. There was a hint of howling winds in it, but by and large it just sounded like a person. The voice was feminine, a bit high-pitched, but very *human*, overall. It sounded more normal than I did, a lot of the time. "I don't want to go back there." The lizard hissed what sounded a hell of a lot like agreement, poking its head out from under the cloth.

"You have to," Crimson said. I could feel her starting to work her magic again, doing something that felt even stranger than when she brought things through. Before it hadn't taken her more than a moment to dismiss the creatures she brought, but apparently the process was more involved with "larger" creatures.

"Hang on a second," I said, walking closer. "Who are you? Or maybe I should ask, who *were* you?"

"I don't know," it—she?—said. Her voice had an odd catch, not quite a stutter, though that was the closest word I could think of. It was more like listening to a skipping audio playback; her voice would catch on a sound and repeat it a few times rapidly before moving on. "I forget."

"But you are a person?" I pressed.

"Give it up," Crimson said, sounding almost pitying. "It's a monster."

"So am I," I reminded her. "Besides, I don't think she's quite as monstrous as you're giving her credit for." I sniffed, and got about what I'd expected. Her magic smelled like dust and stone, howling winds and bone, but under that there was just the tiniest trace of human disinfectant. "You were human once, weren't you?"

She nodded, an odd gesture that didn't seem quite human. Or at all, really. "I was. A long time ago."

Crimson reeled like she'd been slapped. The creature—whatever the hell she was; I didn't have a name for her, but *human* was definitely a past-tense sort of thing for her—took advantage of the momentary lapse in concentration to bolt. She scrambled up the side of the building at a pace that a human would have to work to match on level ground and bolted for the other side.

"Oh, shit," Crimson said, staring after her. "It's a person?"

"Was," I corrected, though that wasn't entirely correct. I was guessing she was still a person, at least under a loose enough definition of the word. "Come on, we'd better catch her."

"Why?" she asked, not moving.

"I'm something of an expert on monsters that used to be people," I said dryly. "I'm not saying that you have to send her back to wherever the hell she came from, but we probably ought to get more information than this before you decide not to."

"Right," she said, nodding. "You think we can catch her? She was moving pretty fast...."

"Yeah, I think we can manage something," I said. "You can drive, right?"

"Sure."

"Good." I pulled a set of keys out of my pocket and tossed them to her. She caught them out of the air. "Let's get moving. Oh, and Crim?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for the save," I said.

Even behind the mask, I could see her grinning at that. Regardless of what name she was using at the moment, Tawny was obviously desperate for praise.

I almost felt bad about exploiting that need for validation. But I was guessing it would distract her enough that she didn't ask too many of the wrong questions, which made it worth it.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Sixteen

The car I had handy was a rather bland SUV, rather than Aiko's high-powered sports car. Which was probably a good thing, since I doubted Crimson could really handle the Lamborghini, but I still found myself wishing for it. We were in a hurry, and the difference in speed between the two was rather substantial.

She made decent time in the SUV, though, certainly much better than we could have managed on foot. The empty streets helped a lot. With almost no one out and about after dark, little things like "speed limits" and "traffic signals" weren't so much rules as casual guidelines.

While she was doing that, I grabbed my phone. It was still intact despite the falls, bites, and fire, for which I was once again grateful for the magically reinforced, industrial-strength case I had on it.

Some people can send text messages faster than they can talk. I'm not one of them—it just isn't something I do often enough, and it's not like I learned it as a kid. They barely even *had* cell phones when I was a kid.

But I was in a rush, and Crimson had already heard and seen enough suspicious things from me that one more wasn't the end of the world. So I dialed a number from memory and tried to pretend that this *wasn't* a terrible idea.

Kyi answered on the first ring. "Jarl?" she said.

"Three suspects fleeing on foot from my location," I said. "Two human, one something else. Take the humans down if you can, preferably without killing them. The other one is fast and tough; don't engage with it, but try to keep aware of its location."

"Got it," she said instantly, hanging up a moment later.

And that, essentially, was what I liked about Kyi. She could be a bit of a hassle at times. She could be obnoxious and even a touch disrespectful, though she never went so far that I had to do something about it for the sake of my reputation. But when things were serious, she was all business.

I frowned, trying to think of who else was in the area, then called another number.

Selene, also, answered on the first ring. "Boss?"

"There's a nonhuman entity in this area," I said. "Moving west, fairly quickly. I want to know where it is and where it's going, and I want the option to bring it down if necessary. Call Kris for surveillance, and see if Jibril has people in the area. Once you've contacted both of them, send a car this way with a group of thugs and Jack."

"Jack's sleeping."

"For what I'm paying him," I said irritably, "you can wake him. Clear?"

"Crystal, boss. I'll send them your way."

"Okay," Crimson said, a couple seconds after I put the phone away again. "That wasn't David."

"Nope," I said. "Something like this, I think we're better off not bringing the others into it."

"Why?" Her tone was a little harsh, maybe even accusatory.

*Because David would want to take control of the situation, and the others are about as much use here as minnows fighting a shark,* I thought.

That was very much the wrong thing to say right now, though. So instead, I just looked at her and said, "They're impulsive, and she obviously isn't that stable. Putting the two together doesn't seem like a great idea."

"I suppose," she said reluctantly. "What about David, though?"

"I don't know him well enough to trust him to do the right thing here," I said. "Whatever we decide the right thing is."

Crimson looked like she wanted to argue, but she didn't. "So who were you calling?" she asked instead.

I shrugged. "Just some people I know," I said. "Friends, guys that owe me favors, that kind of thing."

"What kind of friends are we talking about?"

I sighed. "Crim," I said, "there are questions you don't want to ask. You don't want to think too hard about this, understand? We'll all be happier that way."

"No," she said. "No, I don't understand. What the hell is going on? Who are you, why don't you trust the other Guards, and why the *hell* do you have an army on speed dial?"

"There are two ways this can go," I said. "The first is that you can take this at face value. I'm Jonathan Keyes, also known as Shrike. I'm a violent, antisocial guy with severe paranoia and multiple other psychological disorders who joined the Guards as a form of work release. Anything you hear or see which suggests otherwise is either a trick of your imagination or an elaborate deception on my part."

"I don't like that option much," she said. "What's the other one?"

"You keep asking inconvenient questions," I said. "Sooner or later, one way or another, you'll learn some things you really aren't supposed to know. The Guards will be pissed at me, but they can't really *do* a whole lot about it, so they'll take it out on you. Between that and the fact that you'll have taken a nosedive onto the 'liability' side of the fence, I'd bet dollars to donuts that something happens

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

to take you out of the picture. Maybe you have an unfortunate accident, or something goes wrong in a fight, or you just disappear one day and we never find out what happened. Something."

"You're making it sound like there's some conspiracy or something," she said. Her fingers had tightened on the wheel, though she was still driving quite competently.

"No," I said. "I'm spouting insane conspiracy theories, because I'm a paranoiac and I'm enough of a sociopath to get off on drawing other people into my psychosis. I'm nuts, remember?"

She laughed, though it sounded a little uneasy, and she hadn't relaxed her grip on the wheel.

I caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of my eye, and stuck my head out the window to get a better look. Sure enough, there was a hawk perched on a building nearby. As soon as I saw, it took off and flew across the street, disappearing behind the garage to my left.

"We've almost caught up with her," I said, pulling my head back into the car and rolling the window up. It was a cold night out there, and while I registered the cold breeze only as mildly refreshing, I knew Crimson would find it uncomfortable. "Turn left at the next intersection."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm crazy, remember?" I said lightly. "Although I'm also right, so do take that turn."

She snorted. "If I can keep all of this straight," she said dryly, "I think I've got a future in politics. This is too much doublethink for any other line of work."

I laughed, and she was grinning as she turned at the next intersection. But there was still a tension in her posture that she couldn't quite cover up, and the silence after I stopped laughing was deep, and ugly.

This lie that the Guards wanted me to tell had a limited shelf life. I couldn't realistically keep this mask up indefinitely; I wasn't a good enough actor, and doing my job without the people I was working with realizing that there was something strange going on wasn't possible. The Guards were smart enough to have realized all of that, too. Guard hadn't fallen off the truck yesterday.

I was more than a little concerned by the implications of that.

Kris led us further west, and slightly north, towards the outskirts of town. It seemed clear that our quarry was trying to get out of the city. I doubted that she knew the layout of the city, but there were enough lights towards the center of town that she surely knew where the population was concentrated.

She was moving fast, but Kris was a bird, and we had a car. She wasn't fast enough. Kris mostly stayed out of sight, high enough to track our target easily; she only dropped down occasionally when we needed a course correction.

The streets started to feel more and more familiar, as we got back into a part of the city that I knew very well indeed. I wasn't surprised when I saw the Lamborghini parked at the side of the road. It figured that the chase would end here.

Crimson parked next to the Lamborghini and we got out. I could see figures in front of us, and hear voices, so I started walking that direction.

Crimson stumbled a little as she started to follow me, reminding me that she couldn't see in the dark. It was after midnight, with a cloudy sky, and there were no streetlights around here; it was more than dark enough to cause problems for her. She was, after all, only human.

I offered her a hand to help her. She didn't seem too thrilled, but she took it. She was too practical to turn down help just because she didn't like me very much at the moment.

The people were gathered on the spot my house had stood on, once. It took me a second to recognize it. It had been a lot of years since my cabin burned to the ground, now. At first there had least been a scorch mark to show where it was, but that had faded long ago. If I hadn't known better, I wouldn't have guessed that a structure had ever stood there.

Crimson fell behind a bit as we walked up to them, letting me take the lead. There were around a dozen people there. Most of them were ghouls in their human masks, spread out in a loose semicircle. There were three people standing in the center. Closest to us—and furthest from the ghouls—was the creature we'd chased here. Aiko was standing across from her, fully armored; next to her, Jack looked surprisingly good in his tailored suit, considering that he'd been asleep not that long ago.

"Hi," I said, walking up to them.

The creature Crimson had summoned spun to look at me. I was impressed at the speed of her movement. Even though I'd seen very well just how quickly she could move, it still seemed strange to watch. She looked like she should be slow.

"Leave me alone," she said, in that strange, slightly stuttering voice.

"Can't do that," I said. "Not without knowing what you'll do. You're obviously dangerous, when you choose to be. I can't just let you loose in the city without some assurance that you won't turn into a menace."

She frowned, with a creak of breaking stone. It was a fairly intimidating expression, all things considered. "I just want to be out," she said. "Just want to not be there."

"Where?"

"The Badlands," she said, shuddering slightly.

I glanced at Aiko, who shook her head. It was a small enough gesture that I doubted anyone else had noticed it, but I knew what it meant. She didn't have any idea what the Badlands might be, either.

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Not that that was so surprising. We'd both been around a while, but the Otherside was pretty incomprehensibly huge. For every domain that either of us knew, there were probably a dozen that we didn't.

"And you can't get out on your own?" I asked. It seemed like a natural conclusion, but I was still trying to get a grasp on how Crimson's magic worked.

She shook her head. "Never out," she said. "It wants me back. I can feel it pulling me back down now. I've gotten this far before, but eventually something happens and I'm back there. Can't leave, can't even die. I just wake up back in the Badlands."

"I could probably kill you permanently, if you'd like," I said. I started to call Tyrfing, then remembered that I wasn't supposed to have it as Shrike and stopped. I got lucky; it didn't decide to come anyway.

She shook her head again, more vehemently. "Don't want to die," she said. "Just saying. Can I stay here for a while?"

"How long is a while?" I asked suspiciously.

She shrugged. "A while."

"She doesn't have the best grasp on time," Crimson said. "She understands the concept, but she doesn't really *get* it. I don't think she fully understands the idea of the future, or intervals of time."

"How do you know that?"

"This is what I do," Crimson said. "I've got enough of a connection to her to get some idea of what she is."

"Okay," I said. "Are there other concepts she doesn't get?"

"Self-consciousness, for one. You know how you'd feel awkward having strangers talk about you like this right in front of you? She doesn't have that reaction. There are others, but I don't have enough of a grasp on them to put them into words yet."

"Wonderful," I muttered. I had a killing machine who was seemingly made of stone and lacked basic concepts in her mind that would make interacting with humans nearly impossible. How *special*.

I eyed her, considering how to take her down. I wouldn't be using Tyrfing, for numerous reasons, but I was guessing that at least one of the knives I was carrying could make an impression on that skin. The ghouls could hold her down with sheer numbers, and Jack could probably ensure that nobody was injured. It was a basic plan, but I thought it should work.

About a second before I could give the order, Aiko suddenly said, "Sure, why not. You can stay at my place for however long you end up being here."

I grimaced, but I didn't want to openly contradict her. So instead I just said, "All right, then. Well, if you don't cause problems for the people of the city, that should be fine."

"I thought you wanted her dealt with," Crimson hissed at me.

"This is dealt with," I said, not bothering to keep my voice down. I was guessing it didn't much matter; this creature gave the impression that it could hear a heartbeat, let alone a whisper. "The situation is resolved and she has a place to stay."

"How am I supposed to explain this?"

"Don't," I suggested. "Tell them it was a totally routine patrol, and any doors you happen to have opened were closed shortly thereafter, the same as usual. In fact, if anyone other than David asks, we never ran into those two to begin with."

"I don't like this," she said.

"I'm not exactly thrilled about it myself," I replied, looking at the creature from the Badlands. "But we work with what we've got."



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Seventeen

"Okay," I said to Aiko, as the rest of the crowd dispersed. Crimson was walking back to the Guard headquarters, where she would have a lot of stories to make up. Jack was driving the thing from the Badlands back to the house, since he was one of the few people who could reliably survive if she turned violent. The rest of my minions were going back to whatever they'd been doing before I called them. "So what was that about?"

"What?" she asked innocently.

I sighed. "Come on, Aiko. Why did you feel the need to offer her a place to stay?"

"I don't know," she said. "It's just...look at her. She obviously doesn't fit in anywhere. It's like looking at a puppy out in the rain."

"Since when do you give two shits about puppies locked out in the rain?"

"You oughta know," she said, elbowing me in the ribs hard enough for me to feel it. "Puppy. So are you going to let her stay?"

I sighed. "Until she causes problems," I said. "I get the impression that's more of a when than an if. But I'll give her a chance if you want."

"You're adorable," she said. "Also, this is seriously messing with my head. How often do I convince *you* to do the nice thing?"

"Trust me, my mind is equally blown," I said dryly. "Although knowing you that's probably the whole reason you did it."

"Nah," she said. "I mean, I *would*, but in this case I actually did feel sorry for her. So how'd your evening go?"

"Couple of the mages who attacked the house set a trap for me," I said. "I blew it on an easy fight and had to get rescued by a girl that dresses in a silly costume and calls herself Crimson. Then I chased down a monster that used to be human and comes from somewhere called the Badlands that I've never heard of, and now I feel terrible because I was going to kill her for something she *might* do before you stopped me."

"That's rough, Shrike," she said sympathetically.

I growled. "I'm already sick of that name," I said. "I'm sick of this game, the false identity, the whole thing. This isn't *me*, you know?"

"I know."

I sighed, walking towards the Lamborghini. "Anyway. How was your night?"

"Not half as exciting as yours," she said. "I'm jealous. There was a guy who was behind on his payments to you, so I went and burned his place down. Other than that nothing much happened."

"Aiko. You know I'm not actually running a protection racket. I don't burn people's shops down when they don't pay me."

"Of course not," she said lightly. "Fire isn't really your *thing*. You've got minions for that part." After a few moments, she added, "This guy earned it. I've heard some stories; trust me, you don't need to feel guilty. Sorry you missed it, maybe."

"If you say so," I said. "Still, I should go look into it. See if there's anything I need to do as a follow up measure to make sure this doesn't get blown out of proportion. I need to talk to Selene anyway, make sure those new wards are finished and operational."

"No," she said, not reaching for the ignition. "You need to come home with me and get some sleep."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it's already one in the morning," she said. "Meaning we have to leave for Lucius's party in around six hours."

I blinked. "Seriously? It's already that soon?"

"Yep."

"Okay," I said. "But that means I need to take care of this even more. It needs dealt with, and I might not be able to get to it for a while otherwise."

"Winter," she said, in a tone somewhere between the one you use with a person standing on the edge of a bridge and the tone *Aiko* would use with such a person. "Just because you don't need sleep anymore doesn't mean you don't need rest. You're trying to do too much. You'd completely forgotten about this party, hadn't you?"

"Not completely," I said defensively. "I'd just...sort of forgotten when it was."

"See? You go there with your head in that state, they'll eat you alive. Maybe literally."

"All right," I said. "You might be right. Let's go home, then. Take a few hours to get ready before we leave."

I'd been to quite a few dangerous parties by that point in my life. This one was different than the rest, for a handful of reasons.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

The first was that it was in my world, rather than an Otherside domain. That, in itself, was a pretty huge difference. For all that I'd spent a lot of time in the Otherside by now, I was still a stranger there. I was a visitor, not a native. It made everything that happened there feel a little removed, a little bit less than wholly real. Going to a party in Alexandria, there was none of that comforting *distance*. It didn't feel like a dream, or a visit to another world.

The second distinction was that this party wasn't being thrown by the Sidhe Courts. That was terrifying. Oh, the Sidhe were dangerous, and only a complete moron could fail to recognize the threat posed by going to one of their parties. But with them I knew the rules. I had an idea of what I could and couldn't safely do, and I knew how to navigate the environment. It wasn't much of a safety net, but it was better than nothing.

Here, I didn't even have that. I didn't know the rules here. I didn't know what mistakes were just unfortunate, and what mistakes would get me horribly killed. Hell, I didn't even know who was going to be at this party. All I'd gotten was an address and a time to show up. I had no idea what the scale of the party was going to be, whether it was just a few other people or there would be enough attendees to fill a stadium.

That made it hard for me to plan ahead. It's hard to know tools to bring when you don't know what situations you might need to deal with. I wasn't even really sure what weapons were best against vampires. I'd mostly tried to just limit my interaction with them in general, and while I had an idea of what tactics were and weren't effective, I was far from an expert on the topic.

And that wasn't even considering the other things that might be here. I wasn't too concerned about succubi—their only real tactic under the circumstances was seduction, from what I'd heard of them, and I was pretty thoroughly vaccinated against the honey trap. Similarly, once I'd refreshed myself on yuki-onna I wasn't too worried about them. When you're a heat vampire, and your main tactic was freezing people to death, I was just about the last guy you wanted to attack.

But I had no way of guessing who else might be at this. There were enough factions that were politically aligned with the Vampires' Council that it was essentially impossible to guess what I might see, and that wasn't even counting other things that Lucius might have invited. I hadn't been able to get much, if any, reliable information on him. Apparently the guy was obsessed with security. I'd hired Jacques to put together a dossier on him, and I was confident I'd get something, but it was going to take more than a couple of days.

So in the end, after much agonizing, I went with a very generic loadout. I had some knives, an assortment of stored spells, and some generally useful things—powdered silver and iron, chalk, permanent marker, lengths of string and chain, and such. I had a flask of holy water and a handful of holy symbols that I'd arranged to have blessed by various priests. I also had my amulet around my neck, the wolf's head gleaming on my chest. I'd never had a whole lot in the way of faith, but if I had to pick a symbol for what I did have, that was the best I could do.

Aiko was a lot less dependent on toys than I was, and I was more than slightly jealous of how little equipment she was bringing. She did have her own flask, though, and she had a gold pendant in the form of an apple prominently displayed.

I felt a momentary gratitude that neither of us was particularly religious, at least not in any way that most people would recognize. A crucifix, or a Star of David, was easy to recognize as a symbol of faith, and faith was a legitimate weapon against vampires, for reasons I'd never fully understood. But a wolf's head and a golden apple? Not so common.

Neither of us had ever been to Alexandria, which made going straight there with a portal sadly impossible. But I knew a guy who could open a portal to Cairo for us, and after that it was fairly easy to drive. The man we bought the car off of didn't speak English, but Aiko managed to work out enough pieces of various languages in common to make the deal.

"We definitely overpaid him," she said, as we were driving through Alexandria looking for the address. "This thing doesn't handle worth shit. And the stereo? Useless."

"You only paid him a couple hundred bucks," I pointed out.

"And stole half of it back while he was trying to cop a feel," she agreed. "And it *still* isn't worth it. Can we set it on fire after we're done with it?"

"Let's wait on that one," I said. "I'm thinking we might need a getaway car if this party goes wrong. Or failing that, a pick-me-up afterwards."

"Cool," she said. "Just so long as you don't forget. So how wrong do you think this is going to go?"

"It *might* not go wrong," I said defensively.

She eyed me. "Winter. You remember what I said before we went to that meeting with the Pack?"

"I remember."

"I think it was something about how I was looking forward to seeing you turn a diplomatic meeting into a total disaster?"

"I said I remember."

She grinned. "Was I wrong?"

"Well, it wasn't a total disaster," I said. "It turned out all right in the end. For me, anyway. Mostly."

"Point stands," she said. "When you're around, it's *going* to go wrong. We might as well be honest here. So how wrong?"

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I looked at the building. It was dark and quiet, with some security guards outside showing people inside. The building looked ominous, and it reeked of vampire.

"If I had to guess? I'd say about as wrong as it can get."

"Sounds like fun," she said, getting out of the car. "Let's do this."

## Chapter Eighteen

The security guards were expecting us, apparently. They waved us in without question, without even searching us. I was almost disappointed.

The actual party was downstairs, underground. I could feel the wards parting around us as we went down into the belly of the beast, one after another. There were some impressively strong ones, easily as strong as anything on my house. I wouldn't have liked to be the one assaulting this place with the defenses up. But at the moment they weren't active, and we passed through without any trouble.

I could hear the music, as we started getting closer. It was dance music, fast-paced electronica with lots of synthesizers and a pounding bassline. It was loud, too; as we started getting closer to the party it got to be almost painfully loud, and I started wishing I'd brought earplugs.

The stairs ended at a heavy steel door with another pair of security thugs watching it. This pair looked a little more serious than those aboveground, openly carrying assault rifles and wearing body armor. One of them looked at us in a way that suggested he'd be glad for the excuse to do something and break up the monotony of his day, but they didn't actually stop us. One of them opened the door and waved us inside, and we walked into the party like we owned the place.

We'd showed up exactly on time, but the party was already in full swing when we walked in. Not a surprise, exactly, but I hadn't wanted to come too early. That was something that could easily be seen as rude.

The room was dim. That wasn't a surprise; this wasn't the sort of place that was brightly lit. I'd expected that. What I hadn't expected was *how* it was dim. I was used to the people I dealt with being somewhat old-fashioned, and I'd sort of assumed that Lucius would be similar, since in my experience you didn't get to be that powerful without being at least mildly ancient. Thus, I'd somewhat naively been expecting lanterns and candles, or magical light.

What I got instead was strobes and black lights. The result was a room that was barely bright enough for me to see, but the light was inconsistent. It was a good thing I didn't have epilepsy, because the intense colors and flashing lights were already giving me a headache. The walls were mirrored, creating an illusion of space and making the lighting even crazier than it would have been otherwise. It didn't help that they were set to a rhythm totally distinct to that of the music, and trying to reconcile the two was a constant irritation.

The second thing that caught me by surprise was how many humans there were. Almost half the people in the room seemed to be normal humans, dressed for a night of clubbing. Most of them seemed to be in their teens or early twenties, and they looked like locals, although a handful were Asian or European in appearance.

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A lot of them were probably something else. I was guessing some of them were vampires, or one of the many, many other things that could look a human being. Some of them were probably mages. But most of them looked and smelled human, and I wasn't all that easy to fool about that.

It wasn't hard to figure out why a vampire would have so many humans at his party—especially not humans like this. They were young, attractive in one way or another, mostly dressed in either very little or a whole lot of the kind of clothing that looked more naked than nothing at all. More than anything, they looked *vulnerable*.

They were food. And a lot of them knew it, too. Not all—some looked blissfully ignorant of their role here. But at least half clearly weren't so innocent. Roughly half of that group looked scared, while the other half looked like kids waiting while the adults finished their dinner so that they could have dessert.

The unsettling thing about it, though, was how *normal* it all looked. At a glance, you could have mistaken this for any slightly edgy but basically harmless party. It wasn't until you looked closer that the wrongness became apparent. The figures moving through the crowd with the smooth grace of predators, eyeing people with a hunger more literal than what most people were accustomed to seeing in such a setting. The way that a sizable proportion of the humans here were tagged in one way or another, marked as property—wearing collars, or colored armbands, or in one case actually branded with a set of initials. The people lying in the shadows at the edge of the room, unconscious or dead. The way that the guards were letting people in, but nobody was really *leaving*.

I could easily picture some poor sap wandering in here, and not realizing until too late just what this place was. There was one born every minute, after all.

"Oh," Aiko said, pausing just inside the door. "Fun. It's been a while since I went to *this* sort of party."

"I never have," I said, looking around suspiciously. I had to shout to be heard over the music, and the lightshow was already getting a bit disorienting. I could smell smoke and various chemicals, and I was willing to bet that only a fraction were anything like legal.

"Of course you haven't," Aiko said, patting my arm. "It's adorable how innocent you are. Hang on, I'm going to get us something."

She skipped over to one of the humans who looked more at home here, and who was surrounded by a small crowd. A minute or so later, she came back with a pair of blank white pills and a paper cup of water, and handed one of the pills to me.

"What is this?" I asked, looking at it curiously.

"Special K," she said happily.

I eyed her. "Aiko...."

"That dosage of ketamine won't do a thing to someone with your metabolism," she said, much more quietly and in a deadly serious tone. "But it *will* make you look like you belong here. As it is some of the wrong people are starting to pay attention to us, and believe me when I say that you do not want to attract that kind of attention."

"You're sure it's harmless?" I asked, similarly quietly.

"Under the circumstances, yes," she said. "It takes a ridiculous amount of that stuff to get a werewolf dopey. Just don't take any other pills. Some of the things here like their meals seriously fucked up, and you don't know how to tell the difference between the safe stuff and things even you don't want to touch."

"Your skills never cease to amaze," I muttered, swallowing the pill. I didn't bother with the water.

"I do my best," she said, swallowing her own.

"So what about you? Do I have to worry about you passing out?"

"Kitsune aren't susceptible to ketamine," she said. "That's why I picked it. Now laugh and grab my hand. Try to look nervous. We're playing you up as the nervous newbie going to his first party with an experienced friend."

I did what she told me, though the laughter was a bit forced. That was probably not a bad thing, really. "Are you sure this is necessary?" I asked, under my breath. "Lucius guaranteed our safety, remember?"

"That was before I knew what kind of party this was," she said, tugging me forward. "Standards are different here. You can get away with a lot before it starts falling under definitions of harm. Speaking of, though, we should go and find him. Come on."

I followed along somewhat bemusedly as she pulled me through the crowd. We passed several vampires, a yuki-onna in her shroud of icy fog, two unnaturally perfect figures that smelled the same as the succubus who'd been with Lucius last time, and a rakshasa. None of them said or did anything to us, although a couple looked at us in disturbingly appraising ways as we passed.

On the way through, I heard some of the most bizarre and disturbing snatches of overheard conversation I'd ever encountered—a pretty impressive claim, really, all things considered. A few of the marked humans were discussing the relative technique of several different vampires in strangely matter-of-fact tones. One of them mentioned having never experienced a yuki-onna's touch, and another raved about the peaceful feeling she'd had with one before when she was on the verge of losing consciousness from hypothermia.

The strange thing about it, though, was that I really wasn't sure how much of their attitude was genuine. I was sure that they were encouraged to present themselves that way, but I got the impression



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that their enthusiasm wasn't entirely a lie. And if not, how much of it was because the creatures here had trained them to feel that way, and how much was that they'd deliberately preyed on those who were already susceptible?

Either way, there was something *profoundly* disturbing about people who were being eaten alive piece by piece, and knew it, and willingly came back for more.

The bar was on the other side of the room, lit with a particularly intense blue-violet strobe. The bartender was a tall, bald human man with a prominently displayed violet cloth around his arm. I'd seen several other humans with that particular marker, now that I thought about it, and they hadn't been being hassled by anyone. No wonder, if that indicated a house employee. They might just be humans in a crowd of far more dangerous things, but they were humans with Lucius's favor. That was the kind of thing that you didn't ignore lightly.

"I'm looking for the boss," Aiko said, elbowing her way through the crowd around the bar and pulling me along in her wake. "He's expecting us."

"Don't know what you're talking about," the bartender said, mixing another drink. It fumed, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know why.

"Talking about Lucius," Aiko said impatiently.

The effect of that name was pretty dramatic. The bartender practically dropped the drink he was mixing, and the vampire that had been about six seconds from getting my fist in his face found something else to be interested in.

"You aren't one of the rabble, are you?" the bartender asked.

"Bingo," Aiko said. "Now come on, time is money. Who do I need to talk to make things happen?"

"That would be me," a rakshasa said, stepping up next to her. "I thought I recognized you, but I wasn't sure. You hang around with the man that killed my brother. If I can't get my revenge on him for that, you'll do."

He started to reach for her. I didn't wait to see what he was going to do before I stepped up behind him. I grabbed his hair with one hand and shoved a knife into his back with the other—not enough to kill, or even really wound, just enough to make him *really* aware of my presence.

"I'm almost insulted," I said. "I get that I look different when I'm not wearing the armor, but you could at least have noticed that she wasn't alone."

"Neither am I," he said, sounding surprisingly happy for someone with a knife in his back.

"Yeah," I said. "I know. If your friends decide to start something, I can finish it. Now listen, because I'm only going to say this once. The tip of this knife is about a quarter of an inch from your

spine. It didn't have to stop there. It *doesn't* have to stop there. The only reason I haven't already killed you is out of respect for our host. Speaking of, where should I go to chat with him?"

The bartender looked at me, then shrugged. "I'll let him know you're here," he said.

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### Chapter Nineteen

I shoved the rakshasa off the knife and then cleaned and sheathed it. The rakshasa looked like he was thinking about doing something stupid, but he thought better of it after a few seconds. It probably helped that *nobody* looked that interested in helping him out.

We stood there for a few minutes, waiting for Lucius to get back to us. The silence was a bit awkward—or would have been, anyway, if there had been silence. As it was the music had switched to another track, one that was even louder and faster than the last. It was just as well that I didn't have much to say, because even if I were screaming, I wasn't sure anyone would be able to understand what I was saying.

After around five minutes, another girl walked up. She was small, and she looked pretty awful. She was visibly underweight, and her pale complexion was almost ashen. Her lips were gashed, like they'd been bitten repeatedly, and the numerous piercings in her face likely weren't helping. She smelled foul, sick, and she stank of chemicals, of which alcohol was the most innocuous.

But for all that, she seemed confident and assured as she made her way over to us. She was swaying in time to the music, slipping through the crowd so smoothly they probably never even realized that she was moving towards a destination rather than just dancing. She had violet armbands around either arm, confirming my guess that that was used to mark house employees here.

"You're the ones who are here for a meeting with the boss?" she asked. I didn't feel like trying to scream loud enough to be heard over the music, so I just nodded, and she gestured for us to follow.

We weren't half as smooth as she was getting across the dancefloor. Well, I wasn't, anyway. Aiko was almost as good as our guide, which probably wasn't a huge surprise. I managed to keep up with them, pretty much by brute force. The nice thing about a party where more than half of the people present were food animals was that I didn't have to worry too much about starting a fight by pushing the wrong person out of the way.

"You aren't much like the usual people we get here," she said, detouring around a young man who'd passed out in the middle of the dancefloor. He was pale from blood loss, and he smelled like the pill Aiko had given me. As we walked past, one of the security guards came to drag him off to the darkened corner of the room.

"No," I shouted back, watching the scene distastefully. "I don't imagine we are."

"Maybe you can help me, then. Will you let me out?" I wasn't sure how her voice carried so well through the music; it didn't sound like she was screaming, but I had no trouble understanding her. Practice, I supposed.

"It's more complicated than that," I said.

"It doesn't have to be. Please, I didn't know. I want to go home. Won't you take me out of here?"

"I can't."

"You can," she said, clutching at me. She was standing between a strobe and a black light, leaving her face alternately crimson and violet. The mirrored wall just beside her threw the light back on her from another direction, further confusing it, and the reflected beams of lasers played over her skin strangely. "Please. Just say you'll help me. I'm begging you."

"I think I'm insulted," I said, carefully pulling her hands off without making skin contact. "Did you really expect me to fall for *this*? Seriously?"

"What do you mean?"

I sighed. "Come on. You might as well drop the act. You're apparently one of Lucius's higher-ranking minions, if he sent you to fetch me. You work for the house here. You seriously think I'm going to believe that you're still this pathetic? Because I'm pretty sure that if you were as innocent as you want to seem, you'd have been eaten up a long time ago."

"Maybe so," she said. "You'd be surprised how many people don't take the time to think it through, though."

"You really thought the hard sell would get me to agree to something without knowing what it was?"

"No, but I had to try," she said, grinning. Grinning too wide. Her bloody, tattered lips were stretched across her face, showing sharp teeth that were stained crimson by more than just the lighting. The expression accentuated the gaunt lines of her face, her narrow features and sunken eyes. I hadn't quite grasped just how thin she was. Or possibly she had a way of masking it when she wanted to seem human. Now that she wasn't, she looked almost skeletal.

Suddenly I could smell her. Not just the faint scent of sickness that I'd caught earlier, but a stench of decay and corruption, like a cold wind blowing across an open grave. The smell was cold and isolated, and carried a powerful feeling of hunger. There was magic in that scent, a magic of guilt and need.

It was the olfactory equivalent of seeing myself through a glass darkly. That scent had a lot of the same elements as my own—the cold, the hunger. But there was an ugliness to it as well, the corruption and decay, something much darker lurking under the surface.

Under other circumstances, I would have been hard pressed to identify it. But here and now, it was a bit simpler. This party attracted a very specific sort of clientele. It was a place for things that preyed on humans, in every sense. That narrowed things down a lot.

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The stench of death and decay was pretty standard; that was how my brain interpreted the energy associated with a lot of nasty things. The cold was more unusual, but hardly unique. The yuki-onna was evidence enough of that. But the feeling of hunger and isolation, and especially of guilt, narrowed it down some. Her physical appearance, now that she wasn't hiding it and I was paying attention, left me with only one real guess for what she might be.

I wasn't sure, not completely. Not enough to call her on it. But I was confident enough to be very, very glad that I hadn't agreed to help her get out. If I was right about what she was, I had some ideas what form that help might have taken, and it wouldn't have ended well. I was guessing that by the time I'd died there would have been a whole lot of bodies on the ground, and people would have told stories about the whole thing for years afterward. There are some things that just shouldn't go together.

She opened a concealed door in the mirrored wall and waved us inside. I went first, catching another glimpse of her grin in the mirror. Even by my standards it was a ghastly expression. I'd already noticed that her teeth were too large and sharp, and I'd seen that those teeth were red. But she wasn't a vampire; she took more than just blood when she fed. If I'd had any doubt of that, it vanished when I saw a bit of flesh between her teeth, a scrap of stringy muscle.

As though she'd noticed me noticing, a long wet tongue flicked out. It looked almost prehensile as it wiped that bit of raw meat away. She slurped it down and grinned at me in the mirror.

I repressed a shudder and kept walking.

The hallway behind the mirror was narrow, and it was spooky. It would have been spooky even without the context, I was pretty sure. It was too small, lit only by dim red rope lights that would have been barely enough for a human to keep from tripping over their own feet. I could still hear the music in the main room, loud enough that I could feel it vibrate in my chest.

The hallway didn't run quite straight, and it split several times. Our guide kept us in the halls that stuck close to the room we'd just left. We went up a cramped set of stairs in which the risers were all slightly different heights, and then stopped outside of a massively heavy vault door. Our guide stepped past us and rapped a complex pattern on the door before unlocking it with a key from around her neck.

The room on the other side was...well, it was one of the stranger offices I'd seen. It was large, and luxuriously furnished—a couple small couches and some chairs, all upholstered in leather, and a couple of hardwood tables. It was very dim, though, considerably darker than the room with the party. I knew that, because the wall across from the door was one huge window, looking out over the dance floor. From the other side it had been a mirror; I hadn't been able to see any hint of this room from in there.

Lucius was looking out over the party, sitting in an expensive-looking leather chair. He was wearing a purple suit this time, with pinstripes that fluoresced under the ultraviolet lights.

"Your guests are here," our guide said as she stepped in. She nodded, not quite bowing.

"Thank you," Lucius said. "You may go."

She straightened and left, closing the heavy door behind herself. The sound of the music cut off abruptly as she did, leaving the room silent. It was soundproofed. It was *very well* soundproofed, to keep out that music.

"She kinda creeps me out," I said, watching her leave.

"Annabel has that effect on many people," Lucius said. "But she's very good at what she does."

"She's a wendigo?" I asked. More for confirmation than anything. I was feeling pretty confident in my identification by this point.

"Indeed. You're quite good at that, you know."

I sighed. "This place just gets better and better. Was this really necessary? The secrecy, the mind games...it just feels like a waste."

"We could hardly have a civil conversation out there," he pointed out. "I'm familiar with lycanthropic hearing. I'd be surprised if you could understand a word I said over the music. And while I appreciate that you find Annabel's nature discomfiting, she's the one I typically send to escort guests up to my office. It isn't as though I singled you out."

"I get that," I said. "And honestly, that's not the part that bothers me. No, I'm annoyed by the guy that you sent to cause trouble. Thinking that moron was even a consideration for us is just...insulting."

Lucius paused. "What are you talking about?"

"Some rakshasa tried to hassle me at the bar on the way in," Aiko said. "It was pretty much a nonissue."

The vampire's expression tightened slightly. It was a tiny change, but considering who it was, that was still pretty damned significant. Vampires didn't really react to much. They didn't have much in the way of automatic responses, which meant that any such response they *did* have was much more important than it would be on a human. When it came to someone like Lucius, *any* tell was something to take seriously.

"I see," he said. "That wasn't my doing. I wouldn't have insulted you in that way. A moment, please." He pulled a phone out of his pocket, tapped a few buttons, and then sat and waited.

Vampires didn't wait like people. They didn't fidget. They didn't even blink, or breathe. It was more like they turned themselves off entirely.

I was impressed by the speed of the response. It was probably less than a minute later that the door opened again, and a pair of guards dragged the rakshasa inside. He wasn't struggling. No surprise

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there; he could probably have taken out two humans without any trouble, but these guys were Lucius's personal employees. You'd have to be a special kind of stupid to attack them here.

"These two say that you accosted them as they were trying to reach me," Lucius said. "Is that true?"

The rakshasa shifted uncomfortably. "Don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"You're lying," Lucius said instantly. "And badly."

"All right," the rakshasa said. "I may have stopped them. And said some things. But it was all in fun. Nobody got hurt."

Which was pretty much true. From the smell he'd already healed the knife wound I'd given him.

"You accosted one of my guests," Lucius said, not sounding terribly impressed with this excuse. "We have rules here. That invited guests are not to be bothered is one of them."

The rakshasa licked his lips, then started to run.

I never saw Lucius move. Not even a little bit. He was just standing on the other side of the room, seemingly without having crossed the space in between.

The rakshasa ran into him at full tilt, and bounced off. It was like he'd run into a wall. The vampire didn't even rock back on his heels.

"I take it that you're aware of the consequence of breaking that rule, then," Lucius said. The rakshasa fell backward and scabbled away.

In another of those blindingly fast movements, Lucius snatched him up off the floor and shook him. I could hear bones shatter from where I was standing, one after another.

I smelled magic in the air, something very dark and very empty and very, *very* old. And then the rakshasa crumbled into dust.

I gulped. I'd seen a lot of rakshasas die. I'd killed more than my fair share myself. And admittedly this one had been low on the totem pole. The strongest of their kind were basically demigods, but this guy hadn't even been comparable to *me*. But still, seeing him get killed *that* easily was more than a bit intimidating.

Which had been Lucius's intent, of course. He said that he hadn't actually sent that rakshasa to cause trouble, and I believed him. I didn't have all that much of a grasp on Lucius's personality, but from what I'd seen he wasn't the type to lie. Why would he? In a weird way, it was the same as those painfully tasteless suits. Lucius liked to announce that he was so powerful that he didn't *have* to care what people thought of him.

So when he said that he hadn't sent that rakshasa, I believed him. But he'd dealt with it like this for a reason. You didn't get to be that old and powerful by doing things without a reason. It was yet another statement of power. He wanted to remind me that any fight between us could only end one way.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience," Lucius said, brushing a bit of dust off his suit. "Now that we have that bit of unpleasantness out of the way, let's get down to that chat I mentioned."

"Yeah," I said, eyeing what was left of the rakshasa. "Let's. What did you want to talk about, anyway?"

"You, essentially," he said, grinning. His teeth were very white, and very even. They didn't look like fangs at all. "Please, have a seat."

Aiko and I sat on one of the couches, a little gingerly. I wasn't comfortable sitting down around Lucius. Not that it would matter if he decided to kill us; that was abundantly clear by this point. The two humans left, closing the heavy door behind themselves. Once again, the music cut off as the door slammed shut, leaving the room in utter silence.

Lucius sat in his chair again, spinning around to face us. This left him framed by the party, the mad, darkly hedonistic revelry going on just on the other side of the glass. Seen like this, it was hard to remember that those were real people. The mirrors and the lights made the scene seem unreal. I could see people dancing and shaking in time to the music, but in here it was dead silent.

"I confess I don't fully understand you, Wolf," Lucius said. "What do you want? What drove you to seek me out?"

"We've already been through this," I said. "I don't want to have to defend my territory against hordes of vampires and rakshasas all the time. Plus I've had more than enough legal problems related to killing people that earned it. If I have to kill some of your people because they're too dumb to know when to quit, I'd rather it not turn into another of those situations."

"Those are proximate causes," he said dismissively. "I'm looking for something deeper. I've seen a great many people take power in my life, Wolf, for a great many reasons. And I'm curious what reasons drove you. By all accounts, you were fairly unambitious for most of your life. I want to know what changed that."

"I didn't have a choice," I said.

He snorted. "Bullshit."

"No, for real. I've got Loki breathing down my neck. That's the kind of thing that doesn't leave a lot of room for disagreement. The only choice I had at that point was to grow or die."



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"To an extent that's true," Lucius said. "But only to a point. I've looked into you a bit since our last meeting, Wolf. Loki didn't force you to take over a city. He might have encouraged, he might have been glad to see it, but the choice was yours. So why?"

I frowned. "It's hard to explain. At the time I needed the fighting over the city to stop, and exerting my own claim was the only way to get the other sides to reach a compromise. Afterwards, I couldn't get rid of the job. Things have just...sort of spiraled from there."

"You see it as a means to an end, then," he said.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's a fair statement, I think."

"That's good. Too many people think power is its own reward. That's not a healthy attitude for a ruler to have, in my experience."

I noticed that he didn't say whether he shared it.

Lucius nodded. "I would like to make you an offer, Wolf."

"You said this conversation was payment for what we agreed upon," I said sharply. "*Not* that we would agree on payment here."

"Yes, and I've already done what I said. It should work out just fine, by the way. It'll be a few more days before we know for sure, but I haven't heard anything to suggest that there will be problems." He smiled. "You did, however, agree to this conversation. Including listening to additional offers I might make."

I sighed. "Fine."

"Very good," he said. "So here's what I propose. I happen to have a certain problem, a person trying to challenge my hold over the city of Alexandria. Due to the specifics of this person it's difficult, both politically and practically, for me to deal with him myself. I think it would be quite simple for you to do so, however, and I would be very willing to express my gratitude for such a service."

"See, here's the problem," I said. "You aren't the only one who's been doing research recently. And it turns out there aren't actually that many African emperors named Lucius who would have been in a position to see the Colosseum in its glory days."

"Aren't there?" he asked mildly.

"No," I said. "Not many at all, in fact. Add in the fact that you're savvy enough to still be around, and there's really only one I could find that makes any sense. And this offer is starting to sound an awful lot like how you got to be the emperor of Rome in the first place. Which, as I recall, really only ended well for you."

He smiled. "Most people assume it's just a false name," he commented.

"Is it?"

"No. But you may be ascribing too much importance to events that happened thousands of years ago. Have I actually given *you* any reason to think that my offers are untrustworthy?"

"You mean aside from *that*?" I asked, gesturing at the view through the window.

"*Including* that," he said. "Really, Wolf. I would have hoped that you would be more open-minded. I'm not betraying anyone with these parties. I'm not even hurting anyone. These people chose to be here. They *want* this."

"Just because you want something doesn't make it a good idea," Aiko said. She was watching the party through the window. Her expression was calm and blank, which was never a good sign.

"That's a rather amusing thing for you, of all people, to say," Lucius commented.

She shrugged. "Hey, I'm fine with bad ideas. Don't think *that's* ever been in question. I'm just saying, the fact that you're giving people what they want doesn't excuse what you do to them."

"You don't seem to understand," he said. "I don't *do* anything to them. Those who come here make their own choices. I simply don't feel a need to restrict their choices because some long-dead puritan said that pleasure is evil. For these people, sweet dreams are *made* of this. Who am I to disagree?"

"Cute," I said. "But by that logic, you have just as little right to disagree when I say that I want nothing to do with what you do here."

"Quite so," he agreed. "I believe you know where the exit is. I would have Annabel escort you, but from how you reacted to her I suspect that you would rather I not."

I paused. "Wait. Just like that? I can just...leave?"

"Of course," he said. "I have plenty of people who are happy to work for me," he said, gesturing at the crowd. "Why would I turn to someone who would rather oppose me? No, Wolf, I'm not going to strong-arm you into making a deal with me. You two are free to go. I will send you the details on that problem I mentioned, in case you change your mind, but if you'd rather not deal with it, I won't force you to."

I hesitated, wary, but Aiko was already leaving. I joined her, walking just a touch faster than we usually might have.

Lucius sat and smiled as we left.

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### Chapter Twenty

I was sure something would go wrong on the way out of the party. Lucius would stop us, or a gang of monsters would be waiting when we made it back out to the dance floor, or those drugs Aiko had grabbed would turn out to be less harmless than she'd thought. Hell, even if the guards just didn't let us out, that would potentially be a very big problem.

But none of those things happened. The most dangerous thing waiting when we got out into the main room was pounding music, a nausea-inducing lightshow, and an instant headache. The wendigo—Annabel, according to Lucius, though I had my doubts as to whether the concept of a name was even applicable to such a creature—was standing near the door into the back hallways. It just smiled at us as we passed. There were scraps of meat in its teeth, fresh since the last time I saw it. No surprise; a wendigo was always hungry. It was almost the definition of what they were.

The party itself was going at about the same pace, or a little slower. The atmosphere was a little different, a little less frenetic. There were fewer people dancing, and more people partied out and collapsed in the corners. It wasn't just the food, either. Even most of the monsters were slowing down.

The guards waved us out without question or comment. Presumably Lucius had told them not to bother us.

That, or they weren't actually keeping people in at all. Now that I thought about it I wasn't sure I'd actually seen them stop anyone. I'd just been assuming that it was a sort of pitcher plant, a lure to get the prey inside and the goons to keep them from leaving once they realized what they'd gotten themselves into.

In an odd way, that was more comforting than the alternative—that Lucius was being honest, and these people were here because they *wanted* to be. Even knowing what happened here, what was going to happen to them, they didn't want to leave. *That* was an incredibly disturbing prospect. I knew that some people glorified leeches, but for it to be happening on this scale and to this degree was something else.

I was feeling deeply, deeply unsettled as we climbed out of the basement up into the cleaner air of the street.

I took a moment, once we were out, to breathe deep and clear my head. Just being down there left me feeling dirty, in a way I couldn't quite explain. The funny thing was that it wasn't like this was the worst thing I'd ever seen. Not by a long shot. There was just something about it that bothered me to a rather disproportionate extent.

"Well, I'm not sorry to leave that behind," Aiko said, echoing my thoughts. She shook her head briskly. "I'd forgotten how nasty those parties were."

"Have you gone to many?" I asked.

She shrugged. "A few. They were never really my thing, but I used to know some people that went to them all the time, and I tagged along a few times. Not many. Is it just me, or is that guy down the block looking this way a little too closely?" The segue was smooth, without even a hitch to mark the transition.

"Yeah," I said, not looking directly at him. I didn't need to. Alexandria, it turned out, was a decent city for raccoons. "You want to go check it out?"

"I'm undecided. On the one hand, he's probably with this mysterious rival trying to take over the city, which means that going over there is basically guaranteed to get us involved with a mess that's none of our business. On the other, not knowing what the fight's about is going to drive me crazy."

I shrugged. "If you're that curious, I'm fine with heading over and finding out." I started walking in that direction.

Aiko had to hurry for a few steps to catch up. "Are you serious?" she asked, drawing even with me.

"Yup," I said. "See, I've heard the whole 'you're free to go and I won't coerce you into making a deal' line before. In my experience, they pretty much always find some way of roping me into it anyway. So I figure we might as well beat him to it and at least go check it out."

"That's an exceptionally cynical way to look at it," she commented.

"Not an inaccurate one, though."

"Nope. Oh look, he noticed us."

Sure enough, the guy had clearly realized that we were walking towards him deliberately, and not just coincidentally wandering in his direction. He looked like he wanted to bolt, but couldn't quite make up his mind.

I wasn't in the mood to chase him down. Especially not in a city I'd literally never set foot in before tonight. I was guessing that I was faster than him, but raw speed didn't necessarily guarantee success in chasing someone down. Not when he knew every twist and turn, every back street and hidey-hole around.

So as we got closer, I raised my hands to display that there were no weapons in them. I wasn't sure whether I had a language in common with him, but some messages are universal.

Aiko's was another of those. She had her carbine out and pointed in his general direction as we got closer. Which was probably sending a bit of mixed messages, but I thought we were getting the point across. We were here to talk, and unless he was faster than a bullet running wasn't the best option for him.

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"You come from the monster house," he said as we got within about fifteen feet. His English was rough, at best, but I could more or less figure out what he was saying.

"Yeah," I said. I was trying to get a grasp on him, and it was hard. He stank of chlorine, to such an extent that I was almost sneezing fifteen feet away from him. I couldn't remember having run into magic that smelled quite like that in the past. The closest I could think of were a couple of mages who'd had a note of bleach to the standard human disinfectant.

"They tell you to kill me?" he asked. He seemed fairly comfortable for a guy with a gun pointed at him.

I shrugged. "Maybe," I said. "The guy that owns that place wanted me to take out some enemy of his. He might have meant you; I'm not sure. I told him I wasn't interested."

"And he let you leave?"

I snorted. "For the moment. In my experience people like him always find a way to drag you back in somehow. But enough about me. I want to talk about you. More specifically, why you're so interested in what's going on over there."

"You no like the people there, yeah?" he said. "Us either. They are evil. So we work against them. Tonight we heard that they have many people here, so I come to watch and see if this is true."

"Okay," I said.

Then Aiko sneezed.

I knew what that meant. The reason that scent seemed odd was that it wasn't magic. He just actually smelled like chlorine.

On its own that wasn't such a bizarre thing. A lot of people smelled like chlorine, at least by my standards. My sense of smell was acute enough that I could sometimes pick it up even if someone just washed their clothes with chlorine bleach.

But this was something else. This guy stank like a swimming pool. It wasn't just me and Aiko. Normal humans would notice this stench. They'd probably give him a wide berth to avoid it.

There weren't very many reasons to smell that strongly of chlorine. Given that I knew he was here to deal with his enemies, the only one that really came to mind was poison gas. Chlorine was an old chemical weapon, but it was still nasty.

Except that it was an asphyxiant. Chlorine had other effects, but it was strongest by far when it got into your lungs.

And vampires didn't breathe.

The second I put that together, everything clicked into place. Just to be sure, though, I looked at him and said, "That gas won't work on the monsters."

He twitched, obviously caught by surprise. It took him a second to recover his composure. "It isn't for the monsters," he said after a few seconds.

Of course not. I almost laughed. "The humans in there are the victims," I said. "They don't deserve to die."

"They are food. The monsters will be less without them."

I nodded. "You set this up, didn't you?" I said conversationally. "You arranged this whole thing. Well played."

"I do not understand."

"Not talking to you," I murmured. "You might as well come out now. You've made your point."

There was no warning. No hint of movement. Lucius just *appeared* next to the man, and snapped his neck in an instant, with a flick of his fingers.

"Bit of a drama queen, aren't you?" I asked. "You told them to show up tonight?"

"Through certain channels," he confirmed. "They knew it was a trap, of course, but their responses are somewhat predictable."

I nodded. "How did you know I'd follow up on it?"

"The same reason that I know you can't tolerate this attack," he said. "I know you, Wolf. I know you better than you know yourself. You're as bad as Voltaire, in your own way. You may disapprove of the choices my guests make, but you'll defend to the death their right to make those choices. That goes for you as well, of course," he added, nodding to Aiko. "But I think we all knew that."

"And this is a typical attack for them?" I asked.

"This is the first time they've tried something quite like this," he said. "But it's very much in keeping with their general approach, yes."

I groaned. "Fine," I said. "Give me the info."

He smiled and handed me a sealed envelope. "I thought you might say that," he added unnecessarily. "Have a pleasant evening." He tipped a fiercely violet hat and disappeared as suddenly as he'd shown up.

"See?" I said to the corpse. "I told you they always find a way to pull you back in. Come on, we have a car to set on fire. I'm very definitely feeling the need for that pick-me-up right about now."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Twenty-One

"Unbelievable," I said, watching a car burn. It crackled rather nicely.

"What's that?" Aiko asked, warming her hands. It was just for show, of course; it wasn't that cold out.

"Since when do I *help* vampires?" I asked. "Yet here we are. Lucius is one of the biggest, baddest vampires out there, and I'm seriously planning how to deal with his enemies."

"You making any progress on that?" she asked.

I glowered at the papers he'd given me. "Not much," I admitted. "He wouldn't have bothered asking if it was easy. Plus they're human. I'm...a bit out of practice at fighting humans, honestly."

The files he'd given us had been fairly straightforward. The group he was competing with was almost entirely human, just a bunch of people with no real connection to the supernatural at all. But they were also aware of who he was, and what he was, and they weren't happy about it. Which wouldn't be a problem, except that they had a bizarrely good track record when it came to acting on that dislike.

They'd killed four vampires so far. That, really, was all that I needed to hear. Human beings did not kill vampires without either getting very lucky or having *something* special going for them. One or two I could explain away with luck, but four? That was a bit beyond what could be attributed to random chance. Even if they managed to hit all four of them in the daytime, it couldn't have been easy. In my experience a decent proportion of vampires were still conscious and lethal when the sun was up, and the rest tended to be paranoid. Even *finding* their lairs was usually a struggle, and they had plenty of protections in place once you made it in.

There were only three ways that I could think of for a group of plain vanilla humans to manage that feat. The first was that their targets had whatever members of the neighborhood they happened to be annoyed with at the time, rather than actual vampires. Given the source of the information, I thought I could safely rule that explanation out. The second was that the entire thing was an elaborate deception of some kind. Given the source of the information, that seemed remarkably likely, but it was hard to figure out the details, if it was.

The third explanation I could think of involved major weapons. Not just guns and stakes, but things like bombs and fires. The kind of weapons that would inflict serious collateral damage, especially in the middle of a major city.

Considering that I already had solid evidence to suggest that they were willing to use toxic gas on people, that sounded disturbingly plausible. By the time you were even *contemplating* that, you'd

taken a few steps beyond caring about collateral damage. I mean, I had some problems of that sort myself, and even I cringed at the thought of what they'd had planned.

Unfortunately, that didn't give me any better idea of how to track them down. Alexandria wasn't exactly a small town. Hunting down a group of humans in that crowd was nearly impossible.

Oh, it was hard to find other things in a city as well. A vampire or werewolf could hide very well indeed in a city of almost five million. It could be like finding a needle in a haystack. But this was more like finding a needle in a needlestack. It was just as hard to locate it, if not harder. More than that, though, even if I *did* find them, I'd have a hard time *knowing* it.

"I still wonder why he even needs us," Aiko said. "I mean, he can obviously handle this. They're just people, and he's...*not*."

"They're people who're expecting him, and have a proven track record of beating vampires," I pointed out. "There's a difference."

"Does it matter? He's like two thousand years old, right?"

"Yeah, and he didn't get to be that old by doing what people were expecting from him." I shook my head. "I'm sure he could take them head-on, but that isn't how he operates. It's not how his brain is wired, you know? He's all about manipulation, schemes, hitting people when they don't expect him. And he's paranoid. He must have been, to live this long. No, it makes perfect sense for him to want someone else to deal with this."

"Are you dealing with it, then?"

I shrugged. "I figured I'd ask you, see if you had anywhere else to be. But at the moment my inclination is to say yeah. Having Lucius owe us one is worth quite a bit. Particularly when the only thing we have to do to get it is kill some people that honestly sort of deserve it."

I felt a bit uncomfortable saying that. It was hard to admit that they *did* deserve it. They were trying to do the right thing, after all. In their own way, I really thought that they were trying to do the right thing. But the lengths they went to in that effort were too much.

"It is kind of nice to be working with the system for once," Aiko said meditatively. "I spent so long on the other side it almost feels weird."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Although it's not as nice as I thought it would be. It's not like we're actually getting any *help* out of it."

"Oh, I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I think we might be able to get *some* assistance. It's just a matter of knowing what to ask for."

"What do you have in mind?"

She told me.



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

I stared at her for a few seconds after she was finished. The only sound was the crackling of the flames.

"Well, it'll work," I said, after a few moments, my tone a mix of admiration and disgust.

"Of course it will," she said. "Just like old times, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's basically the first trick we ever pulled together," she said. "Almost brings a tear to your eye, doesn't it?"

"Not quite," I said. "Well, we might as well get started with setup. Tomorrow night we can do it."

"Yep," she said, grinning. I couldn't help but smile as well, and felt guilty for doing it. I shouldn't feel happy about this plan, but it was so slick I couldn't help it.

The next eighteen hours were a blur of frantic activity. I stopped in at Lucius's, where the party was pretty much over. The music had changed to ambient electronica, and quieted down; the lights were dimmer, and slower. The room had emptied out considerably, and most of the people who were left were out cold.

Lucius was still up in his office, though, looking out over the room. As expected, once I'd explained our plan he was more than happy to loan us a vamp. He seemed to find our scheme deeply amusing; he was still grinning as I left.

I hugged Aiko, and then took off for Italy. In Milan, I found Jacques and reminded him that that request for info on Lucius had been an urgent one. He griped about that, and more when I added the vampire hunters to the list, but a few thousand dollars shut him up.

Next I imported half a dozen jotnar and twice as many ghouls to Alexandria, along with a couple of mages that were rather important to my plan. Aiko's plan, really, but I was the one making it work. She was good at a lot of things, but logistics weren't really one of them. Snowflake came with, bouncing excitedly. She was looking forward to this.

Once they were settling into the city, I went back to Colorado Springs to manage my plans. I finally had those meetings that I'd been putting off. Selene had made appropriate reparations for the shop that Aiko had burned, but there was nothing quite like a personal touch with that sort of thing. The new wards needed their final checks, and I had to finish paying Alexander for his work. That entailed a long chat with Tindr, since Alexander's payment was the kind of thing that put a noticeable dent in even *my* budget.

Once that was done, it was time to go chat with the Guards and keep up my identity as Jonathan Keyes, better known as Shrike. Things weren't great there. Tawny was clearly out of sorts about the creature she'd summoned and which I'd arranged to have stick around, and she was *terrible* at keeping secrets. Everyone could feel that there was something uncomfortable between her and me. They came to some rather hilariously wrong conclusions about it, though. The general consensus seemed to be that she'd tried to hit on me and gotten nowhere. The comments on that topic got laughs from both of us.

That was damn near the only positive thing about that situation, though. David wasn't happy about how little time I'd been spending with the group, and even less happy when I told him that I had other work to do again the next day. The others didn't ask questions, but I could tell they were burning with curiosity about what was so urgent.

If the intention had been to set myself apart from the rest of the group, I was starting to think that I'd been too successful. There had already been a fair amount of tension there, but now it was a constant presence, impossible to ignore. More importantly, it was starting to reach the point of being a problem. Almost all of them could plausibly screw me over at this point, and with that relationship in its current state I wasn't sure they *wouldn't*.

It would be hard to change the first impression I'd made, though, and it was a delicate balancing act between the dangers of alienating them too much and all the reasons I'd wanted distance to begin with.

And I just didn't have the *time* right now. As soon as I'd made my excuses, it was back to my other crew to check on the thing from the Badlands, since Tawny had reminded me about her. I eventually found her sitting on the roof, seemingly asleep. The cold and snow didn't seem to bother her any more than me.

I didn't wake her. She looked bizarrely peaceful in her sleep, and I got the impression that it had been a long time since she last slept. I'd have felt bad disturbing her rest. And besides, I still had a lot to do. I confirmed the financial transfers Tindr wanted to make to settle out various debts, grabbed Kyi's latest report to read, and then started on the next portal.

Another couple of hours went by as I was picking up various useful tools from our castle in Romania, largely because I had to pause and make one of them. I'd used the last of my disposable alarm wards a while earlier, and forgotten to get more. The one I made was reverse engineered from that design, and it was at best a crude copy. But it was functional, and it wasn't like I cared how long it would last. If it went twelve hours without being used, I'd be quite surprised.

Then it was back to Egypt, where it was already well into morning. I did one more check to make sure that everyone knew the plan, then ate a solid five pounds of meat and crashed for a few hours in the house we'd taken over as our temporary headquarters. I didn't *need* to sleep, but I'd thrown quite a bit of magic around on all those portals, and sleep would help me recover faster. It also kept me from obsessing over whether every detail of the plan was right, which was a good thing.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Snowflake licked my face around an hour before dusk, waking me up. *Come on*, she said. *It's almost time to go.*

I groaned and pushed myself upright. "Fine," I growled, getting out of the couch. "Tell me there's food."

*Vigdis picked up some fast food. I think she probably bought them out of stock, actually.*

"Close enough," I said, tugging my armor on. I hadn't taken most of it off, of course. Sleeping in armor was all kinds of uncomfortable, but I'd cope.

Snowflake hadn't exaggerated the quantity of food involved. Jötnar and ghouls eat a lot, and there were a lot of them here. Add in the rest of us, and I wouldn't have been surprised if Vigdis had needed to bring along a minion to carry it all.

I practically inhaled two of the cheapest hamburgers I'd ever laid eyes on, and grabbed a third as I headed out to survey the scene and make sure it was ready.

I had to admit, I was impressed with how well it had been arranged. The alley was already narrow, but carefully placed heaps of garbage cut the space down further. There were two snipers with a good line of sight, though I could only see them through the eyes of a raven. The entrances to the alley were rigged to collapse on trigger, leaving anyone inside nowhere to run. The bombed-out shop across from the house was still boarded up, but it was mostly for show. From the inside, the door would open smooth and easy.

We were ready.

The vampire showed up about half an hour after dusk. It wasn't Lucius, or anyone like him. This one could have passed for a living teenager with minimal effort, and while appearances could be deceiving, in this case I thought it wasn't too inaccurate. He'd have sent one of his weakest minions for this.

"I'm guessing that Lucius told you to follow my orders, and that you'd die horribly if you failed him," I said, standing in the street outside our carefully prepared alley.

The vampire grinned. "Good guess," he said.

"If she gets hurt, I'll do worse," I said.

"How cute," Aiko said dryly, pushing me away. "Come on, let's do this thing." She grabbed the vampire's hand and simpered at me.

I snorted and walked into the alley, doing my best to make it look like I was throwing a temper tantrum. The vampire leaned into Aiko, nuzzling her neck. *Not* biting, if he knew what was good for him. I hadn't been bluffing.

I walked into the house and settled in to wait with the rest, wrapping shadows around us. The others layered on their own concealments, of whatever sort, until we were practically undetectable.

The same as our first trick, sort of. Except turned inside out. Way back when, we'd used Aiko as bait, counting on our enemies' nature as predators to drive them to attack vulnerability.

This time we were counting on...well, more or less the opposite of that.

I almost felt bad about it. Almost.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Twenty-Two

It didn't take long for the target to show up. Or *targets*, more accurately. There were four of them. They were all human, or else they were very good facsimiles of human. They looked human, they smelled human, they moved human. There were three males and one female, ranging from around eighteen to a solid fifty in age.

In spite of everything, I had to respect them. It takes a lot of courage, as a plain old human being, to go up against a vampire. They clearly understood the danger. I could see the fear in the way they carried themselves. They *knew* what they were letting themselves in for.

And they were willing to do it anyway. For the sake of a stranger.

Those were brave people. A bit dumb, but brave.

The oldest of them, a grizzled man who looked like he'd lived through more than one war, raised a scrap of paper and began to recite something in Arabic. A prayer, most likely.

The vampire recoiled at the sound, and it wasn't faking. Genuine expressions of faith were uncomfortable to vampires, even painful, and I supposed that theoretically they could be lethal. It was a complex reaction, one that had a lot to do with how malevolent spirits could be warded away with similar expressions of faith. A spirit was repelled because it was a creature of thought and meaning, and the meaning being expressed was one that was antithetical to its nature. It was something like acids and bases; the one opposed the other, potentially canceling it if there was enough of it.

Vampires weren't spirits. But they were utterly dependent on their stolen life force, and their grasp on that life force was fragile. That was the root of many of their weaknesses, really. Anything that challenged that grasp was something they would instinctively avoid. It weakened them, and it could potentially kill them. That was why they couldn't tolerate the sunlight, it was why they couldn't enter a home without invitation, and it was why they were repelled by faith.

Against, say, Lucius I doubted this would have done anything. He was old enough, and powerful enough, that a great many things that worked on lesser vampires wouldn't do much to him.

But this guy was a newbie. And when the man presented that scrap of paper—a written prayer, perhaps?—and started reciting the words of his genuine, strongly held faith, the vampire flinched. He began retreating into the alleyway, carrying Aiko with him.

I watched that part carefully. I really hadn't been bluffing earlier. I was sure that Lucius could be enormously cruel to those that displeased him, but I was also sure that Loki could trump him any day, and if this vamp hurt Aiko I fully intended to hand him over to the mad god. I was certain that Loki would be overjoyed to take him.

But it looked like he was playing his assigned role. Aiko *looked* like she was scared and in pain—and she sure as hell played her role up, shrieking and kicking—but the reality was that he was holding her quite gently. It was harmless.

The vampire hunters bit. They bit *hard*. The four of them rushed into the alley after the vamp, calling out in Arabic. I didn't understand them—I had no grasp at all on that language, though I'd at least heard enough from Aiko to recognize it—but it wasn't hard to figure out what they might be saying.

"Showtime," I said, returning my consciousness to my own body. There were some nods and murmurs as the order was passed down the line.

A few seconds later, someone cut a rope. The mechanisms holding the walls in place disengaged. I could hear the buildings collapse, cutting off the alley with several tons of debris. It was a fairly impressive crash; we'd basically collapsed large chunks of the buildings on either side into the alleyway. Not half bad, considering how little time they'd had to arrange the trap.

I heard the shouting a moment later, people crying out in Arabic. Or something like it. Honestly, my ability to recognize the language was probably nowhere near reliable, and I hadn't checked what they spoke in Egypt. I wasn't staying, after all. If I had my way, after tonight I'd never see this city again.

Once upon a time, I'd have kicked the door open, for the sheer drama of it. Not today. I didn't feel dramatic. I felt old, and tired. So I opened the door quietly and stepped out into the alley. I didn't have a weapon drawn. I didn't feel the need. This wasn't a fight. Four of them, a dozen of us, and they were the weakest ones present. We had positioning, we had preparation. Hell, we had *snipers*. That alone could have won this fight, I was guessing. Everyone else was overkill on a grand scale.

Which was my usual approach. But...usually it was against something where overkill was *needed*. These were just people.

I'd always thought of myself as the underdog, with reason. This was the first time I could think of that it had quite occurred to me that wasn't necessarily true, anymore. Oh, against someone like Lucius, sure. Measured against Loki or Coyote, I didn't even *register*.

But here and now? With these people?

*They* were the scrappy underdog. And I was the big bad wolf.

The vampire tossed me a mocking salute as I stepped out. Then he jumped, easily grabbing the edge of the roof and pulling himself up. You could do that, when you were that strong and you weighed that little.

The vampire hunters recoiled from me, Then the doors opened behind them, and more of us came out from there. My people spread out in a loose ring, enclosing them with me.

Aiko walked over to me, grinning widely. Snowflake stepped up a moment later to stand on my other side.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"Why?" the old man said. "Why do you do this? You are not one of them." His tone made it almost a question.

"No," I agreed.

"Then why? Why would you defend them?"

I sighed. "It's complicated," I said. "I don't...*disagree* with what you're doing, exactly. But I'm not comfortable with some of the details of how you're doing it."

"Neither am I," he said frankly. "But sometimes we must do things we do not like to achieve a worthy goal."

"I know what that's like," I said. "I guess in a way that's what I'm doing here."

He nodded. "The beast sent you."

"The beast?"

"Their leader here. You were seen leaving his home."

"Ah," I said, understanding. "Lucius is the name I know him by."

He gestured dismissively, the meaning very clear. *It doesn't matter.* "Why do you help him?"

I thought about it for a minute, trying to think of how to respond. He didn't seem inclined to rush me. I could feel Snowflake getting impatient, but outwardly she was utterly still.

"I'm tired," I said at last. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I like fighting. I like the thrill of it, the rush. I always have. But...I guess I've gotten tired of fighting for no reason. It seems like I've spent a lot of time fighting with people when in the end we really didn't have much to fight about. And I feel like Lucius and I are probably in that category."

"He eats people." The man said it flatly, without emotion.

"Granted you know him better than I do," I said. "But from what I've seen, he mostly eats people that want to be eaten."

There was no response to that.

"Don't get me wrong," I added. "I don't *like* it. I don't like him, what he does, pretty much anything about him. I'm just not entirely convinced that he's so awful that eliminating him is worth doing no matter what it costs."

"His being hurts others," one of the younger men said. "People more than you see there." His English wasn't as good, though it was still more or less understandable.

"I could say the same about how you were planning on removing him," I said. "That kind of thing isn't exactly a surgical strike. It would hit people beyond who you were aiming for."

"True," the older man said. He sighed heavily. "It can be hard to know the right thing to do."

"I know that feeling," I said wryly. "I'm guessing you aren't going to show me to your leader."

"No," he confirmed.

I nodded. Fair enough. I hadn't been planning on it. They'd left a trail coming here, I was guessing. Out of the people here, someone could follow it. I was fairly confident of that.

No need to tell them that, though. "Sorry about this, then," I said, drawing a knife. "It's nothing personal." There was a soft, whispering chorus as a great many other weapons also left sheathes.

And then I heard a sort of crunching, grating noise.

"Oh, no way," I said, turning towards the barrier of rubble. "You've got to be kidding me."

There were more noises, and it quickly became clear that they were not, in fact, kidding me. The improvised wall of stone and wood was reshaping itself.

After only a handful of seconds, the last pieces shifted, forming a clear path through. It wasn't built into an arch or anything like that. No, there was just an open aisle straight through the rubble, like there were invisible walls holding it open. It made me think of Moses parting the water. Except it was happening right in front of me, on a rather smaller scale.

Three people walked through. In the lead was a familiar face in a cheap suit. Magic sparked at his fingertips, something so subtle that it was almost impossible to detect. I didn't recognize either of the people with him. One, a woman with long dark hair, had an expression of intense concentration on her face. I was guessing she was holding their path open. The last one was a much older guy with flinty eyes and a rather impressive mustache.

"Hello," the mage in the suit said. "Seems we're just in time."

I growled. "What is it with you guys?" I asked, as the people *I'd* brought began to subtly shift position, focusing most of their attention on the newcomers. "I mean, seriously. What is your *problem*?"

"We've made this very clear," he said, stepping through into the clear space. The magic holding the rubble out of the way snapped off a moment later, letting it collapse back into place.

"We want you to face justice for your crimes," he continued, once the noise from the settling rubble faded. "And, in this case, we seem to be just in time to stop you from adding to the list. You know, Wolf, I'm disappointed. My opinion of you was never the highest, but I really thought better of you than to protect vampires."



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"I'm not protecting vampires," I said quietly. "They were going to gas a residential neighborhood. I've got the freaking chlorine."

"I seem to recall you doing something similar," he commented. "Different choice of weapons, of course, but you do have a history of collateral damage."

I opened my mouth, then paused. I...didn't have much of a retort for that.

"You've got a point there," I admitted.

"Not really," Aiko said. "I mean, first off that vamp was actually, you know, doing things. There were actual reasons to stop her."

"I did try to negotiate with her first," I added. "For years. She just wasn't willing to listen."

The mage snorted. "You always have an excuse, don't you?" he said scornfully.

"No, you know what?" I said. "Screw you. I did the best I could, within the limits of my ability. Including my ability to figure out the best thing to do. And if I'm stopping other people from making the same mistakes I did, it's not because I'm a hypocrite. It's because I've realized that my best wasn't good enough."

"How touching," he said. "We're still going to kill you, though. Pretty words don't make up for all the things you've done."

"Funny thing about that," I said. "You didn't seriously think that we'd triggered *all* of the traps before we came out, did you?"

On cue, one of the housecarls hit the wall, *hard*. Things broke, including the only really solid support left in that wall.

I wasn't anything like an engineer. So I didn't really understand how this system worked. But I knew the result. The rest of the building was stable, sort of, but it was only stable because it was leaning on that pillar. Knock it out, and the weight it had been supporting would fall on another part of the wall—one that wasn't able to bear it. Like falling dominoes, as each portion of the wall collapsed in turn it would place more and more of a burden on the rest.

End result? After that first hit, things started going to pieces. And it was only a short time before the whole building collapsed into the alleyway.

And on the other side, the other building was rigged in the exact same way.

The really funny thing? When I'd first heard that there was a minor wizard in town who specialized in setting buildings up to collapse in highly controlled ways, I hadn't thought she'd be worth much. Which, normally, she wasn't—I hadn't even hired her, really, because her talents were just too circumstantial to have on as a permanent position.

Just now, though, it was rather a useful knack to have on hand.

I started running, and the rest of my crew did too.

It wouldn't kill them, of course. That force mage had held off a sizable proportion of this weight for the sake of that dramatic walkway, after all. I was confident that she'd be able to at least keep this off them long enough to get out.

But it would take all her focus to do so. And unless I missed my guess, she'd only been able to do that because the guy in the suit had been helping. Alexander had said that one of his abilities would be to increase the effective strength of other mages, and that would explain why I'd felt his magic as well.

If those two were busy, that left just the other guy to attack us. The three of them together was enough of a threat that I'd rather not chance it, but one? That I thought I could handle.

Apparently he agreed with me on that, because he didn't bother us as we ran. We scrambled up over the barrier at the other end of the alley and kept running. After a few minutes, when we were pretty thoroughly lost in the alleys of the city, I finally slowed from a headlong sprint.

The nice thing about being lost is that is that it's hard for anyone *else* to figure out where you are logically. I mean, if you don't have a clue, it's hard for anyone else to. I supposed they might have a way to follow our tracks directly, but I doubted it. If they did, they'd have been causing me a hell of a lot more trouble than this.

I did a quick headcount, and came up with everyone being present and accounted for. Good. The problem with that panic button had always been that it had a serious potential to go wrong. If someone was slow or unlucky, it could turn deadly very, very quickly.

But we'd gotten lucky.

*I'm almost disappointed, Snowflake said to me. I was hoping we'd at least get some fun out of that.*

I snorted. *Don't worry, I said. Something tells me we'll be having plenty of that kind of fun pretty soon. For the moment, I'm fine with catching our breath.*

After a couple minutes, I was starting to think about where to go next. It wasn't obvious. On the one hand, I thought I could probably go back and sort out that trail. I could follow it back to the vampire hunters'...whatever they had. I wasn't sure what to call it. But on the other hand, those mages were back there as well. I did *not* want to pick a fight with them. There was no way that would end well.

Before I could decide what to do, someone poked his head into the alley. It took me a second to recognize the eldest of the vampire hunters from earlier.

"Did you mean what you said earlier?" he asked.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

I thought for a second, trying to remember whether I'd lied. I couldn't think of any, so I said, "Yeah. I did."

He nodded. "Good," he said. "I will take you to speak to our leader."

"Why'd you change your mind?"

He smiled a little. "I am tired of fighting for no reason," he said.

I chuckled a little. "Touché," I said. "Lead on, then."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The contrast between Lucius's house and the vampire hunters' headquarters was striking.

It was a small, simple building. A rundown cube of a place, it looked like it might be older than I was. The neighborhood was a match for the building, quietly impoverished and faded. The people looked tired, worn down. Somewhere a radio played an old jazz song, quiet and distant, contrasting with the buzzing of flies.

It was a warm night. A very warm night.

My guide pushed the door open without knocking. It groaned quietly as we stepped inside, and he turned on a light. It was a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Everything about this place felt...old. Tired. Snowflake looked around distastefully, and sneezed from the smell of dust.

The old man opened a door and led us down a flight of stairs. They were bare concrete, starting to crumble at the edges. There were so many stains that they didn't have distinct outlines any more, blending together into a single mass instead.

At the bottom of the stairs, he opened another wooden door and we walked into the basement.

It was a kitchen. Linoleum floor, wooden furniture, another bare bulb for light.

"Sit, please," our guide said, gesturing at the chairs. There were only three of them. "I will bring him." He walked off down a narrow, slightly crooked hallway.

I glanced at Aiko, then shrugged and sat in one of the chairs. It creaked rather alarmingly under the weight, but didn't actually collapse. Aiko had looked like she was planning on sitting on my lap, but she changed her mind at the noise and sat on the floor instead, resting her head on my thigh. Snowflake sprawled on the floor next to her, and she scratched the husky's ears absently.

It was a few minutes before our guide came back. He had another guy leaning on him, an even older one. This man must have been well past seventy, and he carried the years heavily. His back was stooped, and even with the help he walked slowly, with a pronounced limp. The other man lowered him gently into a chair, then stood behind him, leaving the last chair empty.

"My name is Rafi," the older man said. He said it like it had weight, like it *mattered*. Unusual in a human.

"My name is Winter," I replied, in a similar tone. It felt...more solemn than most introductions.

"Winter," he repeated. "It suits you. It wouldn't suit me, I think. My joints ache when it gets cold."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"I wouldn't have thought it would get that cold here."

"No," Rafi said. "Not for you." He looked at Aiko. "And you?"

"Aiko," she said. Her tone was...slightly chilly. Not hostile, but less cheerful than usual.

He nodded. "And the hound?"

*Please tell me you're going to say something funny,* Snowflake said. *Come on, you know you can do it.*

"Her name is Snowflake," I said.

*Boring as usual,* she sighed. She shifted a little, pushing her head into Aiko's hand.

"Snowflake," Rafi said. "You're a cold man, Winter."

"I wasn't always. But I've found that life will make you one, if you let it."

He nodded. "True enough. Something to drink?"

"Only if it isn't too much trouble," I said. I wasn't thirsty, but hospitality demanded a certain response. Refusing outright was at least as rude as taking too much.

Not that it probably mattered. Those rules mostly only mattered when you were dealing with particularly traditional, usually very old creatures, and Rafi smelled as human as anyone. But you couldn't be too trouble.

He nodded. "Something to drink for our guests," he said. The man lurking behind him walked to the ancient, battered refrigerator in the corner and started rummaging around in it.

"Tell me, Winter," Rafi said. "What brings you to my home?"

"I hear that you're fighting with vampires for...control, I suppose, is the word...of the city. And I'd like it if we could find a way to settle things peacefully."

Rafi sighed heavily, and seemed to age ten years as he did. His face fell, and his shoulders bent further. "And if we don't?" he asked wearily.

I paused. "I don't want to hurt you," I said. "But I think we both know that this fight can't end well for your side."

He nodded sadly. "That's true," he said.

The other guy returned a moment later, setting glasses of a frothy green liquid in front of us. He set Aiko's on the table in front of me, after a slight hesitation.

I picked my glass up and sniffed at it. It smelled very strongly of lemon and mint, enough that I almost sneezed. I picked it up and sipped at it, but didn't actually drink. This wasn't from fear of poison—I was hard enough to poison that it was a relatively minor concern, for the most part, and I was pretty sure these glasses had all been poured from the same pitcher. Not a perfect guarantee, but enough that I wasn't that scared.

No, I just wasn't sure whether I wanted to taste it. Not if it smelled like that.

Rafi picked up his glass and drank with apparent enjoyment, then set it down with a soft *click*. "What brings you here, Winter?" he asked. "Truly. Why are you on his side?"

"Who says I'm on anyone's side?" I countered. "See, I don't think that 'sides' necessarily has to be a relevant concept here. Why are you fighting him?"

"He takes our young people," Rafi said.

"From what I've seen, they want to be taken," I said.

"Many of them don't come back," he said. "Many men and women have gone, and not returned."

"Why would they?" I asked quietly. "Lucius has the world to offer them. And, meaning no offense, Rafi, but you don't. Why would they stay here, given the choice of everything they want if they leave?"

Rafi looked like he'd been struck. He flinched away from me, then stared at the table. "We need them," he said quietly. "If they leave, we have nothing. There will be nothing left of us. No one left when we are gone."

"You know," Aiko said, "it's funny. Lucius is almost two thousand years old. But you're the ones that are terrified of change."

He started to say something, but she interrupted him. "No, let me finish," she said. "He's two thousand years old, but you're the one that's trying to cling to the past. If people don't want to follow in your footsteps, taking away their way out isn't going to solve anything. At best, it's covering up the problem for a little while."

Rafi didn't look much happier about that. "Some of them die," he said.

"Everybody dies," I said. "Now look, Rafi, I have a question before we go any further. Lucius says you killed a few of his vamps. You as a group, I mean, not you personally. Is that true?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Nice," I said. "But, uh...how?"

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"There is value in the past, whatever your friend says. We have fought vampires before. We remember how."

"I thought they were European."

Rafi's lips twitched. "Two thousand years is a long time."

I snorted. "Fair enough," I said. "So tell me, Rafi, why are you lying to me?"

"Excuse me?"

I sighed. "Come on. I'm not dumb. Reading about how to take down a vampire in an old book wouldn't cut it. For one or two, sure. They've got enough weaknesses that if you know how to capitalize on them you could manage a couple. But we're talking about going up against an organized, numerous group, one with plenty of resources and minions. We're talking about going up against *Lucius*. He's freaking ancient, and even when he was human he was a scary guy. If it was just a matter of you 'remembering how,' he'd have crushed you."

"Perhaps you underestimate us."

"It's possible," I admitted easily. "That's one of the explanations I've come up with. You might be as far from human as anyone in this room, and just better at hiding it. You might be something that can go toe-to-toe with Lucius and walk away from it. That's the first possibility."

He smiled a little. "I don't think that's it."

"Me either," I agreed. "You don't seem the type. Second, you might genuinely think that you're winning, but be wrong. I could see him manipulating you like that. Maybe he's using you as a tool to get rid of some undesirable people, or this whole thing is just a game to him."

"I don't like that idea much."

"Understandable, and it's got some holes, as well. Particularly the fact that he's offering me a fairly meaningful payment for removing you from play, and a man like Lucius doesn't do things without a reason. So that leaves the third option. You're what you seem, but there's someone else pulling the strings to make you a legitimate threat."

Rafi shifted uncomfortably. "It is...possible that we have received some assistance," he admitted.

I grinned. "Here we go," I said. "From whom?"

"That would be us," a familiar voice said from the stairs.

I turned and, as expected, saw a rather predictable trio at the top of the stairs. The man in the suit looked untouched, as did the guy whose abilities were still an unknown to me. The force mage was obviously starting to get tired, but she also looked excited, almost thrilled.

"I was wondering when you'd turn up," I said. "Come on, have a seat. Only one chair left, I'm afraid, but your friends can stand. You can have a glass of...whatever this is."

"We could kill you where you sit," he said, not moving.

"Probably," I agreed. "But who knows? I might get lucky. And Rafi's sitting right there. Whatever you're planning, I don't think you can guarantee that he wouldn't end up as collateral damage."

"You think using him as a human shield will protect you from me?" he asked.

"You?" I shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. I haven't been able to get much of a read on you. Your friends, though? Yeah, I think it will. They think they're the good guys here, and good guys don't murder innocent old men."

He didn't glance at his associates. But they did glance at each other, and we all knew that I was right.

"That's a bit of a low blow," the man in the suit commented. "You really are scum."

"You're trying to kill me," I said patiently. "And I'm disinclined to let you. If that makes me scum, then I'll wear the title with pride. Now come on, take a seat. We've got a lot to talk about."

He grimaced, and picked his way slowly down the stairs. The other two followed him, looking a bit uncertain.

"A drink for our new guests," I said, looking at the vampire hunter. He, in turn, looked at Rafi, who nodded. Thus satisfied, the vampire hunter went and started getting more glasses of that green drink.

"So what are your names, anyway?" I asked. "Don't think I've caught them."

"What, so you can use it against us?" the force mage said. She was standing behind the chair, as I'd suggested, but she was fidgeting, shifting her weight, practically vibrating. I got the impression that she wasn't much of a one for standing still.

"Mostly I just want something more convenient than 'hey, you,'" I said dryly. "Here, I'll go first. I'm Winter, and this is Aiko, and Snowflake is napping. Our host is Rafi. Now you go."

"My name is Jason," the guy in the suit said. He seemed vaguely amused. "My friends are Reese and Sarah."

"Nice to meet you," I said. "So how about you explain why you keep trying to kill me when I've repeatedly explained that I'm really not interested in fighting you guys?"

"We've been over this," Jason said. "You need to face justice for your crimes. And if that means that we need to take matters into our own hands, so be it."



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"You keep saying things like that. But I haven't actually heard what *crimes* you're so upset by. Please, enlighten us. What have I done to offend you so freaking much?"

"You say that while you're working for a vampire?" Jason shook his head. "Open your eyes, Wolf."

"We were just going over this with Rafi, here," I said. "Maybe you can explain it better than he could. Just what has Lucius done to merit summary execution for everyone that has anything to do with him?"

"He's a parasite," Reese said suddenly. "A leech."

"Yeah," I said. "I used to feel that way, too. But what do you think will happen if you kill him? You think the problems will just go away? That killing Lucius will somehow eliminate vampires? That it will eliminate the things that let him get so much power in the first place?"

"It's not about that," Reese said. "It's about doing the right thing. Whatever it costs."

"See, that's the thing that really pisses me off," I said cheerfully. "It's not that things are shitty. It's that the people who are trying to fix them usually end up making them worse. Because of that attitude, right there. Sometimes things aren't black and white."

"And sometimes they *are*," Reese said. "It's easy to choose the lesser evil. But if you do, you're compromising with it. And evil's never satisfied with a compromise."

I rolled my eyes. "And if you *don't* choose the lesser evil, you'll usually end up with the greater by default," I said. "Look, I'll make this simple, since you guys seem to be allergic to complexity. Does anyone in this room have a comprehensive plan for what to do after killing Lucius, which they can plausibly carry out? One which *doesn't* plunge Alexandria into chaos that will ruin more lives than he ever would."

The room was very, very quiet.

"All right, then," I said, clapping my hands. "That's settled, then. If you come up with one I'll be glad to hear you out, and I might reconsider my stance on the whole topic. But for the moment, keeping Lucius alive and keeping his organization intact does less harm than the alternative. So. Next complaint?"

Aiko giggled a little. Snowflake was still and silent, though I could feel that she was ready to move at a moment's notice. No surprise there. We both knew how this would end.

"You've killed a lot of people," Sarah said.

"Yeah," I said. "Most of them deserved it."

"Most?"

I shrugged. "I've made mistakes. I don't think I've ever denied that."

"Enough of this," Jason cut in. "We all know where this is going. You killed Guide."

I sighed. "Yes," I said. "I did. While saving all of our asses from a nigh-apocalyptic threat. Doesn't that count for anything? Some kind of amnesty?"

"Not with us," Jason said quietly.

"So you won't listen to the voice of reason," I said. "Even though I've repeatedly offered you the chance to just walk away, you won't let this end with anything other than a fight."

"No."

"And there's nothing I could say or do to change your mind, short of killing you?"

"No." Jason's voice was quiet and very, very final. Reese and Sarah didn't look as certain, but they didn't argue.

"Okay," I said. "So you know, I've been recording this whole conversation. I'm guessing a recording of what you just said is enough to make a solid case for self-defense. So next time I see any of you, I'm going to be trying to kill you. Nothing personal on my part, but if I leave you running around, sooner or later you'll get lucky. You might as well head out now, then. I don't see this conversation going anywhere."

"That's where you're mistaken," Jason said, smiling broadly. It wasn't a very nice smile. "You see, Wolf, we didn't come alone. Benjamin's been waiting outside compiling constructs while we've been talking. He must have a small army of them ready by now. So no, we aren't leaving. We don't need to postpone this fight any longer."

"How rude to bring it into Rafi's house," I said, shaking my head. "Sorry about that, my host. Oh, and there are also two glaring oversights in your plan. First off, you think you're the only one who thought to bring a small army and have them wait outside? Not even remotely."

Jason nodded, like he'd expected that. "And the second?"

I grinned. "You morons," I said, "were actually dumb enough to get within our reach."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Snowflake was, unsurprisingly, the fastest to react. Almost before I'd finished talking, she was lunging forward, clamping her teeth around Sarah's leg and pulling. I could clearly hear the bones breaking, and the force mage hit the ground screaming. She tried to scramble away, and failed miserably. Snowflake was a lot better at this game than she was.

She could have blasted the husky away, of course. A solid hit from her would be enough to pancake any of us. But she was having a bit of a hard time concentrating while having her shin split open like a soup bone. Some people could have focused through the pain. Hell, some people wouldn't even really *notice* the pain. It's all a matter of scale, really.

But for her? It was more than enough to disrupt her focus.

I was, however, a bit surprised when Jason was the next fastest off the line. He stood, fast enough to knock his chair over, and slipped around the table to grab Rafi by the shoulder. "Don't move," he said, producing a narrow dagger and laying it against the old man's throat. "Or I will cut."

I shrugged and stood as well, a little more slowly. "You do realize I came here planning to kill him myself, right?" I said. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I'd *rather* he not die. I've got nothing against him. But it's not the end of the world if it happens. If you seriously think that's going to scare me off, you're deluding yourself."

He grimaced. "You're a real piece of work, aren't you?" he said. He had to almost shout to be heard over Sarah screaming.

"Hey," I said, calling Tyrfin and stepping away from the table to give myself room to move. "I'm not the one with my knife at his throat. That's all on you, buddy."

"Stop it," Reese said suddenly. He stepped up next to Jason and pulled the knife away. "We aren't fucking killing him. *Jesus*."

One of the shadowy hounds bounded down the stairs a few seconds later, oozing black slime from numerous injuries. Aiko shot it a couple more times and it collapsed. Meanwhile, our first guide tried to pull Sarah away from Snowflake, but stopped when her screaming hit a new pitch. When you're in that kind of situation, being pulled away from the person biting your leg off is going to feel a hell of a lot worse before it feels better.

It was funny, in a way. For being such dedicated killers, willing to go up against terrifying monsters, none of these people seemed very *good* at it.

More constructs started down the stairs. These looked more humanoid, bipedal shapes cobbled together out of darkness and magic. They weren't in much better shape, though. There were bullet

holes in them, and gashes, a couple of them missing limbs. They kept coming, though, almost falling over each other in their eagerness to get at us. It was a little grotesque, actually.

"You know, I'm curious," I said. "Did you ever actually care about fighting the vampires, or was it all an elaborate setup to put me in a vulnerable position?"

Jason broke off glaring at Reese to glare at me instead. "You have a high opinion of your own importance," he said, letting Rafi go. The old man stumbled away from them.

I shrugged. "Hey, you're the ones that keep going to ridiculous efforts to start fights with me. I don't think it's an unreasonable conclusion to reach."

"You are not the only person who thinks he's above justice," Reese said quietly.

"Not much of an answer," I said. "But I guess it's close enough. Pretty funny, though, that we'd run into each other again. Almost seems like somebody went out of their way to arrange it."

Jason smiled a little bit, and nodded slightly, the gesture of a fencer acknowledging a touch. No surprises there, but it was nice to have the confirmation.

I wondered whether these people realized how hard he was playing them. It seemed fairly obvious to me. Magic reflects personality, after all, and Jason's magic was all about manipulating other people, using them as tools, making them stronger and weaker to suit his purpose. That said a lot about who he was.

I kept stepping around the table until I was standing next to Snowflake. I nudged her and she moved out of the way. I could feel a little reluctance from her, but it was minor in comparison to her eagerness. The game was just beginning for her.

Sarah struggled to sit up, gathering her magic. I was guessing she was planning on the kind of attack that could level a building.

She didn't manage to finish before Tyrfing caught her under the sternum. The sword punched up into her vitals, and she slumped back to the ground. It seemed pretty staggeringly unlikely that she'd survive the wound.

I shoved it in further and twisted it before pulling it back out, regardless. I hadn't lived this long by leaving things at unlikely.

"You bastard," Reese said, staring.

"Hey, you started this," I said. "You guys straight-up admitted that you'd only stop if I killed you. What, are you surprised that I *did*?"

He didn't answer, just stared at me some more. I could smell him doing something, a dry, grey sort of magic, with a bit of extra *zing* from Jason's involvement. The world started to lose color and go fuzzy, and my vision narrowed down to a tunnel.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Then the room was violently shaken, throwing all of us to the ground. I didn't hear the *boom*, but when I came back to myself my ears were ringing.

"Oh, yeah," I said, shaking my head to clear it and pushing myself back to my feet. "I may have told my people to just blow up the building if they found your construct guy. Benjamin, you said his name was?"

"You're a madman," Reese said.

I rolled my eyes and offered Aiko a hand up. She took it, and by some miracle there wasn't even a joy buzzer involved. "You say that like it's news," I said. "It kinda makes me wonder about you. Like, what did you *think* I was?"

"Reese," Jason said. "Portal. Now."

"We can't just leave," Reese protested.

"We're outmaneuvered," Jason said. "And we're losing."

"But Benjamin—"

"Is almost certainly dead already," Jason said bluntly. "And we'll join him unless we get out. *Now*, Reese."

The other man didn't look pleased at all, but he threw up a portal. With Jason's support, it only took him a few seconds, and then the two of them vanished.

I didn't bother trying to chase or interrupt them. I was fast, but getting across the room in time to stop them from leaving wasn't a thing that could plausibly happen. We'd taken out a couple of them, at least. That explosion had probably been plenty strong enough to kill Benjamin. I'd had the housecarls use demolitions explosives. If the blast wave hadn't killed the man, the collapsing building had probably finished the job.

"So he can't make portals himself," I commented. "Interesting." I sheathed Tyrfing and walked over to help Rafi up, as well. The old man had to lean on me fairly heavily to keep his balance.

"Well, that was fun," Aiko said. "Over faster than I expected, though. I was guessing they'd be a little more reluctant to run away."

I nodded. "Yeah. The boss has a pretty different attitude to the whole thing than the rest, though. I'd bet he was already after me, and he found them while he was looking for tools."

"They seemed like tools, all right," Aiko agreed, nudging Sarah's corpse with her foot. It didn't even have the good grace to lurch upright and moan dramatically. "Sorry about the mess, by the way."

"It isn't your fault," Rafi said, settling back into his chair with a wince.

"Isn't it?" the other man demanded. "They would have killed you, Rafi!"

"It was not Winter with a knife against my throat," he said dryly. "That position was reserved for our former friends. And it would be unreasonable to expect him to risk his life to save mine."

"Were they actually helping you?" I asked, also sitting down. Aiko took the third chair, now that it seemed unlikely that anyone else would be joining us. Snowflake seemed a little disappointed as she went back to dozing on the floor, but not terribly. Even a little bit of action was enough to make her happy.

Rafi shrugged. "Some," he said. "Not directly, but in small ways, yes. Information, or assistance with travel. Simple things."

"Interesting," I said. "Um. Where were we when they showed up?"

"Trying to figure out how our friends here managed to kill multiple vampires," Aiko said helpfully.

"Oh, right," I said.

"Wait," the nameless vampire hunter interrupted. "You cannot mean to go back to that. Not after...." He gestured vaguely, apparently unable to convey what he meant.

"Yes," I said patiently. "I can. I doubt they're coming back, not after they got their asses handed to them *that* badly. And if I stopped having a conversation every time some moron tried to kill me, I'd never get anything done. So what do you say, Rafi, are you ready to start talking terms?"

"Terms," he said. "What do you mean?"

"Well, here's the thing," I said. "You can't actually fight Lucius. I mean, you're...so far out of your depth you're not even in the same freaking *ocean*, there. You aren't even equipped to fight me. You sure as hell don't have a prayer against him. Especially now that your benefactors are pretty definitely gone."

He nodded. He didn't look happy about it, but he nodded.

"So," I said. "Terms. I'd rather not massacre you if I can help it. If at all possible, a compromise is a much better way to resolve this. So the question becomes what elements that compromise needs to have for you to consider it."

"I want people to stop dying," he said.

"Everyone dies sometime," Aiko replied quietly.

Rafi sighed. "I know," he said. "But there must be something that can be done. I have seen so many young people die."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"Okay," I said. "Let's stop and work through that in more detail. From everything I've heard, you aren't that concerned about Lucius lurking in dark alleys and pouncing on unsuspecting passerby. The problem here is that so many people are going to these psycho parties of his. Is that about right?"

Rafi nodded tightly. "Sometimes people are attacked. Foreigners, mostly. But that is...minimal in comparison."

"Right. Well, let's break it down further. The problem isn't that people go, it's that they don't come back. Now, I can't make these events not kill people. It looked like Lucius was already putting some kind of limit on things, but there's always going to be an element of danger to it."

"Of course there is," Aiko said. "That's the whole point. Nobody goes to a party like that to feel *safe*."

I nodded. "Yeah. And I can't stop people from wanting that, either. Some people are always going to want to engage in risky or self-destructive behavior. That's a fact of life. I could maybe ask Lucius to tone that risk down a little, but I can already guess what his response would be, and it isn't likely to be a positive one."

"You make this all sound very simple," Rafi commented. "Like it's just a part of normal life."

"Well, it kind of *is*," Aiko pointed out. "That's the whole point. These people happen to be using vampires instead of needles, but doing things that hurt your body because they make you feel good isn't *new*."

"Keeping things on topic," I said, "that's one group. Like I said, I'll talk to Lucius about making things less dangerous for them, but there isn't a whole lot I can do beyond that. But there's another group, which are people that *aren't* necessarily inclined to self-destructive behavior. But Lucius is offering them a way out and, let's be honest, it isn't like they're spoiled for choice here."

"They could stay," Rafi said quietly. "Things aren't so bad here."

"For you," I agreed. "But what satisfies you guys isn't satisfying them. They want more, or maybe just something different. Whatever, the point is that they want out, and Lucius is one of the ways available to them. But they don't necessarily *want* to live that lifestyle, and if they felt they had a choice they might not. Is that accurate?"

He sighed. "Likely."

"Cool," I said. "Well, we can't make them stay. I mean, technically we *could*, but we can't make them *want* to, and without that the other is just cruel. But what I *can* offer you is another alternative. I can give those people transportation to somewhere else, and a place to live and a job when they get there. I'll be honest, it's not completely safe. I've got my enemies, and some of them would target noncombatants. But it's probably better than what he's offering."

"Hold on a second," Aiko said. "Winter. Are you seriously offering jobs to...who the hell even *knows* how many discontented teenagers? *Seriously?* Without asking me first?"

"You offered a place to that thing Crimson summoned without asking me," I pointed out. "A few hundred whiny teenagers is roughly equal."

"That's a fair point," she admitted. "Okay, carry on."

"Thank you." I turned back to Rafi. "So. What do you say?"

"I have the uncomfortable feeling that we're being used," he said.

"You are," I admitted cheerfully. "But I'm relatively benign about it. And the nice part about me having them join my organization, instead of just giving them transportation, is that I'm also in a position to help them out. I don't have the kind of power and influence that Lucius does, but I've got some. And this is not a good time to be on your own in a strange environment. It's really not."

"It's not a perfect answer," he said thoughtfully. "But then, what is? This is...better than nothing. And nothing is what we have otherwise."

"So is it enough?" I asked.

"It depends," he said. "We've talked a great deal about what I want. And very little about what *you* want."

"Hey," I said. "I'm just the messenger, here. But what Lucius wants is for you to stop fighting him. He goes back to being the unquestioned ruler of Alexandria. You stop interfering with his projects, and you most definitely stop killing his people."

Rafi's shoulders slumped. "You want us to give up," he said.

I met his eye. "No," I said quietly. "I'm *telling* you that you've lost. And I'm trying to make that loss as painless as possible, for everyone involved."

He nodded slowly. "I understand," he said. "We surrender, then. Your...*terms* are acceptable."

"Good," I said. "And...look, I don't mean any offense by this. But I'm staking my reputation on you following through on your end of this. That's a risk on my part. So...if you *don't* follow through, I'll be back. And I won't be so nice the second time around." I smiled and stood. "Thank you for your hospitality, Rafi. Have a pleasant day." I nodded politely to each of them and then walked out.

"So," Aiko said, once we were outside again. "That went well."

"Yep," I agreed. "Halfway done."

"What's the other half?"



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"Getting Lucius to agree to what we just arranged. Come on, time's wasting. It'll be dawn before too long."

None of us paid much attention to the bombed-out building as we left.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"I solved your problem," I said.

Lucius smiled. "Is that so?" he said. "Do tell."

"I found the people who were disrupting your operations," I said. "And I convinced them to cut it out. You shouldn't have any more problems with them."

"Interesting," Lucius said. "You know, I was really expecting you to kill them."

"You said you wanted them dealt with," I said. "They are. If they cause any more trouble, I'll come back and kill them then. And they know it, too."

"You really are an interesting man, Wolf," Lucius said. "So violent, and yet at the same time, so reluctant to fight. And you found a way to expand your ranks considerably, all under the guise of doing me a favor."

I shrugged. "That's more a public service than self-interest," I said. "I mean, look at who I'm gaining here." I gestured at the wall of windows behind him, and the room beyond that. The party was over by now, the predators and their willing captives gone home. But there were still some unattached food items passed out in various places, sleeping off the drugs and blood loss and who knew what else that they'd subjected their bodies to.

I didn't bother asking how he knew that I'd been recruiting. He owned this city. It was a reasonable assumption that nothing happened here without Lucius knowing about it.

He smiled. "That's a fair point," he said. "Well. As I trust that you'll carry out that threat if they aren't smart enough to take the mercy you've offered them, I believe that our arrangement is complete. More quickly than I expected, even. Well, then, it seems I owe you one."

"Actually," I said, "I've got a more concrete way you could pay me for this."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"You could tell me why the hell you wanted me to do it."

"It needed done," he said simply. "They were becoming an annoyance. It was getting in the way of my business."

I snorted. "What, and you didn't want to deal with it yourself?"

"They were expecting attack by a vampire," he said. "They were ready for it. They were *not* ready for you."

"You really expect me to think that you couldn't have taken them on? You're freaking ancient."

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

"And I haven't lived so long by attacking enemies who were prepared for me," he said sharply. "*Tactics*, boy. Learn some."

I shook my head. "I don't buy it," I said. "I mean, I saw these guys. I've got a pretty good idea of what they're capable of. A weak vampire, somebody who was knew to the game, I could accept that they were a threat to. But I've seen the way people treat you, and you don't get that kind of respect without being able to take on that crowd without any concern. Not to mention that you could have just hired mercenaries to deal with them if you were really feeling nervous. Money obviously doesn't matter that much to you—it's certainly worth less than owing someone a favor. No, you wanted me to do it, specifically."

He smiled thinly. "Well, well. Aren't you clever."

"Not particularly," I said. "But I'll figure things out given enough time. Now come on, spill. Why did you want me, specifically, to deal with this?"

"Curiosity, largely," he said. "You're...something new, I suppose, is how I would phrase it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"Our world is largely static," he said. "You know that. It's such a constant that it even governs how we use the language. Not five minutes ago, for example, you wanted to say that I was powerful enough to win against people who had trained and prepared specifically to fight me. But the word you used was *ancient*."

"Well, yeah," I said. "Because it's accurate. The older you are, the more time you've had to practice, accumulate power, make contacts...do basically everything, really."

"Yes," he said. "Broadly speaking it is an accurate assumption to conflate age and power. But think about what that implies. If the only way to grow in power is with age, then logically the only way to become more powerful than your predecessors is to wait and grow older. But as you grow older, so do they, maintaining the existing power gap. Do you understand?"

"I'm not clear on when this turned into a political science lecture," I said dryly. "Or how this is relevant. But other than that, yes."

"It's relevant because it produces a highly static, stratified social system," he said. "One in which very little changes. It's been...almost a thousand years ago, now, that I took over as the most politically influential vampire in the world. And there are still people that see me as an upstart, because social change is *that* rare in our circles."

*So boring*, Snowflake said in the back of my head.

Privately, I was inclined to agree with her. Out loud, I said, "What does any of this have to do with you and me?"

"Well," he said, "every now and then something comes along to shake up that static structure. Something such as yourself. Think about it, Wolf. You're...what, half a century old? Less? And yet you've already grown into an appreciable force. More to the point, you're not quite like anything that's come before you."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it," he said again. "You aren't a werewolf, not precisely. You aren't a human, or even built on a human chassis; you resemble one only very superficially. You aren't a jotun. At this point you clearly don't fit into any of the categories we typically sort people into, and so the question becomes...what are you? And more importantly, what could you be?"

"When you say 'what could I be,'" I said slowly, "what do you mean by that?"

He smiled. It was the sort of smile that I could only describe as ominous. "Everyone starts somewhere," he said. "Even deities."

Aiko, silent in the conversation to this point, suddenly broke out laughing. "Are you saying you think Winter's a god?" she asked. "'Cause that would be crazy."

Lucius shrugged. "God is a poorly defined term," he said. "We had a much better appreciation of the concept when I was young...but I digress. The truth is that I don't really know what you are or what you're becoming. But any time you mix so many different influences, the results are...unpredictable. In this case, clearly, the result is something greater than any of the individual components. But how *much* greater is a question I'm not equipped to answer."

"Okay," I said, after thinking that over for a couple of seconds. "In that case...why aren't you trying to kill me? If I have the potential to change your static system that much, then shouldn't you want me gone?"

"Two reasons," he said. "First off, I've always been something of a gambling man. Life would be terribly boring if we always knew what was going to happen next. Second, the truth is that I was fully expecting someone to do just what you're describing years ago, which is why I never bothered with you before. But you keep surviving, despite all evidence suggesting that you shouldn't. And those who try to end you frequently *don't*. So why would I ever set myself up to be the next entry in that pattern?"

"Let's say I believe you," I said. "That would mean that everyone who keeps messing with me is...what? Curious?"

He shrugged. "I can really only speak for myself," he said. "And since you did such an excellent job, I'll even tell you exactly what my plan is. Would you like that?"

"Oh, I can't wait," I said dryly.

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He smiled a little. "I'm going to be friendly," he said. "I'm going to be pleasant and helpful, and not ask a whole lot in return. I will help you with your problems. And if you do become something greater, a power unto yourself, then I'll have made a powerful ally at very little expense."

"And if I die next week?"

"Then I'm only out a few hours," he said calmly. "Which, in comparison to how long I've lived and how long I might live, isn't much at all. But I don't think that will happen. There are...oh, it must be half a dozen gods interested and invested in you, that I know of. And they're far too interested in what happens to you to let it end now. No, Wolf, I don't think my investment is going to be wasted. Not at all." He smiled a little bit wider. It looked like a very pleasant, friendly sort of smile.

I shivered.

"Now," he said. "I think that answers your question. Don't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe a bit more than I wanted."

"That's the nature of knowledge," he said. "Well, it's time for me to be closing up. I'll keep you appraised of how your proposal is faring. Between you and me, I'd wager that they'll acknowledge your territory and agree to your rules within...oh, about three days. Have a pleasant morning."

I was not feeling very happy as I left. Given that Aiko was moving like she couldn't get out of that building fast enough, and Snowflake was dead silent in the back of my head, I didn't think I was alone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Guess what," I said as I walked into the building. "I just got us a fairly solid agreement with Lucius, and a bunch of new recruits. I think at least a hundred. We'll have an exact number pretty soon."

Selene stared at me. "How did you manage that?"

"Well," I said, "there were a bunch of people that were volunteering to be fed upon by vampires just to get out of their shitty lives. Teenagers that didn't want to follow in their parents' footsteps, for the most part. So now they'll come and work for me instead."

She closed her eyes with a pained expression. "You recruited a hundred teenagers that have no idea what they're doing," she said.

I grinned. "Yep. I'm sure you can guys can train them. They'll start showing up...probably tomorrow or the next day. Oh, and I'm guessing a lot of them don't speak English. There'll be interpreters for you."

She winced. "You enjoy this, don't you?"

"Yep," I said again, still grinning. "It's strangely satisfying to inflict this kind of suffering on someone else. Kind of gives me a different perspective on all the times I've been on the short end of the stick." I walked past her and lounged in my throne. "Anyway, news from here?"

"We've got a message from the Guards," she said. "They're doing their full public announcement next week. We've also got final version from the Denver pack about that statement they want to make. It looks fine as far as I can tell, but I've set it out for you to look over before we confirm it. Alexander confirmed receipt of his payment, so we're square with him. On that note, Tindr also wants to go over finances with you. Especially if we're hiring that many new people. Do they want paid?"

"Probably, yeah," I said. "Tell Tindr to start budgeting for it. I'm also going to angle for regular payments from Lucius, which should do something to cover it. Oh, and also send a message to the Guards. I want to have a meeting with them to settle the details of who's responsible for what in the city. Make sure the mayor's invited, too."

"Aren't you a part of the Guards now?" she asked.

"Yeah. Sort of."

"So they'll be expecting you to be there as part of their delegation."

"Yep," I said. "Probably. Should be lots of fun. Anyway, go ahead and write that up. You know how to make it sound nice and respectful."

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She looked at me for a moment, then shrugged in a way that said *your funeral*. "Will do. Anything else?"

"Make sure Kyi knows that the new people will be coming in," I said. "You two and Tindr need to figure out how we'll be integrating them into the organization. Things like housing, civilian life, training, all of it. Assume they have zero support structure here. Some of them will probably have useful skills, but we won't know what they are until they get here. Also, add Jibril and Kikuchi to the list of people that are invited to that meeting with the Guards."

"At this rate I'll have to start taking notes," she said, in a tone of mixed annoyance and amusement.

"You'll cope," I said cheerfully. "What's next, what's next...oh, yeah. I have a video I want you to deliver to the Conclave, just in case these nutjobs want to accuse me of attacking them. It's always good to get your side of the story in first. And...I think that about wraps it up. I think it should be enough to keep you busy."

"And then some," Selene said. "And what will you be doing while we're putting all this together?"

"Talking to the Guards," I said. "Have to keep my other persona up, and it's been a while since they saw much of me. I suppose I should also check in on the person Aiko hired. The one that Crimson brought through. Is she settling in all right?"

Selene shrugged. "Hell if I know," she said.

"She didn't run off, did she?"

"No. But even by the standards of the people you've got working for you, she's...odd. I spent a while chatting with her while you were gone, and I didn't really get much. What I do know is that she was a human originally. At some point, someone took her and dumped her in some Otherside domain. It remade her as what she is now."

"Huh," I said. "Any idea when all this happened?"

She shook her head. "None. Her understanding of time is pretty shaky. I'd try comparing her story to records, see if we can find out who she was as a human, but she doesn't seem to remember much of it. Not enough to identify her, for sure."

"Okay. Thanks for trying. I'm going to go and talk to her at least a little before I leave. She's too powerful to leave as a total unknown if I can help it."

"Good luck with that," Selene said. "I'll go and get started on this."

The creature Crimson had summoned up was on the roof. Apparently she'd taken to spending most of her time up there, just sitting and watching. In an odd way, it was actually one of the most convenient places she could have chosen. She didn't move much, and a casual observer could easily mistake her for a statue. It was like we'd added a particularly odd gargoyle to the decor.

February in Colorado is seldom warm, and at the moment it was particularly nasty, with gusting winds and a light snow falling. She didn't give the impression of being particularly susceptible to the weather, though, and I wasn't surprised that she hadn't come in.

Aiko, Snowflake and I all went out to for this introduction. Aiko was there because it had been her choice to hire this creature, and I wasn't about to let her off the hook on it. Snowflake was there because if this went wrong, it had a chance to go wrong in a rather amusing way, and we definitely wanted her help in dealing with it.

She was squatting on the edge of the roof, looking out over the driveway. She obviously hadn't been moving much; there were probably two or three inches of snow on her shoulders and head. The bright little lizard I'd seen her with earlier was perched on her hand, seeming about as unfazed by the weather as she was.

I walked up and sat next to her, dangling my feet over the edge. It was a calculated move on my part. It made me seem more like her, which would hopefully help me establish some kind of rapport with her. It also meant that if things got violent it would be easy for her to shove me off the roof, which would be to my benefit. I could handle that fall easily, and it would put me out of her reach long enough to draw Tyrfin.

"Hello," I said, as Snowflake padded over and lay down next to me. As a husky, she was about as comfortable in this weather as the rest of us. Aiko wasn't, of course, but she was wearing a couple of heavy coats. She'd still complain about it later, I was confident, but she wasn't in any danger of freezing.

"Hello," the creature said, barely glancing at me. I didn't recoil, but it took a bit of an effort. I'd forgotten about her mismatched eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said. I didn't pretend not to know what she meant. "Do you have a name?"

She shook her head, the motion very slow. "Not anymore. I did. But I lost it. I'm not sure when."

"Okay," I said. "Well, is there something people call you?"

"No," she said. "I never needed something. I don't usually have someone to talk to. Except my pet, and it doesn't talk back."

"You mean the lizard?" Aiko asked.

"It's not really a lizard. It just looks a little like one."



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The lizard hissed, as though agreeing with her. For all I knew it was. If it had come from the Otherside, that "lizard" might be smarter than anyone else here. Not that that was all that high of a bar.

"Well, think about it," I said. "Maybe you'll think of something you'd like to be called. If not, we can come up with something for you."

"Okay," she said. "I'll think."

*This is surreal, Snowflake said. This whole scene, I mean.*

*Said the talking dog,* I pointed out. Then, out loud, I said, "Is there anything I can do to help you settle in here?"

"No," she said. "You're very friendly. And we have lots of food. It's quiet here too. I like the quiet. Is there something I can do to pay you back? I don't like owing people."

"For the moment what you're doing is fine," I said. "Just sit up here and watch, and let us know if someone who looks like they aren't friendly is coming."

"Okay," she said. "I can do that. Tell me if you want me to do something else instead."

"Actually, maybe there is something you can do," Aiko said suddenly. "Can you tell us anything about the place you came from?"

"You mean the Badlands?" The creature frowned. "It's cold. Colder than this. It's dark. And it's always windy. You can't hear yourself think over the wind. But mostly it's the bad place. I heard there are parts that aren't cold and dark, but they're all bad."

"What do you mean by that?" Aiko asked.

The response was slow in coming. "It's like...things don't work," the creature said at last. "You do something and it seems like it should work but it doesn't. It's because it wants to make you work for everything you do."

"Why does it want that?"

"So you get better at things." This time the response was faster, and more confident. "It wants to make people into things that are better at things than people. It made me into this. It makes other people into other things. But people would rather be people than be good, so it makes it so that you don't get to choose."

"Okay," Aiko said, in an unusually gentle tone. "Thank you. That was all we needed. We'll talk to you again later."

"Okay," the creature repeated. "We'll stay here and watch."

"What was that about?" I asked quietly, once we were inside the building and out of earshot. She might be able to hear us, of course—I had no idea how good her hearing was. But Tawny had said that she didn't have a concept of self-consciousness, and Tawny would know.

"Checking whether I knew the domain she was in," Aiko replied.

"Do you?"

She frowned. "Maybe. There are always...rumors. People talk about a domain that exists to create monsters. If you annoy the wrong person, or just get unlucky enough, you can get trapped there and turned into something horrible. Most of the time people don't talk about it much, in case talking about it gets them sent there."

"Huh," I said. "Do you know anyone who's actually seen this place?"

"No," she said. "But then, I wouldn't, would I? Not if the people there are trapped."

"Fair enough," I said. "Okay. Next thing on the list is going back to the Guards. I'll see you guys in a while."

"I'm coming with you," Aiko said.

I paused. "You are?"

"Yep," she said firmly. "You need some help integrating with what they're doing, making them see you the right way. So I'm going to come and help you."

"And...do they know this?"

"Nope," she said cheerfully. "But I figure that if I show up with you, and you talk about how I'm a new recruit and David knew I was coming, he won't want to argue with you."

"That...might work," I said. "You realize I'm going to make them call you Cupcake, though. Since you stuck me with Shrike and all."

"No you won't," she said. "You're going to make them call me Peaches."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because then we'll have Peaches and Crim," she said. "It'll be hilarious."

Snowflake started laughing. After a few seconds, so did I. "Yeah," I admitted. "That actually is pretty funny. A little funnier than hearing them call you Cupcake in the middle of a fight, even."

"So you'll do it?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "I'll do it."

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Aiko grinned. "All right, then. Let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Who's that?" Derek asked, staring. He was sitting on a couch in the common room, holding a car magazine. It looked like he'd been reading it until we walked in.

"This is Jane," I said. "Peaches when she has her game face on. She's going to be working with us."

"She is?" he asked, staring. I could tell that he wanted to ask about the name—Aiko did not look much like a Jane, after all—but he didn't.

"Yeah," I said, like it was the most natural thing in the world. "We cleared it with David. Did he not tell you about this?"

"No," Derek said. "He didn't tell us anything about it."

"Huh," I said, with a broad, shit-eating grin. "I guess he didn't want to get your hopes up in case things fell through at the last minute. You know where he is? We'd probably go let him know that she got here."

"I think he's in his room working on some paperwork," Derek said automatically. He looked like he was still too busy staring to think clearly.

"Thanks," Aiko said, in her best sultry voice. "It was nice to meet you...." She trailed off suggestively.

"Derek," he supplied promptly, stammering a little bit. "It was nice to meet you too, um, Jane."

"See you later," she said, still with that sly, suggestive smile.

That lasted all the way until the stairs, when she broke down laughing. "Did you see his *face*?" she asked me breathlessly. "That was *priceless*. How new is that kid, anyway?"

"Pretty new, obviously," I said. I wasn't laughing. "It's not funny."

"Of course not," she said. "It was hilarious. It's been ages since I got somebody that good."

"And if you can get to him that easily, what do you think will happen when he runs into one of the Sidhe?"

The laughter stopped. "Oh," she said. "Good point." She frowned. "We're probably supposed to keep him from ending up as some faerie's pet, right? Or vampire's, or whatever."

"Probably," I said, starting up the stairs. "That seems like something you're probably supposed to do for a teammate. Generally speaking."

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"Huh," she said. "Do you figure we ought to get him laid, then? That seems like it'd probably help a little. He didn't seem like the sort to pay for it, but maybe if he didn't know we'd hired her we could make something work."

I closed my eyes for a second, standing next to the door. "Let's leave that for later, okay?" I said. "I mean, it's probably not a terrible idea, but...bloody hell. This is why I don't work with children."

"Says the guy who just hired a bunch."

I groaned. "Don't remind me," I said. "I'm already regretting that decision. Being the good guy is such a pain in the ass."

"It's adorable, though," she said. "Now are you opening that door, or just fondling it?"

"All right," I said, opening the door. "Let's do this. It should be a fun conversation."

The seventh and top floor of the building was set aside for our personal quarters. Theoretically I had a set of rooms up here, though I hadn't really spent any time in them. I hadn't had much time to spare since I started this work, and when I did have a few minutes to myself, I wasn't going to spend them here.

The stairs opened into a sort of hub area with a dozen doors spaced out around it. Those rooms that were occupied had signs on the door with the name of each room's inhabitant. The signs were paper, cut in the shape of flowers. It was the sort of arrangement they'd used in college. I hadn't spent much time in the dorms, but I remembered them doing something very similar there.

That comparison made me smile for about half a second. Then it just reminded me of how young most of the people living here were. They'd have fit right in at a college dormitory, and instead we were sending them out to fight monsters. Granted, I'd been doing things just as stupidly dangerous when I was their age, but still.

I shook myself out of it and walked over to the door that said *David*. I knocked twice, paused for a couple seconds, then opened it.

I was a little surprised by how...normal his rooms were. It was sparsely furnished, not much more than a bed, a chair, and a desk. The desk had a laptop sitting on it, with what looked like an email client open. A half-open door on the other side showed a bathroom, which looked to be organized with military precision.

It wasn't completely without personality. There were a couple of watercolor paintings on the walls, and some pictures on the desk. Photos of David and his family, it looked like. There was a picture of him and an elderly couple, presumably his parents. Another with him and a smiling young woman sitting on a park bench. She was wearing a floppy hat and a "I LOVE NEW YORK" shirt, and couldn't have looked more like a tourist if she wanted to. The last photo looked like a school photo of a little boy. Next to the photograph of his parents, it was impossible to miss the resemblance.

I'd never really thought of David as having a family, somehow. It wasn't a context I was accustomed to thinking of people in.

"Hello, Jonathan," David said, minimizing a couple of windows on his computer and turning to face me. The desktop image was a sunset. It was a pretty typical photo to use as a desktop background, but I didn't think it was just a stock photo. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Jane," I said. "She's going to be working with us."

He looked distinctly unimpressed. "She is," he said.

"Yeah."

He sighed. "Close the door, please."

I did, stepping into the room. As the door closed, I felt a set of wards flare to life, so subtle that I hadn't even noticed them from outside the room. They weren't designed to prevent entrance, I didn't think. Probably just soundproofing, making sure that this space stayed nice and private.

"Are you out of your mind?" David asked bluntly.

"Probably," I admitted. "But no more so than usual. I know she hasn't been offered a spot, but between your authority and the connections I've got I'm sure we can smooth over any issues with the Guards."

"That assumes I want to," he said. "Bringing her into this seems like a pretty terrible idea."

"You know who she is?" I asked.

He sighed. "Think about this," he said. "You really think I was going to start this job without reading a full dossier on you and everyone of importance that works for you? *Of course* I know who your wife is. Give me a little bit of credit, here."

"Fair point," I said. "But what's your problem with it?"

"What are you even going to do?" he asked her. "Have you thought about that? Granted you have talents, but they aren't much like the magic we do. The kids might not know much, but it'll only take so long for them to catch on to that."

"Easy," Aiko said. "I'm him."

There was a pause. "Excuse me?" David said at last.

"We already worked this out," she said. "See, Jonny here has to be careful about what he does, since you don't want any of these kids finding out who he actually is. Like you said, they aren't dumb. If he shows off too much of what he can actually do, eventually they'll put two and two together. But if

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they think I'm the one doing all the stuff he does, you get his talents and he gets to stay the dumb thug werewolf."

"There is no way you can pull that off."

"You might be surprised," she said, grinning. "He's good at doing his thing without anyone realizing he's doing anything. And I'm *really* good at lying. I think you'll find we can sell it better than you think."

"Let's assume for the moment that, against my better judgment, I go along with this," David said. "How are you going to explain the fact that you're always together? I'm assuming you are, anyway, because you sure as hell aren't selling this story if you aren't."

"Way ahead of you," I said. "See, Jane here is my wife. She's been thinking about joining, but she wasn't sure whether it was a trap. So I came first to check things out and see whether you were on the level. Since you've impressed me so much, I told her to go ahead. But I'm wildly overprotective, so I don't want to let her out of my sight while we're here."

"You might be able to make that work," he said after a moment. "*Maybe*. I'm still not seeing how we really get all that much out of it, though."

"Well, here's the thing," I said. "Let's assume, hypothetically speaking, that this is the only way I'm going to be staying here. I'm not doing any more work with you guys unless I have someone I trust to watch my back."

"And you think the loss of your talents is such a dire fate that you can use it as a threat." David smirked. "Well, don't you think highly of yourself."

"Oh, cut the crap," I said, rolling my eyes. "You can't really replace me, under the circumstances. You're good, but everything I've seen you do is...mobility, support, and ranged fire, for the most part. If you have to stand your ground, your skills suddenly become a lot less valuable. And who else are you going to get to do that job? Derek could conceivably play the tank, but we both know he's too raw to last five minutes there against a real threat. Tawny could summon something to do it, but nobody wants her bringing in things that scary on a regular basis." I grinned. "Or are you going to argue that point?"

He said nothing, and he said it pretty loudly.

"Thought so," I said. "That means that if you wanted to replace me, you'd have to bring in someone from out of town. Now, the Guards are stretched thin as it is, and mages in general aren't typically good on the front line, so your chances of getting a replacement sent out are slim. So yeah, actually, under the circumstances I think if I leave you are in a bit of a bind."

He glared at me for a few more seconds, then sighed. "You've got a point," he said reluctantly. "As much as it pains me to admit it. All right, then. We'll do it your way. For the moment. But if you can't follow the rules, I'm dumping you both, and muddling through without your *assistance*."

"Oh, don't worry," Aiko said with a wicked grin. "I'm *real* good at playing by the rules."

"Well, that's settled," I said. "Good. Now, I'm guessing you'll want to introduce our newest member to the rest of the team. Her name is Peaches when we're in the field, by the way. Then you've got a meeting at three."

"I do?"

"Yep," I said cheerfully. I was grinning almost as broadly as Aiko. "With me, in fact. Though I'm going to send a proxy instead at the last minute. I'm sure it'll be terribly insulting. Try to act surprised."

"You aren't remotely as funny as you think you are," David said sourly.

"Oh, I know," I assured him. "But the funny thing is, it's more or less a self-perpetuating cycle. All those years I spent just having this shit inflicted on me, I'd have said that I'd never be such a jackass myself. But now that I've got the chance to be on the other side of it, it's actually surprisingly fun. Anyway, do you want to go ahead and get those introductions taken care of? You'll want to have plenty of time to get ready for your meeting, after all. Plus Peaches here has to have a chat with the PR department. I'm looking forward to that one, myself."

David took a deep breath and let it out, looking like he very much wanted to strangle me and was having to remind himself of all the ways that was a bad idea. "Yes," he said, through gritted teeth. "Let's."



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### Chapter Twenty-Eight

The meeting room was small, and grey, and it stank of burned coffee and tobacco. I was reasonably confident you weren't allowed to smoke there, and entirely confident that a great many people had ignored that rule.

On the whole, it seemed a disappointingly mundane location for huge decisions with sweeping consequences to be made. I was guessing it had never played host to a fraction of the personal and political power that was currently present.

In the role of Shrike, I was one of the last people to show up. David had decided that the Guards weren't going to bother arriving early. I was...less than thrilled with this decision, but it wasn't worth fighting him on it. I had a sneaking suspicion that a large part of the reason he'd made it was that he knew it would annoy me, and I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of knowing how right he was.

There were three distinct factions at the conference table, although none of them was entirely monolithic. The first, and most straightforward, of the three was the Guards. David was the one representing them—or us, or whatever. But he'd brought all of us along, as a sort of show of force. Coming alone could have sent a lot of messages, ranging from confidence to weakness. As I'd expected, he didn't want to take the risk of it being interpreted in an unfavorable way.

The second faction was mine. Selene was heading that one up, and she'd brought her own backup. Kyi was there, as was Jibril. Kikuchi was standing just far enough away from them to make it clear that they weren't entirely together, and just close enough to make it clear that he was still more on that side than anyone else's. More worryingly, she'd also brought Shadow. The mage *was* technically my ally, and she was the closest thing the local independent community had to a leader. But that didn't mean we saw eye-to-eye on much.

The last group was, essentially, the neutral party. The mayor of the city was the focal point of that faction. He'd brought a handful of functionaries that I didn't recognize. A little more disappointing—if not particularly *surprising*—was the presence of Nicolas Pellegrini. The crime lord had brought his own retinue in the form of a rather boring-looking man in a suit.

I recognized that man, and I wasn't for a moment fooled by the appearance. His name was Andrews, and he might have been the most personally dangerous person in the room. I didn't have a clear enough handle on how he operated to know whether he was a match for Kikuchi, or David, or me. But he was at the very least in the same general vicinity.

I was much more surprised by the *other* person with Pellegrini. She looked like a human child, maybe ten years old. But she smelled vaguely fae, and I could tell that she wasn't a young girl. She was too calm, and her eyes were too old.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Selene said, as Tony stepped in the door and closed it. Spark, rather, since were all using the ridiculous masks and fake names. "Thank you for coming. I am here representing the man you call Winter Wolf."

"Why isn't he here himself?" David demanded. Playing the role; he was technically my opponent here, and it would have been suspicious if he didn't act like it.

Although really, this whole act was an enormous waste of effort. My people knew what was going on, and so did David. I was guessing Pellegrini knew who I was, as well; he was only human, but the man was sharp. Not much got past him. I was guessing the mayor also knew, since it seemed like David would probably have cleared my dual identity with him. Which, essentially, meant that the entire farce was being played for the sake of keeping the rest of the Guards in the dark.

It seemed a bit pointless, all things considered.

"He is otherwise engaged," Selene said smoothly. "My employer is a man with a great many responsibilities. An urgent matter came up unexpectedly."

All of which were, technically, true statements. It was probably unnecessary to keep it that way, since we were dealing with humans here. But it was good to be careful, and I thought Selene enjoyed the challenge.

"Are you implying that this meeting is not important?" David asked, his chin thrust out confrontationally. Body language had to be more dramatic to get the point across when your face was covered. I'd been acting that way for years, but I'd never quite realized it on a conscious level.

"I imply nothing," Selene said in a quiet tone which still managed to convey quite clearly that you did not want to push her any further. "I merely state facts. And the fact is that I am here to speak on his behalf. That is sufficient for him, and it should be sufficient for you."

"Oh, yes," Pellegrini said, staring right at me. "I'm sure your employer's interests are *quite* well represented here."

I gritted my teeth. He knew, all right. More importantly, he wanted me to *know* that he knew, and he didn't care too much whether he told someone else in the process. That had been a pretty subtle giveaway, as such things went. Probably none of the people who I wanted to keep in the dark would notice. But it was still risky, and the fact that he'd taken that risk said a lot.

"All right, then," David said reluctantly. I didn't think he was faking it. "Let's get this over with."

I stood quietly for the next hour or so as details were hashed out between the various factions. I had a whole set of signals worked out with Selene, but they turned out to be largely unnecessary. She did an excellent job of sticking to the instructions I'd given her beforehand.

The terms that were eventually reached were an excellent compromise, which naturally meant that nobody was really happy. I ceded—well, by proxy, but Selene had the right to speak on my behalf,

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so it ended up being a moot point—a great deal of authority over the human citizens of the city. The Guards took on most of the protective role that I'd been playing, and the mayor reclaimed his official authority. In return, they agreed to run any action involving the nonhumans of the city by me first. Effectively, we were splitting the governance of the city into two completely separate jobs, with only a cursory connection between them. Technically, while the representatives of one side would obviously be able to get an audience with the other, they had no more formal authority outside of their sphere of influence than any private citizen.

In practice, of course, the distinction was little more than a hypocritical act. I was the head of one side and a highly ranked member of the other. Pellegrini and I were still working together where our interests were in agreement. On the whole, there just wasn't half the distinction between the two factions as these terms made it seem. But it sounded good if you didn't know the real story.

There were a handful of more meaningful agreements. Jibril and his ghouls were officially recognized as an independent group, although one that was subservient to mine. It had taken a while, but I'd actually gotten him a seat at the table to settle out the rules of the new order, just like I'd promised. I got them to agree to a couple of smaller concessions, as well. Things like giving the relationship between a werewolf and the Alpha of a recognized pack the same privileged status attorneys had, and recognizing my people as having inalienable human rights despite not being anywhere near human.

And, naturally, I had to give some things up as well. It was a compromise, after all. So I was forced to agree to make my minions follow the law within the city, and my protection racket was getting a lot more oversight. I was still going to be collecting about the same amount of money, but now it was being treated as a part of the taxation system, with all the associated bureaucracy. So it wasn't great, but it wasn't untenable, either.

Of course, all of these terms had already been agreed on in advance. By the time any of us sat down here, the agreement had already been ready. I kept an ear on it to ensure nothing was changed at the last moment, but by and large it didn't take a lot of my attention.

That left me free to split my focus between two other things, instead. First off was Snowflake, who was pacing regular patrols around the building. She didn't notice anything particularly suspicious, and she was too bored by the negotiation process to even make fun of it, so mostly those contacts were just quick check-ins to make sure that things weren't absolutely disastrous outside.

The second, and more interesting, was watching the people in the room with me. Pellegrini had his mask of professional detachment on, and his was very, very good. But Andrews looked just slightly too bored to conceal it. The fae thing with him was almost the opposite, unable to fully conceal the excitement it obviously felt.

Jibril was almost beside himself with joy at actually getting what I'd promised him way back when. He kept shooting grateful glances in my direction, and it would probably have been a dead

giveaway if anybody had been looking closely at the ghoul. Selene looked just about the same as Pellegrini, although she went for professional interest rather than professional detachment.

Most interesting, I thought, were the Guards. David gave the impression of being as fed up with this nonsense as I was feeling. He was obviously bored, and just didn't want to be wasting his time on this farce. Razor was watching everything at once—that was, after all, her particular trick. She seemed interested, almost fascinated, although it wasn't particularly focused on the direction of the conversation. If anything she seemed more interested in some of the people who had come, including a lot that she probably shouldn't have known enough about to be interested in at all.

I didn't try too hard to discourage her. That was an ability that might be very useful. The fact that it was annoying to be on the wrong end of it was just more evidence of that.

Meanwhile, Chainmail was obviously out of his depth and knew it. He looked like a scared kid listening to the grown-ups talking about something he wasn't remotely prepared to grasp, probably because he was. Spark was more cocky, arrogant. He wasn't even paying as much attention to what was going on here as I was.

And then there was Crimson, who watched in studious, silent fascination. It wasn't just interest, or ambition. It was like there was something in there that needed this instruction, *any* instruction, and when she got it the rest of the world turned off.

I watched them, and listened to the discussion, and occasionally shared a grin with Aiko or Snowflake, and the hour passed more rapidly than I was expecting.

Then, at last, we were done. The deal was still bare-bones, but everybody wanted the chance to think about it a bit before continuing. "Is there anything else?" Selene asked, tapping her stack of notes on the table to straighten it up.

And, *naturally*, the door slammed open. Jason walked in, in the same suit as usual, with a broad, self-satisfied grin. "Yes," he said, staring right at me, as the woman who covered herself in fire and Reese stepped in to flank him. "Yes, I think there is."

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### Chapter Twenty-Nine

I had seldom, if ever, seen a group of people that powerful taken that completely, utterly by surprise.

I mean, normally you didn't. People didn't get to be in that position by being caught off guard. That phrase had a pretty clear meaning, after all, and in the circles I ran in it could have a very *literal* one. Nobody wanted to go down as the guy that got shanked by some twit he never saw coming. That's a crappy way to die. More so than most, even.

But for whatever reason, none of us had any warning that these lunatics were about to show up. Maybe that was sheer dumb luck on their part, or maybe it was because we'd all been extremely preoccupied with what was going on in this room. Or, hell, maybe they were just really sneaky. That would fit with the general theme, so far, of these guys being actually pretty competent, generally speaking.

Jason walked in, with that broad, smug grin firmly entrenched on his face, and took a seat at the table. More specifically, a seat not far from David, putting him uncomfortably close to me.

And he knew who I was, too. There was no question about that. Jason looked smug, but otherwise he could have fooled most people into thinking he was in the dark. His lackeys, though, were less capable actors. Reese was glaring at me, and the woman's expression was even nastier. It was the sort of expression that reminded uncomfortably of the fact that this was a woman who, when she chose, was capable of leveling buildings by looking at them the wrong way.

I noted, absently, that the reaction of the people already in the room was fairly revealing. Most of the Guards just looked confused, like they weren't sure what this meant. Razor was the rather predictable exception, looking distinctly wary from the moment they walked in the door. Considering that alertness was pretty much her thing, I'd have been more surprised if she *didn't* look a bit nervous about them.

The mayor immediately looked at me, his expression practically asking *Did you arrange this?* Confirmation, if I needed it, that he knew who "Shrike" really was. Beyond that, nothing useful there; he was a bit player, here. Pellegrini showed no reaction whatsoever, as usual. Those pale blue eyes betrayed very little of the mind behind them. Andrews looked bored, and probably was bored. The little girl that smelled like fae, on the other hand, was openly delighted, giggling and clapping her hands.

The third faction, though, was most interesting to me, because if one of my people had told these nutjobs where to be, we were going to have some issues.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it—none of them reacted in a particularly guilty way. Selene didn't openly react, but then, she wouldn't. With Selene, a good general rule was that she wasn't going to openly react to much of anything. Jibril looked confused, and Kikuchi

looked mildly annoyed at the interruption. Kyi reached for a weapon before visibly forcing herself to stop. On the whole, all reactions that were perfectly normal for the individual in question. If any of them was responsible for this, they were too good of actors for me to catch them out.

"What's the matter?" Jason asked, once he'd sat down and his two thugs were standing behind him. "Cat got your tongues?"

"You were not invited here," the mayor said, when it became apparent that no one else was in a particular hurry to respond. Part of the difficulty with having this happen in this situation was that we'd just spent a ridiculous amount of time negotiating and jockeying for position, and nobody wanted to ruin that by effectively announcing that they could speak for the rest of the people present. It was easier for the mayor, since everyone knew that he didn't really matter at all. He was important as a representative of human government, not because of anything inherent to him personally. The role was important; the person in it was effectively disposable.

"Oh, but do you have the right to tell me where I may and may not go?" Jason asked. "I think not. Justice neither has nor needs an invitation."

"Justice also seldom exhibits such superb timing," Pellegrini said. "Kindly spare us the hyperbole. This is a professional meeting, and not one which you have any business in."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong," Jason said. "You see, one of the people in this room isn't half as pure of heart as you might think he is. Settling that score with him is very much our business." He looked in my direction and smiled even wider. "Hello there, Shrike. Did you miss us?"

"You haven't left me alone long enough to know," I said sourly. "I'd like to find out, though. Why don't you leave and come back in about fifteen years to ask me that question?"

"You've got a great sense of humor," Jason said. "I've always appreciated that. It doesn't change the fact that you're utter scum, of course, but you do have *some* redeeming qualities."

"He really does," Aiko agreed. "I don't know if humor is the first thing I'd have gone for, but it is a positive aspect."

"Why are you wasting our time?" David asked, sounding tired and frustrated. I couldn't blame him. We'd been stuck in this room a disgustingly long time already, and then this jackass walked in and started talking.

"Mostly just because it amuses me," Jason said frankly. "I didn't even start the banter until I'd already won. At this point it's just running out the clock."

There was a very short pause. Then David, sounding deadly serious, said, "Get him."

What happened after that was terrifying, on multiple levels.

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The first, and most obvious, was that multiple mages were trying to kill somebody in a confined space. The new Guards weren't the most experienced or refined, but in a way that just made it scarier. Power tended to be a great deal easier than control, and being in the same room as a group of half-trained mages in a fight was not a comfortable thought.

So on that level, the response was immediate, predictable, and frightening. David whipped the air around him into a gale, Spark started reaching for fire, Crimson pulled out another loop of rubber and started opening what felt like a pretty sizable door. Between the three of them, a smart person would be feeling pretty nervous being in the same general area. I knew that, because *I* was feeling nervous, and at this point my fear response was calibrated to a pretty spectacularly dysfunctional scale.

But what happened next was even more frightening, at least from my perspective. Jason...did something, and all of that magic just *disappeared*.

I wasn't sure how to phrase it more clearly than that. I had no idea how he did it. This kind of magic was so far outside my scope that I didn't even have *words* for it. He just shut all three of them down cold, in less than a second.

After that, things started happening very, very quickly.

First off, people started going for weapons. It seemed like everyone in the room was reaching for some instrument of mayhem, even most of the mayor's people. Apparently things had been crazy enough recently that even political flunkies had started keeping a knife or gun close.

Second, Reese grabbed me around the shoulders in a bear hug. I doubted he could hold me long—he smelled pure human, and at this point no human was really capable of taking me in a contest of pure strength. But for the moment he'd managed to catch me off-balance, and that was enough to let him grab me.

At the exact same time, Jason stood, moving fast enough to knock the chair over. He grabbed David, who was still reeling from having his magic canceled out, and shoved him into Aiko hard enough to send both of them sprawling to the ground.

All of that happened before anyone else had so much as stood up or finished drawing a weapon. I had to appreciate the speed and precision of their actions, even if they were screwing me over, personally. That kind of skill and coordination were rare.

In the next instant, the woman with them started blasting the room indiscriminately with fire. She wasn't aiming to kill, I didn't think; there wasn't enough intensity or focus behind the fire for that. This was just a threat, forcing people to take cover and discouraging them from approaching her directly. It was the magical equivalent of spraying an area with covering fire from a machine gun; actually *hitting* people wasn't the point.

At the same time, Reese opened a portal to the Otherside. It should have been impossible for him to tear the world open that quickly; only the very best mages were capable of that kind of thing, and

nothing I'd seen suggested that Reese was anywhere near that level. But the impossible became possible when you had someone like Jason backing you up.

He started trying to drag me through the open portal, but he didn't make much progress. I was braced, now, and he was neither strong enough nor skilled enough to make me move anyway.

Then Jason shot me in the knee.

I was wearing armor, but it was the set I'd gotten for my Guard identity. It was decent, but not nearly as good as the suit I'd gotten from Loki.

Jason must have been using a custom pistol, something heavier than most people would need or want, because the bullet punched right through my armor. A spray of blood came out the other side, and I staggered as my weight suddenly fell on a joint that wasn't remotely capable of supporting it.

Before I could fall, Jason hit both of us with a diving tackle. It was timed brilliantly, hitting me right as I was losing my balance and carrying my weight out over the damaged knee. Something crunched and tore inside the joint, and I pitched over. The three of us fell through the portal in a tangled pile.

Normally portals didn't do much to me anymore. Apparently this one was special, though, because the second I went through it I was out cold.

The next thing I was aware of, I was lying on my back in the snow. I was staring up at the sky, which was dark and full of stars. I could smell snow, and pine, and a cold, dry wind.

I tried to sit up, and floundered instead, ending up in a contorted heap in the snow. My body wasn't suited to that movement, not at all. I was in fur, and I hadn't realized it until that moment. Which, put together with some other things, meant that I could only really be in one place.

I rolled over and pushed myself up to sit on my haunches. I wasn't in any particular hurry about it. I'd figured out what was going on by this point, and time wasn't really an issue.

As expected, once I was upright, I saw myself. He was sitting in front of me, in a seat carved out of the snow. He was casually dressed, but he didn't look cold. No surprise there. Even more than usual, cold didn't affect us here.

Because this was, of course, not the really real world. This was a piece of the spirit world, a conceptual representation of *me*.

"Hi," he said, once I was sitting up. "Been a while since I saw you here."

I ignored him, looking at what kind of twisted mind games my subconscious had decided to present me with today.



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We were sitting on a narrow ridge, barely wider than I was. In the physical world I might have been concerned about slipping, but here that wasn't a thing that could happen. Thought and intent mattered far more, here, than physics. Accidents weren't even really *possible*.

There was nothing else in sight. The ridge extended forward and back as far as I could see; to either side was nothing but darkness, with the stars blazing cold and white above. It was an unusually simplistic scene, all things considered.

"You're starting to crack, you know," the other me said to me. "I mean, seriously. You just got taken out like a total chump. They should never have been able to pull that kind of stunt. But you *let* them, because you keep trying to be things you aren't."

I glared at him. I didn't say anything. I could have—here and now, the usual barriers to speech as a wolf didn't really apply. But I didn't feel like talking to myself, and he knew what I was thinking anyway. I mean, we weren't really different people.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger," he said, holding his hands up in front of him. "I mean, this isn't my choice. It's just the way things are. You knew better than to let Jason and his crew get close to you, and you did it anyway. That was a mistake. And you know why you did it?"

I kept glaring silently at him.

"Of course you do," he said. "It's because you didn't want to take the initiative. You didn't want to give away what you really are to those kids. So I guess the question is whether it was worth it. Something to consider, if we survive the rest of the day."

I looked away. I couldn't argue. Of course not. If I didn't agree with what he was saying, he wouldn't be saying it.

"In the meantime," he continued brightly, "there are a few things you should probably keep in mind if that's going to happen. See, you haven't spent a whole lot of time actually thinking about Jason. So now I have to tell you the things you already know but haven't bothered to work through explicitly. First off, he's not the same as the people he's working with. There's a qualitative difference there. He's just using them, and they haven't realized it. Right?"

I nodded, settling back into the snow a little more comfortably. I couldn't really get *tired*, here, but a physical body was engrained into my way of looking at the world enough that it was difficult to disregard the habits when I didn't have one.

"So the question is what he wants, and why he doesn't want them to know about it." The other me grinned. It wasn't a very happy expression. "Now, I'm just going to list off some facts, and how you put them together is up to you. One, you're still alive. Two, way back when Jason was first explaining things, he mentioned you killing his mentors, plural. Three, while you've got a considerable body count, there aren't all that many serious mages on it. Four, you've only run into one person who does anything like this sort of thing, and that would be Jon."

"Who?" I said, startled into speaking.

"Jon," he said impatiently. "You remember, back when you met the Inquisition? The guy that tried to eat you? Look, I know it's been a few years, but I'd like to think you could at least remember that. It was the first time you were kidnapped and tortured, remember? That should probably have left *some* impression."

"I remember," I said irritably. "I just forgot the name. Did I ever even hear his name?"

"You heard *a* name," he said with a shrug. "Doesn't really matter whether it's the right one. Point is that was the only kind of purely energetic manipulation you've run into, at least as far as I remember. You get where I'm going with this?"

"Obviously," I said. "I mean, when you draw the chain of logic out like that, it's not hard. You think Jason knows that trick?"

"It would explain some things, wouldn't it? I mean, it isn't anything certain, but it seems fairly likely. Now shut your mouth and pay attention. There's a reason that you're having this chat instead of a wet dream, and it's because this is *important*."

I debated a smart remark for about a second. Then I shut my mouth and paid attention.

"You're in trouble," he said. "You really, really are. You've been treating these guys like a minor issue. They're not. They've got the advantage on you right now, and the only reason they haven't actually killed you is because it doesn't suit their purposes. You need to start taking them seriously, *right now*."

"Okay," I said. "Take the people who are about to kill me seriously. Got it. Is that all?"

"No," he said. "The important bit is this. You made your choices. They brought you to this point. Every step on the road, it was your choice. You've tried to stay on the fence, as witnessed by the fact that you were too busy being a Guard to deal with the consequences of your actions as a jarl. Eventually, you're going to have to pick a side and go with it."

Grinning, he reached out and gave me a shove. He didn't have much leverage, at that angle, but again, this was the spirit world. Leverage didn't really *matter*.

I slipped off the ridge into the dark, and fell, and just kept falling.

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### Chapter Thirty

The next time I woke up, I was actually awake. I knew I was awake, because I felt too shitty for it to be a dream. My leg was throbbing; I'd almost forgotten that I'd been shot.

My subconscious had a point about that, if nothing else. I'd gotten complacent. I'd assumed that just because I'd beaten some big people, I no longer had to worry about the small ones. You'd think that I, of all people, would know better than to discount the threat things like guns could pose.

Beyond that, I couldn't really say much about my surroundings. It was dark, and I was tied down to something hard and flat. I could hear what sounded like a heating or ventilation system in the background, and my leg was tied with some sort of tourniquet.

That meant two things. First, it meant that they didn't want me dead yet. Second, it meant that they didn't care too much about how long I stayed that way. Tourniquets weren't something you used on people you cared about, not unless the alternative was imminent death. It probably wasn't a huge danger for me, but for a human it could be a literal death sentence if they didn't get lucky.

There was no one in the room, and I couldn't smell anything beyond a faint scent of must and disuse.

I debated waiting to see what happened next for about a second and a half. Then I remembered the dream I'd just had. Or vision, or whatever the hell I was supposed to call that. I wasn't even sure.

Waiting wasn't a good idea. If I waited, it might be too late before I even knew what was happening. A good card was no better than a bad one if I never played it.

"Loki," I said. Luckily they hadn't bothered gagging me. I could have gotten his attention without talking, of course, but this was simpler. "Loki, Loki. Come on, I know you're listening."

For once, I had some warning that he was about to show up. It turned out that Loki's eyes didn't just look like wildfires, they actually cast light. It wasn't enough to stand out most of the time, but in a completely dark room, it was pretty noticeable.

"Obviously I'm listening," he said, somewhere behind me. "You didn't think I wouldn't notice this, did you?"

"Nope," I said. "So what's the deal? What do I have to pay to get out of this?"

He considered me in silence for a few seconds, then said, "No."

I paused. "No?"

"No," he said again. "I'm not really interested in helping you this time. See, I think you've been getting too reliant on my help. So this time, you don't get it."

"You still owe me some answers," I said.

"I do," he agreed. "But do you really want to use them on this after I've made my opinion on the matter clear? I recommend you think carefully before you answer that question."

I gritted my teeth. "All right, then," I said, trying and failing to keep my voice calm. "Disregarding deals entirely, is there anything you just want to tell me?"

The room was silent for a moment. "You can't go back," Loki said at last. "Your choice, then, is whether you take the next step forward or this marks the end of your path. Either way, rest assured that I'll be watching."

And then the fires went away, and the room was dark again.

After Loki left, I spent a while testing my bonds myself, in various ways.

I didn't make much progress. I was tied down quite thoroughly; I couldn't move anything other than my head, and even then my range of motion was sharply limited. I wasn't entirely sure what I was secured with, but judging by feel it was a combination of rope and manacles. I could conceivably have just torn myself free by main force, but in my current position it wasn't going to happen. I was pretty strong, but I still needed leverage and positioning.

I considered trying to do something with Tyrfing, but I didn't have the mobility to pull it off. I could *get* the sword, I was fairly confident of that, but for all its power, Tyrfing did still require someone to move it. I couldn't even twitch my wrist enough for that.

Magic wasn't going to get me much further. There was no silver disrupting my power, which was a nice change. Considering Jason's specialty, though, it wasn't a huge surprise that I couldn't manage much anyway. Trying to gather power was like trying to empty a bathtub with a funnel, and the harder I tried, the harder it got. Getting enough together to do something dramatic, like unlock the manacles or tear the ropes, was out of the question.

I could, however, manage enough for a more natural application. After a minute or two of trying, I slipped out of my body and went looking for another host.

It was harder than it should have been, and not just because of whatever Jason had done. The nearest animal was, as far as I could tell, several hundred feet away at the least. That was unusual, in my experience. Most of the time there was something closer than that, even if it wasn't something I could really use. A few rodents, a stray cat, some pigeons, *something*.

When I did make contact, I got another shock. The animals around here were not the sort that you typically found in the city. Far from it. There were a couple of foxes and coyotes, which wasn't that unusual. But there were also a few wolves and a freaking grizzly bear, which were unusual and then some.

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Sifting through their senses, I got a sort of gestalt impression of the area. It was a wilderness, which wasn't that much of a surprise after the selection of animals I'd felt. The hills were forested and rocky, and there was a cold stream not too far away.

After a few seconds, I realized that I was underground. That explained why there were no animals closer to me, at least. It made sense, too. Jason was obviously pretty well prepared for all this, and keeping me away from animals was one of the first steps someone would logically take to keep me imprisoned somewhere.

It did present a bit of a problem for me, though. I didn't have enough time to figure out a solution—if there *was* a solution—before I heard the door open.

A second later a fluorescent light turned on, and I saw Jason and Reese step into the room. Or, rather, closet. It was barely bigger than the table I was tied down on.

More surprisingly, I also saw that there was a steel circle set into the floor around me. An enormously intricate design was laid down outside of that, a mix of geometric designs and runes in a wide variety of metals.

It was, I realized, a ritual circle, the basic structure of a major piece of magic. Probably part of the purpose was just to support whatever Jason had done to shut me down, but it would also serve as the setup for whatever the hell else he had planned.

I got a sinking feeling when I realized that. Somehow, I'd been planning on having an opportunity while they moved me to wherever they had it all set up. In hindsight, that had been a silly expectation. That would introduce another possible point of failure for no apparent reason. It wouldn't have been a very smart plan, and so far Jason seemed to be pretty damned good about avoiding stupid mistakes.

He was holding a silver knife engraved with more designs, one that stank of magic to a ridiculous degree. The second I saw how he was carrying it, I knew there wasn't going to be a final monologue and a last-minute rescue. Here in about thirty seconds he was going to walk over and kill me, as quickly and efficiently as possible. That was his style.

I panicked, trying to think of any way out of this. Nothing came to mind. I couldn't win this fight, not in any world I could imagine. Even if I'd been able to move, I wouldn't have put money on myself here. I still hadn't seen what Reese was capable of, beyond throwing up a portal with impressive speed. I hadn't, however, overlooked the fact that Jason had chosen him to bring with, while the fire mage was left to be torn to shreds covering their escape. Based on that alone, I was guessing that Reese was nobody to take lightly.

Fighting was out. Running was out; again, even if I could have moved, it wouldn't have been likely. Not with them between me and the only way out. I'd established extremely thoroughly that talking wasn't going to get me anywhere with these lunatics. The only help that could plausibly get here in time was Loki, and I didn't see him going back on his decision.

I had nothing.

Then, very suddenly, the world froze. Things stood still. Jason was standing with one foot in the air, utterly still, not even breathing. Outside, I could feel that each and every one of the animals I was in contact with was frozen as well, even their minds paused in the moment between thoughts.

An instant later, someone was standing next to me. Or, rather, *something*. He looked generally human in shape, a tall and terribly thin man. But his human mask wasn't very firmly in place. Things shifted under his skin, and his eyes were terrifying, pits of golden flame so deep it felt like I could fall forever in them. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something else entirely, a massive beast of darkness and hunger and impotent rage.

"I can help you," Fenris said. His voice was shaking; the strain of holding us outside the normal flow of time was obviously telling on him, after just a couple of seconds. "I can...I can save you. But you have to trust me. Do you trust me, Winter?"

That was a big question. There weren't many bigger. In spite of the circumstances, I took a second to decide.

In the end, though, there was really only one way I could answer. Most people would have said that it was a sign of utter madness, and they might have a point, but I genuinely did trust the Fenris Wolf. He might be a monster, a being of hunger and destruction, but to the best of my knowledge he'd never done me wrong.

And besides. I knew the game was crooked, but it was the only game in town.

"Yeah," I said. "I trust you."

Fenris nodded, and stepped up beside me. Time started up again as he lashed out, claws of darkness gathering around his fingers. I heard Jason screaming in cheated fury.

Those claws had to be unimaginably sharp. That was all I could think, oddly enough. They had to be incredibly sharp. I never even felt the pain as they broke my skin. Just...cold.

A second later, Fenris ripped my beating heart right out of my chest, right in front of my eyes.

## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

### Epilogue

Walking was hard. I hadn't fully learned how to control this body yet. Fenris had told me that it would feel natural in time, but until then I was more or less stuck with it.

Fenris had told me a lot of things. I hadn't understood most of them. I lacked the context to make sense of them, and explaining things was hardly his strong suit.

I saw the group gathered up ahead. I didn't approach. Not yet. There were too many unknowns. It had, apparently, been a while. A week for me to regain consciousness, according to Fenris. Another week to begin to grasp what I was, and how to function now that I was...different. He had done what he could to mitigate the time lost, but there were limits.

A lot could happen in two weeks.

I watched, though. It was fun, in a macabre way. And there were plenty of eyes for me to look through.

Not so long ago at all, I would have had a hard time doing so without them being aware of my presence. I tried to use a light touch, but actually going unnoticed? That would have been difficult, probably impossible with some of them.

I'd learned some new tricks since then. This one was simple, although not easy to describe. It was a matter of potential. All I had to do was be something that *could* be present, rather than something that actually *was*. It was very hard to detect something that only existed in theory. Doing it that way also made the sensory information I got back fuzzier, but with so many sources to draw on, the resulting gestalt image was still clear.

I doubted I could have learned that particular trick, before I was forcibly separated from my body. It wasn't a concept that human minds were suited to grasping. Having now given up any vestiges of humanity that might have remained to me, I found it a surprisingly easy thing to learn.

I'd learned a lot, in the past week. It had, on the whole, not been worth it.

I stood there for an hour or so while the funeral wrapped up. No one bothered me. Probably no one even noticed me. There wasn't a whole lot to notice, really. I wasn't moving, not even a little bit. I had to keep reminding myself to breathe.

Fenris had assured me that it would get to be natural at some point. Eventually I would no longer need to make an active attempt to breathe. Like a lot of the other things I'd always taken for granted, it would eventually become second nature again. Until then, there wasn't much I could do but keep dealing with the annoyance.

As the group started splitting up, I walked away. It was slow, but I'd given myself time. I was out of sight around the corner before they were anywhere close to me.

I wasn't sure which direction Aiko and Snowflake were going to go. So I gave them a nudge. It was nothing big. Just a very gentle, very delicate tugging on Snowflake's mind, a slight preference to walk in one direction rather than another. At the same time, I swept the snow into a slightly different position, one that pointed in my direction.

I was kind of amazed at how easy that was. I remembered when physically manipulating snow and ice had been difficult, even exhausting. Now it was...simple. It was barely harder to do it than to think about it. The hard part was just getting it exactly right, since I had only a vague sense of what I was doing. I had a vague impression of where the snow was, but I couldn't actually see it. While it had gotten easy to do, I still couldn't multitask well enough to do it and also process input from animals for my vision.

They started walking in my direction, though, splitting off from the rest. I wasn't entirely sure how much of that was luck and how much was my intervention. It didn't really matter.

It took a few minutes for them to reach me. They were moving fairly slowly. I wasn't surprised by that. It would have been odd for them to move quickly, in that context.

I'd spent a fair amount of time, over the past week, thinking about how to handle this conversation. I hadn't come up with much. There were some things you couldn't say well. I could have tried some kind of clever way of getting at it, but that had never really worked out for me. So in the end, I'd settled on the direct approach.

Aiko didn't look surprised when I stepped out in front of her. Snowflake didn't either, although she did at least look upset.

"Hi," I said.

"You have three seconds to explain before I kill you," Aiko said. Her voice was calm and cheerful, and she had a quiet half-smile playing about her lips. She didn't sound like I was joking.

"I'm only mostly dead," I said hastily.

"That's funny," she said. She had that same half-smile, the same joking tone, but there was something underneath that wasn't funny at all. I had seldom, if ever, gotten that much of a feeling of *intensity* from Aiko. "Because they shipped your body back to us in *pieces*. I just finished putting it in the ground, in fact."

"I know," I said. "I was watching."

"Well, you would be, wouldn't you?" she said. "So maybe, if you're so magnificently well-informed, you can explain to me how it is that you're still up and walking when your body is really most sincerely dead."



## Building Bridges (Winter's Tale)

Rather than answer, I held up my hand, and stopped concentrating on it.

The illusion of flesh faded, revealing what was underneath. The basic structure was ice, with here and there a bit of bone. The "meat" was packed snow, and it was all held together with shadows.

She stared for a second, then said, "Oh." That mocking little grin was gone.

"Fenris saved me, at the very end," I said quietly. "But his options for doing so were...limited. He couldn't get me out as what I was. So he took my...essence, or soul, or whatever word you want to use for it."

"Your heart," she said. "It was missing."

I nodded. "The heart isn't important, really. But it's a symbol." I resumed concentrating, and my hand took on the appearance of a hand. Skin, with flesh and blood and bone underneath. It was an imperfect mask, at best. Apparently that was another thing I'd get better at, as time went on. "He held me together long enough for me to learn how to do it myself. Apparently I can't go back to my original body, so I put this together instead."

"And why did you not contact me about any of this?"

I snorted. "Maybe because I was ripped apart down to my soul, and it turns out that coming back from that is actually pretty hard? It wasn't until yesterday I even figured out how to walk."

"It's really you," she said quietly.

"Yeah. It really is."

Aiko was silent for about half a second after that. Then she tackled me to the ground, squeezing as tightly as she could. Snowflake pounced a second later, licking my face and wagging her tail and generally seeming much more doglike than usual in her excitement. She hadn't said a word so far, but now that she was opening her mind to me I could feel her relief, so raw and intense it was almost painful.

It was a bit of a challenge to hold myself together. Snow wasn't naturally good at holding up under pressure, and it was hard to force things against their nature. It wasn't a huge problem; this body was a convenience, more than a necessity, and if it were broken I could easily make another. But I figured that hugging me until I crumbled would probably not a great first experience after hearing that I wasn't quite dead after all.

They didn't let me up for a solid minute. When they finally did, I sat up, surreptitiously fluffing the snow back out and freezing the cracked ice together again. Once I tugged the casual clothes I'd stolen back into place, I looked as good as new.

"I was expecting it to be harder to convince you," I commented. "I mean, I was ready to spend an hour exchanging passwords and doing proof of identity stuff."

Aiko shook her head. "I'd have known if you were lying."

I paused. "How?"

"Um," she said uncomfortably. "That's a long story."

"I've got some time," I said dryly.

"Well, here's the thing," she said. "When I thought those fuckers had killed you, I wasn't about to let them get away with it. But if they'd taken you down that easily, I needed a hell of a lot more power to beat them."

"Makes sense," I said. I'd have been getting a sinking feeling in my guts, if I had any. I'd always known that Aiko might do something reckless if something bad happened to me. I just hadn't expected to be around to deal with the consequences afterward.

"I didn't have all that many options for how to get it," she said. "But...you remember what Scáthach said? About how I had the potential to take her role?"

"I thought we arranged for her to die in a way that that couldn't happen."

"Turns out she wasn't actually dead," Aiko said. "She just really wished she was. Anyway, I figured that would be enough power to make a decent try at it. So I looked into it, and...well...the position was still open."

"So let me get this straight," I said slowly. "I'm a partially disembodied entity that might be transforming into some sort of deity of cold and predation. And you're the Maiden of the Midnight Court, the youngest Queen of the Unseelie Sidhe."

"That sounds about right," she said.

I sighed. "We are so utterly fucked," I said.

She shrugged. "We're alive," she said. "So I figure we're doing all right."

"True enough," I said. "Well, are you about done here? It sounds like I've got a lot of catching up to do."

*You have no idea,* Snowflake said, butting her head against my thigh. *Let's go home.*