

Broken Mirror

Emrys Vaughn

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Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

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Emrys Vaughn

This book is dedicated to the color green. Not, like, a limey yellow-green, but dark green. Also the letter epsilon, the number i , and the fact that the alternating harmonic series is convergent.

Chapter One

I'd been to the Isle of Shadows before. But this was still a very novel experience.

For one thing, I wasn't the same person I'd been back then. I'd changed, on a lot of levels. I didn't see the world the same way anymore, literally or figuratively. And not just because the only other time I'd come here I'd been in a psychotic rage and unable to think clearly. Or at all, really.

For another, the context was completely different. The last time I'd been here, I'd come to unseat the Queen with violence and destruction. This time was...well, pretty much the exact opposite of that.

I still hadn't fully wrapped my head around that. Or any of this, really. It was a lot to get used to, and I hadn't even finished adapting to how my own mental functions had changed. That was a pretty vital first step when it came to adjusting to other massive upsets.

This visit started about the same way as the last one. Aiko did the portals, of course. She'd always been better with that sort of magic than I was, and the role she'd adopted had done a lot to widen that gap. Messing around with the structure of the Otherside was a major part of what a Faerie Queen *did*. That was what the title *meant*.

Aiko was good. She was one of the best I'd ever seen. She could open a portal in a couple of seconds while carrying on a conversation, and she made it look easy. They were so smooth that even Snowflake barely even stumbled.

That, in itself, did a lot to drive things home. I'd taken portals that smooth in the past, but only very rarely, and they were always the result of a major power taking an interest. Someone like Ryujin, or a Twilight Prince. That was the league Aiko was playing in, now. In one step she'd gone from being a fairly minor member of a fairly minor faction to a notable factor on the world stage.

The three of us stepped out of the last portal into Faerie. We were standing on the path leading up to the castle, back in the island. Like the last time I'd been there, it was thronging with creatures from the Midnight Court. Unlike the last time, though, they weren't trying to kill me.

Instead, the instant Aiko appeared, they knelt and bowed their heads in her direction.

All of them. At once.

"Is this normal?" I asked in a whisper. Not that it would probably matter, given who we were dealing with. It seemed like a safe bet that a lot of the fae could hear my heartbeat, let alone a whisper. Except that I didn't have a heartbeat anymore. You need a heart for that.

"No idea," she replied, even more quietly. "This is the first time I've been here since I...you know...did it."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "Well, don't let them see you flinch." I offered her my arm, and she rested her fingers lightly on my elbow as we started up the path.

Not one of the fae said a word. There wasn't a sound as we walked up the hill. They weren't even breathing. I'd have known if they were. They stayed there, kneeling on the ground, until we were out of sight.

There were a lot of them, too. Enough that I gave up counting after a few hundred, and we weren't all that far up the path. And they didn't stop until we'd made it all the way up to the castle bridge.

I was a little hesitant to step out onto that bridge. The last time I'd done so, it bucked under my feet and threw me back to the shore, which would be rather embarrassing.

Aiko showed no such hesitation, and the stone didn't so much as twitch. It *did* twitch when I stepped on it, and kept quivering under my feet the whole way across, but it didn't go any further than that.

Across the moat, we were in the courtyard. It looked much the same, but my *awareness* of it had changed dramatically. I was still cognizant that it was a barren, utterly lifeless field of stone. But that was a side note, much less important than the less obvious things I could feel about the space. I could sense the currents of power running through it, torrents of energy rushing by just beneath my feet and on every side. They smelled dark, and subtle, but beyond that I couldn't say much about them. There was too much there for me to process, even now.

Even more than that, though, I was acutely aware of the *meaning* of the space. I had an impression of what the courtyard, and the castle which encompassed it, were intended for, the context in which they existed. I could feel the creeping fear that was inherent in it, the deception and power. It smelled dark and quiet, like secrets and sadness, regret without remorse. It tingled on my skin, to the extent that I had skin.

And as a final note, there was a constant awareness of...well, *me*. I had a sort of perpetual connection to the ideas that were most important to my makeup. I could feel cold, not in the sense of *being* cold, but in the sense of instinctively knowing where to find cold in my vicinity. I could feel the presence of predatory minds outside the walls, the *hunger* there.

Between processing all that and the constant effort involved in things like walking, I didn't have all that much attention left for actually looking at things.

The castle around the courtyard all looked about the same to me—which was, itself, probably the result of some kind of fae shenanigans, since the side we'd just come from seemed like it should

have been less heavily built. Aiko, though, seemed to know exactly where she was going as she walked up to one of the tall, narrow spires and opened the door.

Then again, she *would*. Being on what was, now, her home ground, I was guessing she was getting an incredible amount of information as a sort of constant feed. I could almost *feel* the connection between her and the island, subtle but very much present once I knew to look for it.

Inside, the building was far larger than it should have been, a vast, echoing hall rather than a narrow spire. Par for the course, with the Sidhe. It was, of course, empty, the black stone lacking any sort of decoration or indicator of purpose.

Aiko ignored all of that and went straight to a staircase in the corner. It was an impossible staircase, thin slabs of black marble stacked in a tight spiral with no other form of support. In a rational world, it couldn't have supported its own weight, and the staircase would have collapsed into a pile of broken stone. As it was, it was a perfectly serviceable spiral staircase.

It led both up and down from where we were. Naturally, we did not start climbing.

It was a long way down. A very, very long way, descending through a shaft no wider than the staircase itself. It was tight enough to trigger my claustrophobia, although it didn't manifest the way it once had. There wasn't fear, or even unease—no *emotional* reaction at all, in fact. There was just an abstract, cerebral sort of awareness of it. I knew that I was uncomfortable, that my current surroundings were upsetting me. I knew that I *should* be a little nervous, or even actively afraid. But the actual fear reaction just...wasn't there.

I didn't get tired, either. That had been one of the strangest things for me to get used to. Not having flesh meant that simple things like walking and breathing, which had once been so rote as to be entirely thoughtless, were instead difficult and demanding. But it also meant that I wasn't susceptible to the weaknesses of the flesh. I could still get tired mentally, but I simply didn't *have* a physical fatigue response.

Aiko, similarly, didn't get tired as we descended the stairs. Her movements were casually, effortlessly perfect. She didn't stumble, didn't slow down, didn't have to pause.

Snowflake, though, was still mortal, still flesh and blood. And she was *not* pleased about this. *You don't know how good you have it*, she groused to me when we were about two hundred steps in.

I could carry you, I offered. I had to pause for a second to do so; stairs were enough of a challenge, when it felt like I was operating a marionette rather than actually walking myself. In a sense, I supposed that perception wasn't inaccurate. Not that it mattered too much, since the stairs were narrow enough that we had to go in single file, and I was at the back of the line.

That's a good point, she said. *Why aren't you carrying me?*

Rather than answer her, I sped up slightly and pulled her up off the ground, cradling her in my arms. It wasn't hard. I wasn't quite as strong using this puppet-body of ice and darkness as I had been back when I was housed in my own flesh and bone, but it also didn't weigh nearly as much. I could make it move very, very fast when I wanted to.

The next twenty minutes passed in a steady, uneventful routine. The only real concern was boredom, which was alleviated considerably when Snowflake started telling impressively filthy jokes to break up the monotony. Aiko got in on it too; being largely unable to hear Snowflake was no longer a problem she had. One of the perks of the job, presumably.

I tried to remember to laugh—or, as was more appropriate for a lot of the jokes, groan. Neither one was an automatic response for me, anymore. They were things I had to think about, and even when I remembered, they didn't sound right. It was like telling jokes to the Terminator. There was always that momentary pause, while I tried to remember what I was supposed to sound like, and even when I did respond, it sounded artificial.

I didn't even try for a reaction more elaborate than that, and definitely not for actually contributing jokes myself. I was having a hard enough time managing things as it was. I figured being a bit less fun than I might have been was preferable to taking a tumble down the endless staircase.

We'd gone down a similar staircase last time. But that one had ended at a similarly vast hallway, and this time it was just a door.

It didn't look like much. The stone of the door was glossier than that we'd seen elsewhere in this castle, something like an enormous slab of obsidian. But beyond that, there was nothing particularly remarkable about this door.

I had an intense feeling of foreboding looking at it, though. This one wasn't the result of weird magical senses, though. It was just because I knew what was on the other side, and I'd have needed to be utterly, irrevocably mad to not be frightened at the prospect.

"Are you ready?" I asked quietly.

"Oh, hell no," Aiko replied. "Not even a little bit."

"Me neither," I said. "You going to do it anyway? Because I did not get the impression that this was optional."

"If it were optional, we wouldn't be here," she said. She took a deep breath, then shook her head briskly. "Okay. Let's get it over with."

I nodded and stepped forward to open the door for her. She stepped through first, trying her best to look authoritative and arrogant. She didn't do a very good job of it. It wasn't a look that came

naturally to her. Aiko was good at cocky, but the formality and gravitas she was going for here just weren't *her*.

The room inside the door was small. That was the first thing I noticed about it. It was small, and simple, almost cozy. There was a wooden table, not big enough to seat more than a dozen friendly people, and three chairs. A couple of empty bookshelves. That was it.

Two of the chairs were already occupied. I recognized one of the occupants, though there wasn't a whole lot there to recognize. Her black cloak didn't show anything of what might be underneath, not even a tiny bit of skin. I didn't know her name, and I wouldn't dare to use the names I could guess she'd used in the past. I called her Grandmother Midnight, because that was what she was—the eldest queen of the Midnight Court, the matriarch of the wicked fairies.

I had not, to the best of my knowledge, encountered the other being in that room before. She was beautiful, of course, in the overwhelming, inhuman, almost painful way that the high Sidhe usually were. She looked a whole lot like Scáthach had, in fact, at least at first glance. She had the same alabaster-white skin, the same raven-black hair. Only the eyes were different, a few shades darker—the green of a forest in summer, rather than spring.

Aside from her physical appearance, though, the difference was obvious. Her bearing had none of the playful mockery that Scáthach had exhibited, none of her thinly veiled sadism. The only thing that showed through her mask was a sort of detached, businesslike interest.

In other ways, the difference was even more dramatic. She smelled *powerful*, in a way that Scáthach never had. She'd been a powerhouse, of course, but this was something entirely different, in the sense that a military-grade assault rifle was different than a popgun. There was really no comparison.

This, presumably, was Mab, the middle queen of the Midnight Court and the one who most often acted as the Court's political head. She was a force of nature, the sort of being that most people thought of only as a bogeyman, although she still wasn't a match for Grandmother Midnight.

Between the two of them, though, this was very possibly the single most dangerous meeting I'd ever attended. That was a high bar, too.

They ignored me and Snowflake entirely as we walked in. No, *ignoring* wasn't the word. It was more like they were aware of our presence, and dismissed it utterly as unworthy of their attention.

No, they only had eyes for Aiko as she walked in and took the third seat, with me and Snowflake standing behind her.

"Welcome to the family," Grandmother Midnight said, with a chuckle that sent shivers down my spine.

Chapter Two

"Right," Aiko said, as I stepped in behind her and closed the door, setting Snowflake down on the floor. "Family." She sounded understandably uncomfortable at the thought.

"There are things to be established," Mab said in a flat, empty voice. "Now that you are assuming the responsibilities of your office."

"Cool," Aiko said in a casual voice which fooled nobody. "What do I have to do?"

"The question is not what you do," Mab said. "The question is what you are."

"Okay," Aiko said. "Um, quick question. Since we're all technically on the same side here, is there any chance you could stop the cryptic bullshit?"

I almost thought I saw Grandmother Midnight's cowl twitch, as though she were smiling underneath. Beyond that, they might as well have been statues for all the response she got out of them.

"Of course," Aiko muttered. "Who was I kidding? All right, then. What am I supposed to *be*?"

"You are the Maiden of Night," Mab said. "Reflect that fact."

"Okay. So that means...violent, psychopathic, and scheming, but not quite mature enough about it to be a grown-up?"

This time there was no question that the cowl twitched. I heard the barest whisper of laughter, bone-dry and cold, but recognizably laughter all the same.

"That is one interpretation of the role," Mab said. "It is not wholly wrong."

"You realize I do those things anyway, right?"

"That is why the offer was extended," Mab said. "The less the office is required to mold you, the simpler the process is."

I was reasonably confident I should have shivered at that. I probably would have, if I still had a physical fear response. It was sure as hell an ominous thing to hear.

"So just be myself," Aiko said. "Are there things I have to do in particular? I don't really know how hands-on this gig is. Am I supposed to be here every Tuesday to boss people around or something?"

"You will know when there are specific obligations to be met."

"Be myself unless otherwise noted, and I'll know when otherwise noted applies. Got it. So...if it's this individualistic, why did we even need to have this meeting?"

"There are formalities to be observed," Mab said in that same voice, empty of all emotion. "Such as the appointment of a champion to act on your behalf when appropriate."

"Where's yours?" Aiko asked flippantly.

"I do not bring pets to important meetings," Mab said. I wasn't sure whether that was a dig at Aiko or not; it could have been, but it could also just be a statement of fact. Mab was really, really hard to get a read on.

"Fair enough," Aiko said. "Well, I think I'm going with this guy." She elbowed me in the ribs, a little harder than necessary. She was more nervous than she was letting on. Or possibly she'd just forgotten that I wasn't wearing armor. There wasn't a lot of point in armor for me, these days.

That got a response, the first really notable response I'd seen from the elder Queens in this meeting. There was a pause, one that dragged on for a few seconds. I couldn't see Grandmother Midnight's face, and Mab's was still a blank, beautiful mask. But I got the impression of surprise, all the same.

"You realize that a champion is meant to be a living mortal," Mab said.

"Are you saying I'm dead?" I asked. More to see how she'd respond than anything, really. I knew better than to expect a straight answer from Mab.

"I say that there comes a point at which life and death cease to be meaningful concepts. You passed that point some time ago. And there are other issues which make this choice problematic, as well."

"No."

It was amazing how much of a response that one word got. It was just one word, spoken in a barely audible rasp. But everyone, even *Mab*, shut their mouths and turned to look at Grandmother Midnight. All at once.

"Let them do it," the crone rasped.

"Pardon me, ma'am," I said. "But if this is a problem, it might be better not to."

"Such caution," she replied. "Not at all like last time. Arrangements have been made for this, however."

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I paused, and while I couldn't really shiver, I did have a definite feeling of unease. That statement had...a lot of implications, none of which I liked. I couldn't help but be reminded that the last time I was here, Grandmother Midnight had offered me the chance to be *her* champion.

"This won't end well, will it?" I asked quietly.

I'd heard it a few times now, but the sound of Grandmother Midnight laughing was still creepy as hell. It rasped and twisted and caught in her throat, working its way out only with difficulty. It sounded like it stained the world darker just by its presence. I could feel, now, that this impression wasn't entirely wrong.

I understood that a little better, now. I understood what Mab meant when she said the important thing was for Aiko to *be*. One of the things I'd come to realize was that power was a little like mass. At high enough concentrations, it started to bend the world around it just by existing.

By the time the laughter stopped, Snowflake was shivering a little, and had our surroundings been a little bit less dangerous I was guessing she'd have been growling. For that matter, I might have been growling too.

"It won't end well," Grandmother Midnight said at last. "Nothing ever does."

I tried to smile. The result was probably more creepy than anything. I'd always been better at psycho-killer than comforting, when it came to smiles. I doubted that had changed.

"True enough," I said. "Well, I'm willing to try it. I doubt it can be much worse of an idea than everything else we've done."

Aiko snorted. "Setting the bar low, there. Was there anything else that needs dealt with first?"

"Not presently," Mab said. "Go. There will be more to be done when that is complete."

With no more formality than that, the meeting was over. I knew the meeting was over, because both Mab and Grandmother Midnight were gone. I didn't see either of them move, didn't feel a bit of magic.

Then I realized that Aiko had moved, too. She was standing instead of sitting, and on the other side of the room.

"Um," I said. "What just happened?"

"A conversation," Aiko said sourly. "Which Mab decided you didn't need to be a participant in. So she removed you from it."

I paused. "Removed? What does that mean?"

"She put the two of you into stasis," she said. "For...an hour or so, I think. They left a few minutes ago."

I frowned. "Oh," I said. "That's...unsettling. What was the conversation about?"

Aiko shrugged. "Can't really explain. Some of it I don't really have the words for, and some of it I'm not allowed to talk about."

That was a bit odd. Aiko wasn't normally the sort of person to care too much about what she was and was not allowed to do.

I didn't say anything about it, though. I was guessing she was already chafing under the restrictions of the role she'd chosen to adopt, and for me to remind her of that fact wouldn't make it any better.

"You want to get this over with?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I know what we need to do."

"I'm not going to enjoy this, am I?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It could be worse. It's us, at least. And it won't be any more fun if we wait, so let's do this." She opened the door and started for the stairs. I picked Snowflake up and followed her.

The top of the stairs wasn't the same as it had been when we went down. The vast, empty hall was replaced with an expansive suite. It was also at the top of one of the castle's towers, as I found out when I glanced out the window at a five-hundred-foot drop.

It felt familiar, and that wasn't a coincidence. It took me a couple seconds to realize it, but it was very clearly an expanded replica of our bedroom from the castle in Transylvania.

Aiko didn't seem surprised by the change, which made sense. Hell, she was probably the *reason* for it. This was her domain, after all. It stood to reason that she would be able to mold it to her will the way I'd seen really powerful people manipulate the Otherside in the past.

It was going to take a bit of getting used to thinking of Aiko as someone who could use that kind of power, instead of someone who had it used on her.

"Okay," she said, scratching Snowflake's ears. "You can't stay for the next part."

Can't? Snowflake asked. *Or don't want to?*

"Both," Aiko said firmly. "You want to take a nap, or get some food, or something?"

Nap, she said. *Wake me when you're done with the freaky faerie rituals.* She then walked back out the door and lay down at the top of the stairs.

Afterward, I never really remembered what happened after that. Not in any clear or coherent way.

The process involved sex, and blood, and darkness. The blood was Aiko's, presumably, since it wasn't like I had any left. But I took some damage, as well. I remember having to scrape my body together a few times, and I was still missing some chunks by the end.

Somewhere along the way, I got a glimpse of just what I was joining myself to, what I was letting inside. I got a tiny glimpse of what the Midnight Court was *for*.

I couldn't fathom that purpose. Not really. My mind was not meant for that kind of thing, wasn't made to process that. It was too alien to anything that I understood the world to be.

I didn't scream at that revelation. I hadn't been breathing for a while, at that point, and I sure as hell wasn't going to start just for that. I couldn't spare the attention to even if I wanted to. I got very little physical feedback from this body, and I was guessing it was just as well, because what did get through was enough to leave me half-stunned.

The next several hours stretched out into a small eternity, floating in utter darkness and bitter cold, filled with power and primeval hunger.

Later—much later, at least from my perspective—I was lying on my back on the stone floor. Mostly on my back, at least; my torso was sort of twisted on its side, and my neck was bent at an angle considerably sharper than it should have been able to get to. I wasn't really dependent on things like nerves and muscles to control my body, and keeping it to vaguely human limits was more a matter of habit than anything.

Not that it would have looked anything like human, anyway. I'd stopped maintaining a mask of flesh over it somewhere along the way, and I hadn't yet bothered to put it back on. As a result, my body still looked more like a vaguely humanoid ice sculpture than any kind of person.

The influence of the power I'd just taken into myself was obvious, if you know how to look. The strands of darkness tying the ice and snow together were a little bit darker, a little more real. The shadow I cast, too, was just a little larger and darker than it should have been. There was a *depth* there, as though when I looked into that shadow I was seeing something more than just a patch of darkened stone.

I could feel a similar depth inside me. I couldn't really put words to it—I wasn't entirely sure words *existed* for this sort of feeling. The closest I could come to really grasping it was to picture a sort of well in my soul, except instead of water, it led down into darkness. The power wasn't in me, not really, not beyond a minimal amount to establish that connection. But I could tap a hell of a lot of it, through that connection.

That wasn't something I could do without consequences. I didn't fully grasp the nature of that well, and I couldn't *begin* to fully comprehend the nature of the power it was tapping into. But it didn't take a genius to guess that it wasn't something to do casually. Power never came without a consequence, and when the source of that power was the Midnight Court, it wasn't hard to guess that the consequence wouldn't be a pretty one.

But if we went down, Aiko and I would go down together. If the whole thing weren't so spectacularly messed up, it would have almost been romantic and sweet.

"So what now?" I asked, twisting my head further to the side to look at Aiko on the floor next to me. There was a quiet *crack* of breaking ice as I pushed the "bones" in my neck past the breaking point. It only took a moment's thought to fuse it back together in the current position. That was definitely a bright side of being associated with ice rather than, say, stone.

"Lie here and contemplate our many and vast mistakes," Aiko said sleepily. "Wake the dog. Then I have to go introduce myself to my new minions. You should probably be there for that. You'll have to start making an impression on them at some point."

"What kind of impression are you thinking?" I asked.

"They aren't the sort of people to be impressed by nice guys," she said. "So I figure you can just be yourself."

I snorted. "Should be fun," I said. "When is that?"

She shrugged, a fluid, almost boneless gesture. "Whenever I want," she said. "Basically. Time is pretty flexible here anyway. Like, as far as anyone else is concerned, we've only been in here for about fifteen minutes."

I blinked. A thin film of snow acted to lubricate the eyelid of darkness as it slid over an eyeball carved as a rough sphere of ice. It was funny how much my instinctive understanding of how a body worked carried over to this. If I'd had to actually build a functioning replica of a human body out of frozen water and darkness, I'd have had no chance at all. But if I just gave a sort of general instruction and let my subconscious take care of the details, I got a sort of functional result.

"You can do that?" I asked.

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She shrugged again. "Here? Yeah, sorta. It's not a precise sort of thing, but I can make it faster or slower."

"That part's nice," I said.

Aiko grinned and nodded. "It really is," she said. "I mean, I get that Faustian bargains are bad and everything, but *damn*, the perks are nice."

"Otherwise nobody would take the deal," I said. "All right. Putting this off any longer isn't going to make it hurt any less. Let's just get this over with."

She sighed and pushed herself to her feet. "Let's," she said. "I'm really not looking forward to this. Who'd have guessed we'd end up here, huh? Me actually being in charge of people?"

"I don't think anybody saw this coming," I lied.

Chapter Three

The throne room had undergone some major renovations since the last time I saw it. Not surprising, I supposed. This room was the center of Aiko's power, at this point. It made sense that it was the first place to reflect the new ownership.

The basic structure was the same. It was a vast, open room. Cavernous, really. But cosmetically, it was very different. Rather than total darkness, it was defined by the interplay of light and shadow. Mostly it was kept dark, but there were patches that were brightly lit. The light shifted and danced slowly, unpredictably. As was often the case, it didn't so much illuminate the darkness as emphasize by contrast just how deep it ran.

The floor had also changed. Instead of flat, featureless black stone, it was black with swirls of crimson running through it. The color was arranged in ways that almost, but never quite, formed repeating patterns. There were patches of ice on the ground, as well, and snowdrifts scattered irregularly around the room. The lights reflected off the snow, adding another layer to the slow, constant dance of light and shadow.

The throne had shifted as well. Scáthach had sat on a chair carved from a single piece of gem-quality amethyst. This was similar, but it was a blood-red stone rather than violet. Ruby, or something like it. And while it still had an assortment of runes and hieroglyphs carved into the stone, pride of place was clearly held by a stylized image of a diving falcon on the back of the chair. After a moment I recognized it as the coat of arms Loki had assigned her, way back when. At the time, I hadn't understood why she would need a coat of arms.

How long had this been planned, I wondered? Since the day I met her? Since before that? Just how much of what had happened to us had been planned from the start?

The room was crowded with every sort of fae that I could imagine, from Sidhe nobles to hags and trolls. Every last one of them got well out of our way as we walked in, leaving a ten-foot aisle to the throne absolutely empty. We walked up to it in total silence.

Aiko sat—or, more accurately, lounged—in the throne. I stood next to it, with Snowflake by my feet, and tried to look threatening and ominous. It was probably undercut a bit by the fact that I was dressed in casual clothing rather than armor.

Although I wasn't planning on that staying the case for long. There were *reasons* I didn't feel the need to wear armor.

"Okay," Aiko said. Her voice carried through the room like she was using a high-quality PA system. "I'm taking charge here. Now, I'm sure there's going to be some urge for a lot of you to cause trouble for me while I'm getting used to the role. I'm telling you right now that that is a bad idea. You

annoy me and I'm perfectly fine with killing you. This is the only warning I plan to give you, so I suggest you take it seriously."

"Do you really intend to kill everyone that goes against your whim?" one of the Sidhe nobles said. All of the Sidhe were beautiful, of course, but his beauty was less attractive than most, and more condescending, a silent statement that he was better than everyone and everything around him. He sounded oily, and he smelled like a snake.

"I figure I'll have the thug do it," she said, nudging me in the ribs with her foot. I suddenly noticed that she was barefoot. Of course she was. Cold wasn't a problem for her anymore. We had that in common. Which was a good thing, really. Otherwise she'd be liable to get frostbite just being near me.

The Sidhe responded in what was, really, a very predictable way. He threw a blast of dark fire at me, something that didn't so much cast light as eat it, and left an acidic scent in the air behind it.

I didn't even try to dodge, and the blast hit me in the face. My head exploded into a cloud of steam, and the rest of my body collapsed to the ground.

There was no pain. That was the most interesting thing about it. There was no pain response associated with what happened.

There was just a sudden, wrenching shift in perspective. My view of the world twisted, instantly and dramatically.

The most immediately noticeable thing was a sort of loss of location. I wasn't associated with a specific point in space. Or, rather, I was, but the relationship was suddenly a great deal looser. A single step could carry me across the room, since I wasn't really *moving* in any physical way. Movement was just how I conceptualized a transition, a shift in focus and attention.

The second thing that changed was the pattern of light and darkness. It went from a constantly shifting maze to a pattern that was static, locked in place. It also had nothing to do with illumination. Again, it was just how my mind was interpreting something completely unrelated to visual input.

Instead, it indicated the presence of something in line with my nature. Here, the "light" indicated the presence of ice and snow, of cold. The snowbanks and ice slicks in the room burned with a cold light to my sight, casting a dimmer glow over their immediate surroundings. The stretches of stone between them, meanwhile, were dark and empty.

I took a moment to orient myself and decide what to do next. It didn't take long. Like a fool, the Sidhe noble who'd blasted me was standing right next to a snowbank, with his back turned towards it.

I took a step towards that snowbank, blurring across the empty stone floor between me and it. I couldn't have stood there if I wanted to; there was nothing to host me, nothing for my mind to inhabit.

Once there, I stepped into the snow, and then *through* it. The world twisted again, snapping back into a view more in line with what I had grown accustomed to in life, as a loose body formed itself out of snow. I called Tyrfing as I reached out with one arm, forming a rough pseudopod out of snow.

The cursed sword still came when I called. If I'd had any doubt that I was really *me*, that would have settled it. I might have changed in ways that I could never have seen coming or comprehended before they happened, but it still recognized me. It was still bonded to me. 'Til death did we part, if death was even a concept that could be applied to me anymore.

My "body" wasn't much—just a torso and a pair of arms extending out of the snow, with no clear features. It took time to form a decent replica of the body I'd had.

But for all its crudity, it did have one undeniable perk. It was *strong*. Something of the unnatural strength I'd had, as a werewolf and a jotun and who knew what else, carried over. There was something else there, too, a trace of darkness that was a new element in my composition, a shadow just a bit deeper than the mere absence of light.

I shaped myself out of the snow, and before anyone could so much as shout a warning, I hit the Sidhe nobleman with Tyrfing and the kind of force that could punch holes in concrete. He hit the ground in two pieces, both flickering with pale fire from the touch of the iron.

A second or two later, my body collapsed back into snow, casting me back into that disembodied state. It had been too hastily constructed, too unfinished to hold me for more than a moment or two. Tyrfing clattered to the floor beside the dying Sidhe, the blade gleaming against the floor. No one moved towards it.

I could see the sudden wave of shock go through the fae as they realized what had just happened. More than a few people cast sidelong glances at the snow and ice and edged away from it, suddenly realizing that it was more than just a choice of decor.

"I can't change what you are," Aiko said into the echoing silence. "I can't alter your natures. I'm not even going to try. But I can impose some limits. I am your Queen, and you *will* acknowledge that." The words sounded odd, vague and warped, like I was hearing them underwater. Probably because I *wasn't* really hearing them. There was enough here for me to work with that I could understand them to some extent, but it wasn't the same thing at all.

I found it interesting, in a way, the extent to which her role had already influenced her. Aiko had never been that much of a commanding presence, really. But now there was a regality to her bearing, an almost palpable authority. She'd just told this entire room full of Sidhe to sit down and shut up, and not a single voice was raised against her.

And granted probably part of that was because of the clear possibility that I'd cut them in half if they tried. But then again, this *was* the Midnight Court. Violence was a part of their nature. That wasn't really good or evil, as such. It was just...what they were.

"I will meet with many of you in the coming weeks," Aiko continued. "I expect I will be making some changes around here. In the meantime, you may go and consider what has been said here."

Every single one of them knelt for a moment, then stood and began filing out. There must have been more fae magic at work, because despite the size of the crowd and the fact that there was only one exit, it only took a few moments for the room to be empty.

No one went near the corpse, or the sword, or even looked at them too closely.

I stepped into another snowbank, then just waited as they left. I couldn't see anything much in that state. I was too coherent, too closely tied to a specific body, to use the weird sensory model that I'd picked up when I ceased to be a fully living being. But the senses I was more used to, and which I instinctively mimicked while in a body, were largely blocked by the snow.

It wasn't exactly a moment of vulnerability. I was still, for all practical intents and purposes, invulnerable. Even if someone destroyed everything that could host me—every bit of snow and ice, every predator, everything that I could manifest through to act on the world—even then, I wouldn't really be hurt. Not in a meaningful way. Inconvenienced, perhaps. But not hurt, not killed. From what Fenris had said, there were *very* few things that could kill me at this point.

But that in-between state was definitely a moment of *weakness*. It was a moment when my ability to perceive and influence the world was sharply limited.

I dimly heard footsteps coming closer, then stopping. "Well," Aiko said, outside my snowbank. I wasn't sure how she'd known which one I was in, beyond the obvious. "That was fun."

I waited a moment longer for my body to finish forming, then clawed my way out of the snow. It moved aside at a touch, or a thought. It was mine to command.

This body wasn't as good as the one that had been destroyed. It was still a little crude, lacking the fine details. Even if I put on an illusory mask of flesh and blood over it, I was guessing it would be noticeably imperfect. It wouldn't look real. But it was functional, and it was formed enough that I could sustain it more or less indefinitely.

"I would have thought you'd hate it," I commented, sitting down and leaning back into the snow. The image amused me—snow leaning into snow. Even if I was as much formed of ice and darkness as actual snow. "Too political."

"The Midnight Court has a fun sort of politics," she said. "And they mostly have to deal with my whims, instead of the other way around. That makes it easier."

"You can't lie, can you?" I asked.

"Not as such," she said. "No. That was part of the deal I made."

I nodded. It made sense. Even if she hadn't been born fae, she'd effectively chosen to become such when she took the job. It fit that she would have taken on some of their weaknesses as well.

"That's going to be hard," I commented. "Especially for you."

She grinned broadly. "Just means I have to get twistier," she said.

I nodded with a creak of breaking ice. "Yeah," I said. "What now?"

"I'm going to have to have those meetings," she said. "There's a lot to do right now. I'm not doing this job the same way Scáthach did."

"Do you think you'll have the choice?" I asked.

"I think so," she said. "The role is...it isn't a cookie cutter. It isn't about forcing people into exactly the right mold. It's more a matter of...expressing the right concepts. How I go about expressing those concepts is up to me."

"Two plus two is four," I said. "But so is three plus one."

"Or two times two," she said. "Yeah. That's a good analogy. I actually have more flexibility than I would have expected."

"That's good," I said. "Do you want me here to put the fear of me into them?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No," she said. "Thanks, but no. I have to show them that I can stand up for myself."

"Okay," I said. "I've got my own things to take care of. Meeting with my minions and reestablishing control in Colorado Springs. I'll meet you back here?"

"Yeah," she said. "Do that. You can get back on your own?"

"I haven't forgotten how to open portals," I said dryly. "I can get back around on my own." I stood with another creak of breaking ice and shifting snow. "Come on, Snowflake," I said. "Let's let her do Court things. I think you're going to enjoy this trip."

Will we get to kill things? she asked, standing up from where she'd been lazing next to the throne. She hadn't even gotten up at any point, or involved herself in the proceedings in any way. Smart dog.

"If past experience of what happens when I leave that city to its own devices is any guide?" I said. "Yeah. Probably we will."

Cool, she said. I can't wait.

We'd debated, at first, telling my minions what had happened. Or something of it. Most of them weren't remotely equipped to understand the full reality of it, but the gist could have been explained.

In the end, though, we'd decided it was a bad idea. I had *enough* henchpersons that I couldn't remotely guarantee that all of them were loyal. Even of the ones that were loyal, there was no guarantee that they were smart. Hell, given that they were working for me, there was practically the opposite. So any information shared with them was potentially information leaked to an enemy.

In the end, we'd decided to just carry on like nothing had happened. Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated, and such. Some of them, of course, would know better. And my inner circle would have to be informed, at least partially. But for most of them, this was need-to-know information, and they didn't need to know.

Most of them didn't even know I wasn't dead and gone. I'd sent messages to Kyi and Selene, including statements that they shouldn't inform anyone else. I thought the reactions to my reappearance would be telling.

I'd told some other people, as well. Friends, mostly. I'd made sure that Kyra, Anna, and Edward all knew. I'd sent a message to Alexis. There were a couple of other werewolves I'd known when I was younger who were still around, and some people from Pryce's.

I'd seriously thought about letting them continue thinking I was dead. It would probably have been kinder to them, all things considered. But in the end, I just couldn't bring myself to do so. I'd already lost...so much of my old life. Things I'd given up, and things that had been taken from me. I couldn't bring myself to cut those ties as well.

By the time I got back to the city, it was dusk. The sunset was beautiful, and I stopped to watch it before going in. It seemed like it had been ages since I'd just stood and watched the sunset.

It was interesting how much comfort the little things could provide, when the big things were ugly.

Once it was dark, I walked up to the door and opened it without knocking. The wards let me through without complaint. I'd been keyed into them when they were built, and I was still *me* enough for them to recognize. Snowflake came in, as well, walking just to my right.

I'd taken the time to finish sculpting my body into a passable imitation of the original, and I was maintaining the mask over it. Clothing hadn't been an issue; my suite at the Isle of Shadows had a full closet, including duplicates of everything from the castle in Romania. Those duplicates were absolutely perfect, right down to the magic I'd woven into the fabric.

I walked into the throne room, and by prior arrangement, everyone of real importance in my organization was there waiting for me. I wasn't sure how Selene had managed to get everyone there at once, at just the right time, without any of them noticing anything odd about it. She was really very good at what she did.

The response when I walked in was instant and pronounced.

Jibril looked momentarily, intensely annoyed. Then the ghoul smiled wryly and nodded to me. The gesture reminded me of a fencer's acknowledgment of a touch, not so much a greeting as recognition of a point scored.

Vigdis whooped and threw her arms up, grinning like a madwoman. It was nice that someone was glad to see me again, at least. Even if it was just because she was a psychopath and I let her kill people on a fairly regular basis.

Between those two extremes, the responses were mostly defined by their surprise, or lack thereof. Most of them seemed shocked. A few—Kjaran and Luna, in particular—very much didn't.

But by and large, they seemed glad to see me. They seemed glad to have me back.

I wasn't sure why that was as much of a surprise as it was.

"Hi," I said, walking up to my throne of black iron. I thought, with a sort of wry amusement, that our days of complaining about the thing were probably gone. I didn't have the physical responses to make it really uncomfortable, and if Aiko was really fae now, odds were good she couldn't stand the iron. "Did you miss me?"

There was a momentary pause, then the room filled with laughter. It was a relieved sort of laughter, the sound you make when it turns out that everything's going to be okay after all. I found myself grinning as I settled down into the throne. As much as I hated the thing, as much as I'd never wanted this job, there was something...comforting about coming back to it. There was a feeling of *continuity* about it, a feeling that as much as everything had changed, some things were still the same.

Selene was standing next to me with a sandwich and a cup of tea—cold tea, of course; I could imagine the effect of drinking hot tea, and it wasn't likely to be a fun one. Kyi was going over scouting reports and talking with the housecarls about patrol schedules and countermeasures. Tindr was walking up with a notebook full of numbers.

It felt like coming home. I'd never have expected it, but somewhere along the way, this had turned into home.

My city. In spite of everything, this was still my city.

Chapter Four

I didn't fully appreciate the extent to which my sensory perceptions had changed until I walked through the city streets.

Until that point, I'd been able to more or less fool myself into thinking that things hadn't changed that much. Operating in limited, familiar environments, it almost seemed like old times.

Out in the city, that wasn't so much the case. There was too much to see, and I could see too much of it.

I knew, without even having to think, where every animal within a mile of me was. I could feel their minds pressing against me, a constant, quiet hum of activity. It only took a passing thought for me to let that murmur rise to a resounding chorus, flooding into my mind. Most of that input didn't make it to my conscious thoughts, just stayed in the background.

Those minds were part of what was currently sustaining my existence. Based on what Fenris had said, anyway, but it made sense. I'd always had a strong connection to animals, and especially predators. I'd been able to exist as a purely mental entity by, essentially, timesharing space in their minds that they weren't using. In doing so I'd been transitioning from a purely mortal being to something else, though I hadn't recognized it at the time. I'd been taking the first steps on the road that led me, eventually, here. Now that I'd taken another step on that path, the relationship had grown more complex, but that connection was still one of the things maintaining me in my current state.

All of that, though, was more or less an extension of something that I'd had most of my life to get used to. That was relatively easy to deal with.

The rest was less so. The way I could feel a chill in the air, a scrap of snow or ice, a sense so basic I couldn't fit it into words. I wasn't translating it into vision, or scent, or anything else, at this point. It was a sense all its own. I could feel it, and it only took a little more thought and effort to act on it, manipulating it.

Darkness was similar—the same, in fact, since shadows tended to bring a certain cooling effect. Beyond that, though, there was a looseness to it. Standing in the darkness felt, in an odd metaphysical sort of way, like standing on the surface of gelatin. There was a surface that I was pressing against, but it was only a minimal resistance. With a slight push, I could break through it. Through it, I could feel a connection to every other shadow anywhere close to me, like a vibration in a spider's web.

With all of that to draw on, my experience of the city was nothing like what I'd been accustomed to before. Strangely, though—or not so strangely, considering—it didn't feel odd. It felt normal, natural. I had to keep reminding myself that it *wasn't*, that the people with me didn't have that appreciation of their surroundings.

Snowflake, at least, understood. She could feel an echo of what I did. It was a distant echo, but it was enough for her to grasp the most basic level of what I was getting. She had some of the information I did, and she knew why I was so distractible. The rest—the housecarls with me, and the people I was here to meet—didn't even have that.

I had to remind myself that this was temporary. Eventually it would all be natural for me again. Eventually I wouldn't have to focus on this, any more than I'd had to concentrate to use my eyes when I'd had eyes.

For now, I just had to muddle through as best as I could.

I'd brought thugs, although I didn't really need them. At this point, they were little more than a statement. Anything that they could present a meaningful threat to was so far below me that it wasn't even a challenge.

If power were graded on a scale of one to ten, I thought I'd gone up a solid two or three points recently, between Fenris and Aiko. I hadn't had the chance to really test my new powers yet, but between what I did understand of them and what I'd seen of Carraig, I was pretty sure I'd suddenly transitioned to an entirely different world of power.

I was guessing that I was about to have the opportunity to find out.

Snowflake was at my heel as I walked up to the cafe. I had Kjaran and Vigdis there, as well as Herjolfr. I hadn't interacted with the skald much. I still didn't particularly like having him in my employ at all. But on this occasion, I thought I could make an exception.

Pellegrini had brought his own thugs. Naturally. The man called Andrews was with him, quietly dangerous as usual. I could smell him, his magic, vivid and sharp. He felt like a coiled spring with a sharpened edge. The girl, who smelled more fae than ever, was a bit more of a mystery. She smelled cold and hungry, but there was a depth to her, a subtlety. She nodded in my direction, very slightly, as I approached.

The third party was largely an unknown party to me. They'd shown up in the short time while I'd been "dead." Or not so short. Two weeks was a tiny scrap of time on the cosmic scale, but two weeks at the right time was an eternity.

My people had been able to dig up some information about them. They were human, as far as could be determined. But they were surprisingly well-equipped, and well-informed, which between them suggested well-connected. They had resources. And they had a very serious hate on for everything that *wasn't* human.

I was pretty sure that they were the same group that had been attacking werewolves around the country. I was also pretty sure that their presence in my city, and the suspiciously good timing with which they'd appeared, were not coincidences.

Taken as a whole, I was reasonably confident that they had a tie back to Jason. It made sense. He'd been the one arming the last group of these lunatics I'd seen, the one that had attacked Conn's little meeting. He'd been in a position to know exactly when I was removed from play, since he was the one that did it. Between those, it figured that he was responsible for sending these people here to make trouble.

I intended to find out. I owed Jason, and I didn't have any intention of forgiving that debt. He had, after all, killed me. The fact that it ended up not being quite as permanent as he'd intended didn't change that.

There were five of them. Four were clearly members of the group; I could smell magic around them, but not on them, in them. They were using someone else's toys, but of themselves they were no more magical than anyone on the street. They looked like hardened killers, and I was guessing it was because they were.

The last one, the odd one out, was different. He smelled like he had magic. Not a lot, but some. Still human, although I'd come to think of that as a less binary descriptor than I once had. It was hard to really characterize a mage as fully human, even if they'd started out that way.

I thought about making a dramatic entrance, since there were so, so many ways I could have done so. At this point, I had *options* when it came to dramatic entrances. But they would all have given things away, so in the end, I just opened the gate of the patio and walked in.

Snowflake came with me. The housecarls waited outside the fence, both as a statement of power and for their own safety.

This meeting wasn't going to go peacefully. I was guessing we all knew that, although it was anybody's guess who'd throw the first punch.

I walked up to the table and sat in the one open chair. That put my back to the street, which would have been a source of discomfort. Now, it didn't really matter. With so many ways to monitor what was happening, which way I was facing was more or less immaterial.

"Hi," I said, breathing for the first time in almost an hour. I hadn't bothered, earlier. It still required attention for me to breathe, and the people I was with weren't going to be upset if I didn't.

"Hello," Pellegrini said. "I trust you're feeling better?"

I smiled casually. "I've felt worse," I said, not really answering his question. I was still capable of lying, but more than ever, I felt like it was probably a bad idea. It might reflect poorly on Aiko if her thug was breaking her rules, after all.

Pellegrini caught the distinction. I could see it in his eyes, hear it in his breathing. The girl caught it. Andrews might have caught it, or might not; he wasn't interested, wasn't *invested* enough in this conversation for it to be clear.

None of the human supremacists caught it. I was confident of that.

"Good to hear," Pellegrini said, another phrase that was quite a bit more meaningful than the words suggested. A veiled threat, a congratulation on my promotion, a statement of solidarity...it incorporated elements of all of those.

The other faction at this table might as well not have known the language, there was such a large proportion of the conversation flying over their head. I'd have felt sorry for them if I didn't feel so contemptuous of them.

"You're Winter Wolf?" one of them said. The apparent leader, he was the only one of their group sitting down. Effectively, the rest were there as decoration, as objects more than people. It was a fairly common sort of approach among the supernatural. I wasn't sure whether it was similarly common among gangsters, or Pellegrini was just a quick study. Oddly enough, for all that I'd spoken and worked with him repeatedly, this was the first time I could remember having attended a meeting he was hosting.

The man was expecting an answer, though, and my inability to keep my train of thought on the rails was already showing. So I smiled, and nodded. "I've been called that," I said. Again, not really an answer.

I wasn't really sure what the answer was to that question, anymore.

The man nodded. "Do it," he said.

The odd man out, the mage among their group, gestured slightly. Brilliant red light flared around me, complex geometric designs drawn in a circle around my chair. It wasn't just me, either; there was real light there.

I felt a minor, distant surge of annoyance at that. It was sloppy work. Energy spent on lightshows was energy wasted, when it came to magic.

"Fascinating," I said, not standing up. Pellegrini and his people didn't stand, either, didn't react at all. "You realize that we're meeting under truce to discuss the fact that you've broken *numerous* rules within this city? With a neutral arbiter here to adjudicate the resolution of this dispute?"

"It was going to come to a fight anyway," he said, pushing his chair back to make very sure that he was out of my reach. "We just cut to the chase."

Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

I nodded. "I appreciate that," I said. "It's less frustrating for me, that way." I glanced at the designs around me, sniffed the air. "This is solid work, by the way."

There was no response from the mage. Andrews, however, smiled slightly. He knew where I was going with this.

"Surprisingly powerful warding circle you've got here," I said casually, still not standing. "Looks familiar, though. Did you copy it right out of the Lesser Key of Solomon?"

"It's a viable design," their mage said defensively.

I nodded. "Sure, sure," I said. "The geometric structure is solid. Overbuilt, if anything. Lots of redundancy built into it. Of course, that also means it takes a lot more power to energize it. How did you manage that, anyway? You're not strong enough to power it yourself. You aren't *good* enough to be tapping a major source of power without killing yourself. It's too coherent to be a group effort; those tend to come out more as patchworks. It doesn't smell like fae, or a god, so you aren't getting subsidized by one of them. So that only really leaves blood magic." I smiled. "Did you kill someone to power this thing?"

"Wolves," the mage said. His voice was surprisingly deep and resonant. "Sympathetic magic, like to bind like."

"Fascinating," I said. "See, that was your third mistake."

Their leader tensed, started to rise, then visibly forced himself to relax again. "Third?" he asked.

I nodded, still smiling. It was a hungry sort of smile. "Third," I repeated. "First was trusting the guy that set you up to do this. That was a mistake."

They reacted. It was small, it was subtle, but I was watching. They reacted to my mention of a backer. I was, it seemed, not entirely wrong, although there was still a possibility that I'd put the pieces of the puzzle together wrong.

"Second," I continued, "was hiring an amateur to do your trap. You get what you pay for, guys."

The mage bristled. "Who are you calling an amateur?" he asked, flexing his fingers like claws. They glowed with a gentle violet light as he did so. Again, a sloppy, incompetent waste of power. My respect for these guys fell even further when I saw that.

"You," I said simply. "But I'm getting to that. See, mistake number three? You killed animals for power. Before that, this was just business. Now, I've got something against you, personally. That's really not a position you want to be in."

Their leader gestured slightly. Almost imperceptibly, but he had to move his hand through a shadow, and I could feel the movement.

Two blocks away, the sniper saw that gesture. He moved, a similarly slight amount. But there was a raven on the roof with him, and it saw him, and so did I.

I could have dodged.

Instead, I sat dead still as he put a bullet through my chest.

It was a very solid shot, straight through where my heart would have been if I were as human as I currently looked. I was guessing they fully expected a fountain of blood and for me to collapse out of my chair and die with a confused, silly expression.

Instead, they got a fountain of snow and a disappointed expression.

I let out a long, slow sigh. The nice thing about not having to breathe, when it came to sighing, was that you could drag it out. It sounded more like the wind through bare branches than any human noise.

"The circle you could, perhaps, have made a case for," Andrew said, not even flinching. "But that was a clear violation of the truce."

"Yes," I agreed. "I would appreciate if you allowed me to take care of it, rather than doing so yourself. As I said, this is personal."

Pellegrini smiled. "Well," he said briskly. "As a host, it seems the least I can do. Any chance of peaceful negotiations seems to have been rather thoroughly terminated, so my role here is done." He stood up and started walking away without another word. Andrews followed silently after him. The girl, on the other hand, shot me a darkness-tinged wink before she left.

"I paid a phenomenal amount to get him out here, you know," I said. "But it was worth it. The illusion of neutrality can be such a useful thing, at times."

"You should be dead," their leader said.

"Oh, probably," I agreed. "But I was going to finish what I was saying. You shouldn't have hired an amateur. See, the circle from the Lesser Key has two flaws in this situation. One is that the power usage is extreme. The other? This circle, it's not designed to keep things in. It's designed to keep things *out*."

I threw my hands out in front of me as I said that, calling up power as I did. Unlike almost every other time I'd done so, I wasn't drawing power from my surroundings, or from myself. I was tapping into something considerably darker and more powerful than either of those things.

Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

I wanted to make an object lesson out of this.

The power of the Midnight Court leapt to my call like an eager pet, thrilled to be called. I took it and channeled it out.

I wasn't drawing much power from that well. I wasn't even drawing, so much as letting off the pressure that had built up. All things considered, it seemed safer to start small. For much the same reason, I wasn't trying to exercise much in the way of control over it. I was content to largely let it do its own thing.

The power manifested as a column of darkness as thick as my chest, flowing out from my hands. It looked thicker and darker than it had any right to, not yielding to the light the way darkness was supposed to.

I could smell the magic, the power in it, rich and ancient. I imagined the mage could feel it, as well. I imagined he was rather unhappy as a result. When somebody you thought you had caged starts throwing around that kind of power, it's never a good thing.

Left to its own devices, the power of the Midnight Court was a destructive thing. It was a force of death, of *endings*. If the Daylight Court was growth and birth and vibrant life, I was currently tapping the other side of that force, something that was by its very nature associated with darkness and death and devouring hunger.

When that power hit the circle, there was no question of stopping it. It annihilated the warding circle in an instant. The defensive structures, not having been designed to hold up against a powerful assault from this side, shattered. The darkness continued, coiling in the air like a serpent. It crashed into the table and didn't even pause, splintering it and throwing it aside. The flood of darkness just kept coming, slamming into their leader and driving him back into the rest.

I sat and watched, feeling the power flowing through me. It wasn't hard. I didn't even have to think. It felt less like doing something, and more like relaxing my grip on something. The power wanted out, wanted to be used. All I had to do was...let it out.

After a few seconds, I closed my hands, and closed that connection in my mind with them. I felt a hollowness in its absence, a sense of *lacking*.

I should have been scared by that. I wasn't. It wasn't a surprise. I'd known what I was letting myself in for when I made the deal.

I stood up slowly, as they tried to do the same. They were having a harder time of it than I was. It was snowy, and an almost thoughtless effort on my part had been enough to turn it into ice. As though that weren't making things hard enough for them, the couple that had been directly hit by the darkness seemed to be struggling. It had sapped something from them, left them weak and fumbling.

Again, that made sense. The hunger in me wanted to take from them to satisfy itself; it fit that that would have an influence on how I manifested the power of the Court. It might not be my power, but it was being channeled through me, and from what I knew of how such things worked, it was inevitable that the channel would have an influence on what form the power took.

There would be rules to the whole champion of darkness gig. It was unfortunate that I didn't know what those rules were. Hopefully Aiko would be able to tell me, once she'd figured out her own role a little better. Either that, or I'd have to figure it out by trial and error.

I stepped forward, a massive hole still gaping in my chest, and called Tyrting as I walked.

Two of them were down and dying before they could even stand up. A third got to her feet, but Snowflake pulled her back down and started chewing on her face before she could do any more than that.

I almost felt bad. Not...guilty, exactly. But it felt too easy. For a long time, a fight like this would have been a very serious one for me. Now that I was capable of winning it easily, it felt like cheating.

I didn't let that stop me, of course. But still.

The last two didn't even try to fight. I couldn't blame them. They'd just played their trump card, and it got them nowhere at all. Then I killed more than half of them in a couple of seconds. And I still had three housecarls just standing around looking bored. Their sniper wasn't sniping, which I knew to be because he'd been forcibly rendered unconscious by Kris shortly after he took his first shot, but they had no way of knowing that.

In their position, I'd have run too.

By a mixture of chance and intent, the two left alive were the most important ones. Their leader, and their mage. The leader jumped to the top of the priority list by virtue of being the first to get to his feet and bolt.

I let him get around fifty feet away while I walked casually after him. Then I stepped into a shadow, and *pushed* against that surface I'd felt earlier.

It gave way at my touch, and I slipped into another world. It was dark, the total darkness of a moonless night with no stars, but I could see. More than sight, I could feel my surroundings, including feeling another weak point ahead that I could return through.

A step and a thought were enough to move me to the one I wanted. Naturally; this was my domain, my private little world, granted to me in my capacity as a champion of the Midnight Court. My desires were a literal, physical force here.

I stepped out of another patch of shadow less than a second after stepping into the first one, and the runner almost ran headlong into me before realizing I was there. Before he could turn around, I stepped forward and grabbed him by the throat.

Choking someone unconscious is a risky business. It's easy to go too far. Even if they survive, it can be very easy to do permanent damage.

Luckily for me, I just didn't *care* about that kind of thing right now.

The mage looked at me, fifty feet away and choking his boss unconscious. He looked at Snowflake, who was just finishing the woman she'd brought down and looked like she'd be happy to go for another. He looked at the housecarls.

Then he looked down at the dying man by his feet.

I got an ugly feeling. Something bad was about to happen, I could feel it. It wasn't a premonition so much as...recognizing what was in front of me.

The mage dropped to the ground. He was holding a knife, although I hadn't seen him draw it. I was running, trying to get closer. I'd have ducked into a shadow if I thought about it, but I was already too far away.

He drew the knife across the dying man's throat. Blood spilled out, the bright red an oddly intense contrast against the snow.

I could smell the magic. This mage wasn't all that powerful, but life was a hell of an equalizer when it came to that, and he'd just taken a lot. It was a fairly intense scent.

I couldn't tell what he did with that magic. Not really. It was too strange, too alien for me to fully grasp.

But I could see the result.

A hole opened in the world. It was something like an Otherside portal, but *more*. It was unnatural, unreal, or quite possibly *too* real for me to process. Looking at it made my head hurt, and I didn't even really have a head anymore.

Something came through.

I couldn't really define it any better than that. It looked dark, although I could tell that it wasn't, not really. I'd have felt darkness, have understood it and had a degree of control over it. This was more just...an absence, a piece of the world that had been removed. I couldn't see anything, not because it was dark, but because there was nothing *to* see.

Tendrils extended from the main body, as the hole it came through slowly sealed itself with a sound like tearing metal. Where those tendrils passed, they left trails of the same utter, total blackness behind them.

Had I still had blood, it would have run cold. Had I been breathing, I'd have stopped.

He'd called something up from the empty spaces between worlds. Somehow, some way, he'd managed that. And he didn't have the slightest bit of control over it.

Suddenly, I wanted to be somewhere very far away.

Chapter Five

The instant that thing appeared, the nature of the fight changed. Dramatically.

Before that point, it was pretty much a joke, and one that was played most of the way out. The advantage had been tipped so far in my favor that there really wasn't any kind of contest.

After it showed up, that had pretty much completely reversed itself. It was still a fight between two wildly different weight classes. But I wasn't on the winning side.

I'd seen one of these things before, once. It was bad enough that Loki—*Loki*—had felt the need to bring help to deal with it. I'd gotten a lot stronger, but I was still several orders of magnitude short of Loki's scale. If he needed backup, I was not remotely capable of winning this fight. Or even surviving it.

I kept running, but changed direction, cutting across at an angle towards the others rather than running straight forward.

I'd already noted that I could run pretty freaking fast in this body. I was a lot stronger and a lot lighter than a normal human, and between the two I could set a pace much faster than anything I'd been able to manage as a human. Add in an edge of raw terror, and I could *really* book it.

None of them had even started to stand before I reached them. It was that fast.

I grabbed Snowflake and tossed her away from the thing, then kept moving, bowling the housecarls over with sheer momentum. I fell down, and it took me a second to extricate myself from the pile.

When I did, I was glad that I'd prioritized things how I had. The tendrils extending from it had already reached the cafe, writhing slowly in ways that almost—but not quite—formed regular patterns. They left streaks of that same not-darkness in the air behind them, places where things started to seem less than fully real.

It was moving faster than I remembered. The last one had moved slowly enough that I could outrun it, and that had been when I was a lot slower than this. Compared to this one, that thing had been moving in slow motion. If I hadn't reacted as quickly as I had, somebody would already have taken one of those tendrils to the face.

I could still remember what being touched by one of those things felt like. The scars had gone away with the rest of my body. But my left hand still twitched a little at the thought. That had been a really, really bad day.

If I got very lucky, I wasn't about to have a worse one.

"Loki," I said as I pushed myself up. "Loki, Loki...come on, of all the times to not be listening, you picked *this*?"

"No," Loki said, appearing out of nowhere right next to me. He didn't offer me a hand up, unsurprisingly. "I'm watching."

I noticed that things had stopped. *Everything* had stopped, with the sole exception of the void-beast, which was still moving, albeit slowly.

How did that even make sense? It had been moving quickly before, but not *that* quickly. Why was it still moving when Loki had warped time around us?

"You want to deal with that thing, then?" I asked.

"No," he said, watching it with a cheerful, lopsided smile. "Not particularly."

I paused. "I thought keeping these things out of the world was kind of important to you guys?"

"Oh, it is," Loki assured me. "I won't actually let it get out. For the moment, though, I'm more interested to see what *you* do about it. This one is considerably weaker than the last you saw. Even in the worst case it'll only destroy a part of the continent. It's an acceptable risk."

I blinked. "Wait, what?"

"You heard me," he said cheerfully. "Do try to keep up."

"What the hell am I supposed to do to that thing?" I demanded.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll figure something out," he said cheerfully. "It's not like you have to *fight* it. Just make it go away."

"Make it go away," I repeated. "And...how am I supposed to do that?"

"You'll figure something out," he said again. "Just remember, the worst case scenario is all of your friends dying horribly, your city being annihilated, and everything you've spent your life building being laid to waste." He grinned. "Oh, and you might want to get ready. You've got about...ten seconds before time goes back to normal for you."

I wanted to scream at him, or plead, or do any number of other things.

But I believed him when he said that I only had about ten seconds before things got crazy again. And I could afford to waste any of that time on feeling sorry for myself.

I wasn't entirely sure what I should, or even really *could*, do in this situation. But the first step, at least, was fairly obvious to me, and I figured I could sort out the rest after that.

Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

So while I was waiting for those ten seconds to expire, I took a couple steps further away from the void-thing and drew a quick circle in the snow. It was harder than it should have been, probably because they weren't in the same reference frame I was for the passage of time. From their perspective, I was trying to move them at an incredible speed.

But after a second, I managed to make it work, and stood in the middle of a circle in the snow. I bit one of my fingertips, drawing something that was...well, not blood. Ice-cold water and liquid darkness and something a little more indefinable just under the surface. It was as close as I was likely to come to having blood again.

I touched that thick, heavy fluid to the circle, throwing power into it as I did. It was sloppy, manifesting physically as a burst of cold, a faint wash of darkness in the air. But it got the job done, and I was in too much of a rush to care about efficiency.

I stood up again as the world wavered and then started to move again. People were just starting to scream and run. It felt like it had been a painfully long time since the thing showed up, but objectively it had only been a few seconds.

It started to move faster as time skipped a beat and then resumed its normal flow. One tendril swept through a car, not even slowing, and then carved a hole in the ground before retracting.

"Aiko," I muttered, tapping that well of Midnight power in me and *pulling*. "Aiko, Aiko. Come on, I could *really* use a hand here."

I pulled a little harder, and felt something *rip*. Darkness flooded into me, like a hemorrhage in reverse, and I gasped.

The world went black.

Chapter Six

When you summoned something, there was always a certain amount of uncertainty regarding how it was going to appear. With formalized rituals, you could usually make some reasonably confident predictions. When you were just inviting something and hoping it came, it was harder to predict quite what would happen. Sometimes it was huge and dramatic. Sometimes it was closer to Loki's favorite approach, and they just showed up without any flashy effects at all.

Aiko appeared in a wave of darkness. For an instant everything went dark, like a curtain had been drawn over every spark of light in a three-block radius. I could still sense things, still function, but vision—normal vision, the sort that was based on the perception of light—was utterly impossible.

The darkness lasted for a solid three heartbeats, and then faded, leaving Aiko standing right next to me, close enough that I could feel her breath and she could feel the lack of mine.

She looked like herself, still. But maybe that was me, because the housecarls were staring like they'd seen a ghost. Or, I supposed, a Faerie Queen. Probably I'd had a similar expression the first time I saw Scáthach.

"What's up?" she said, grinning.

I pointed at the monster and said, "Kill it." Not my most articulate moment, but it got the point across.

She looked at it, and for an instant, I saw a flicker of fear cross her face. She knew what this thing was. She hadn't *seen* the other one the way I had, but she'd seen enough to know just what kind of danger it posed.

Then she went back the cavalier grin she'd shown up with. "You're really good at getting in trouble," she said. "You know that, right? All right, let's do this."

Then I saw Aiko use her newfound power for the first time.

I loved her. In spite of everything that had happened to both of us, I still loved her.

But even I thought it was freaking terrifying.

The one and only time I'd seen Scáthach fight, she'd gone for a very straightforward, physical assault. That might have been because she'd been fighting Skrímir at the time, but I thought it probably had more to do with who she *was*. From what Aiko had said, and what I'd felt myself, taking on a role within a Faerie Court entailed a sort of mutual adjustment. The role bent you into shape to fit into it, but it also bent itself to fit around you.

For Scáthach, being the Maiden of the Midnight Court had meant being swift and aggressive, embodying the predatory hunger and aggression of the Unseelie fae. But Aiko had always been more inclined to misdirection and trickery, and it was in that that the power of the role found its expression in her.

She flicked a finger, I smelled a burst of magic scented with fox and spice and darkness, and things started getting crazy.

It started with ropes and patches of darkness materializing all around the thing from the void, tangling it up. It devoured them in instants, but as many as it eradicated, there was always another waiting. There were sparks of scarlet light scattered through the darkness, casting an eerie crimson light through the area that was just bright enough to see. Not that I really needed the light, since this darkness, born of Midnight power and sculpted by the person that had given me mine, stood out even more sharply to my senses than natural darkness did.

At almost the same instant another burst of power went the other direction, flooding into the people who were standing and watching in shock. As one, in total unison, they stood and started walking away. There was something stiff and mechanical about it, something artificial. It looked like they were puppets, somehow. All things considered, that might have literally been the case. Only Snowflake and the housecarls were unaffected. They were still standing and staring at the unfolding scene.

One of those tendrils of manifest nothingness stretched out towards Aiko, shredding the barriers of darkness and power between them. Without thinking, before I had *time* to think, I was bolting towards it, moving to intercept it before it could reach her.

Probably a dumb move, given that she was more than fast enough to get out of the way before it could get near her. But I'd always been sort of dumb in some ways.

As I got close, I did another dumb thing without thinking, on reflex. I called Tyrfinn to my grasp and brought it over in a sweeping cut at the tendril. I wasn't really sure why, beyond the fact that a quick cut with Tyrfinn had gotten to be my default response to attackers. I knew that this wasn't really something that could be cut, after all. It was a hole in the world, the concept of *void* given shape and form. It didn't take a genius to figure out that a sword wasn't going to do much against something like that.

Which, in turn, made it even stranger when the thing recoiled from the blade, the tendril snapping back in to its core. It looked slightly ragged, too, the clean edges of the absolute nothingness wavering slightly.

Tyrfinn looked as smooth and bright as ever after passing through the abomination. It gleamed bright and hungry in the crimson light, looking like it was drenched in blood though blood had never left a mark on that sword.

I stood there staring in shock, trying to process what had just happened. As such, I was just standing there as two more tendrils snapped out from the abomination and hit me in the chest.

I hadn't thought that I was really capable of feeling pain anymore.

I was probably right. This wasn't *pain*, as such. It was just an overwhelming feeling of *wrongness*, something vile, spectacularly wrong. It was an alien feeling, something I couldn't quite grasp or process.

My body collapsed in an instant, ripped to pieces. I was left in an incorporeal state, lacking the means to directly influence what was happening.

"Keep it still," Aiko said, her voice echoing strangely. I almost heard it more mentally than physically, the meaning of the words reverberating through the bond between us.

Keep it still. Great. Because that was totally a thing I could do. Really.

It seemed like she had a plan, though, and that was a lot more than I could say. So I figured I had to at least try.

There was snow around, but I didn't have time to form a decent body. Hell, I probably didn't *want* to. This thing was terrifyingly fast to retaliate, and I did not want to let it hit me again. I was mostly invulnerable, but considering just what I was dealing with, I didn't think it was a good time to put that *mostly* to the test. That meant that staying in one body for more than a few instants was a bad idea. I couldn't trade hits with something from the void; that left hit-and-run as the only viable option available to me.

So rather than the snow and ice, I reached for darkness, slipping into the cords and sheets of Midnight power Aiko was throwing around.

I found them to be a surprisingly good host. Or not surprisingly, maybe. I still didn't have the best grasp on how this champion gig worked, but it seemed clear that the Midnight Court's name wasn't just an affectation. It sort of made sense that tying myself so closely to the Court would leave me with a connection to the dark magic it used as well.

Only a few seconds after I collapsed, a vaguely humanoid form stretched out of the darkness behind the abomination, nothing fully real about it except for the shining blade in its hand. I swept Tyrfin through another of its tendrils, then ceased concentrating and let my body dissipate into a few wisps of shadow. The sword fell to the snow an instant before it ripped that patch of darkness apart, a few seconds too late to catch me.

The next minute or so was a tense, fast-moving stalemate. I jumped from one shadow to the next, occasionally even sculpting a loose body out of snow, always slashing at its tendrils with Tyrfin. Every time I hit one it recoiled in what seemed to be pain, reabsorbing that tendril into its core, although since it was constantly absorbing and extruding tendrils anyway the effect was rather minimal. I could

do a bit to slow it down, but I wasn't really affecting it in a meaningful way. Cutting the core might have done more, but even if I'd been willing to get that close to it, there was nothing there to manifest out of.

Meanwhile, Aiko was throwing out a constant stream of darkness, replacing the shadows as fast as the abomination could remove them. She took a moment to throw up a wall of darkness just past the housecarls, as well, keeping any well-intentioned morons from rushing in and getting themselves killed. Occasionally she tried something else, flinging blasts of magic at it. I understood about half of them—force, lightning, dark fires—while the other half were more abstract, fae magics. Or, hell, maybe kitsune magics; it wasn't like I'd understood what Kuzunoha did all that much better. Regardless, nothing she did seemed to be having an effect on it, beyond the minimal slowing effect that the solid darkness had. Again, she could *inconvenience* the thing, maybe, but that was all.

For its part, the abomination seemed to be focused on me. For a while it tried to hit me before I could cease manifesting, but after a few tries it seemed to figure out that it couldn't react quickly enough to reach me before I abandoned a body and moved on. Instead, it started lashing out wildly in all directions, cutting through large swaths of the darkness and hoping to catch me by chance.

It worked a few times. I took some more hits, shattering bodies before I could do anything with them. More than that, though, they seemed to be having a cumulative effect. It was getting harder to manifest a body for myself, and slower. I was getting clumsy. The last two times I'd missed when I went to cut at it.

I wasn't sure how much of that was the damage from the abomination adding up, and how much was just me getting tired. I hadn't felt fatigue in the physical sense for a long time, now—hell, even before I'd lost my real body, I hadn't had much of a fatigue response. But I could still get tired, mentally, and there were still limits to how hard I could push myself.

I hadn't done this before, hadn't tried to weave together anywhere near this many bodies in such a short time. As it turned out, there were limits to that as well. I didn't think I could manage very many more without a long rest.

This wasn't working.

I tried to think of something, *anything* else that I could do in this situation, and took a tendril to the face for my distraction. I shattered again, and this time that feeling of *wrongness* lingered for several seconds. It was something like an intense nausea and a splitting headache, except that it was a purely mental thing, like someone dragging their nails over the chalkboard inside my head. I transitioned to another patch of shadow, and even that took a couple seconds of concerted effort.

I couldn't keep this up much longer.

I gritted my teeth—well, metaphorically, but teeth were engrained enough in my self-image that I still had them even when I existed only as a concept waiting to find expression—and prepared myself for another attempt.

Then I suddenly heard something. "Winter!" Aiko shouted, her voice coming to me in a strangely warbling, almost unreal way. If I hadn't had the mental and emotional echo from my connection to the Midnight Court I might not have understood at all. "Get out of there!"

It took me a second to grasp what she meant, and then a couple more to actually do it, shifting my focus to a patch of snow in the shadow of a building. Or half a building, at least. It seemed like the upper half had largely been obliterated by a stroke from the abomination.

As I was lying there, trying to work up enough energy to build a physical shell to inhabit, I finally saw what Aiko had been planning.

All that time while the abomination was swinging at me, it had been leaving those trails of nothing behind itself. They didn't seem to be permanent, but they lingered.

What neither of us had realized was that Aiko hadn't been throwing that darkness around at random. On the contrary, they'd been *very* precisely placed. And as it kept trying to hit me, it had been unwittingly following the path of that darkness.

It had, in essence, been duped into drawing an enormous and elaborate geometric diagram around itself, one which still hung in the air as a three-dimensional image in the form of those trails of nothingness.

Now, Aiko threw her hands out, and once again I smelled a burst of incredibly powerful magic. Ropes of darkness spiraled along those trails, outlining and somehow *feeding* off of them in a way that I couldn't quite grasp.

She twisted that magic, leveraging it, and the entire space inside the diagram—including the entirety of the abomination—shifted, turning into utter blackness filled with sparks and streamers of light in every color I could imagine, and some I couldn't.

It took me a second to realize what I was looking at, and when I did I wanted to laugh.

It was the void. Or rather, the void as Coyote had shown it to me, with enough buffers that mortal eyes could look upon it without the mind behind them being rendered into confetti. We weren't meant to look at something that fundamental.

Things stayed that way for the space of a long breath. Then Aiko clapped her hands together, and with another surge of power, the hole she'd opened in reality sealed itself shut again. The void, and the eternal chaos that danced within it, were gone.

So was the abomination, leaving nothing behind but the slowly fading streaks of nothingness that it had carved into the world.

We'd done it. Unbelievably, we'd actually managed to drive the thing off.

Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

I almost wanted to laugh as I slowly, painfully began assembling another body from ice and snow and darkness.

Chapter Seven

It took a while to piece myself back together. Unsurprisingly, I supposed. Hell, the surprise was probably that I could do so at all. I'd taken multiple hits from an abomination out of the void between worlds. The one and only other time I'd had that happen, it had taken a ridiculously long time for it to heal to any degree of functionality. And that had been a glancing blow, barely even getting into muscle. The impression I'd gotten in general was that when the void destroyed something, it couldn't really *be* fixed.

Which, all things considered, was a fairly ominous thought.

I started out trying to make a really well-designed body, but in the end I just didn't have the energy to care. It was slow going, too, and I was more than a bit concerned that I'd miss something important.

My body was nothing more than a roughly humanoid shape, the sort of sculpture a not-particularly-gifted child might make, when I pushed my way out of the snowbank I'd been gestating in.

Nothing much had changed. I was actually a bit surprised by the extent to which nothing had changed. The housecarls were still staring like they couldn't quite grasp what they'd seen. Even Snowflake was staring, and when I brushed against her mind, all I got was a sort of numbness, the mental equivalent of a cartoon character with his jaw on the floor.

It took me a second to realize why. They hadn't seen either me or Aiko using our new powers. Not seriously. Even Snowflake had only seen the most basic applications of what we were capable of. She might know conceptually, but there was a huge gap between knowing something and *seeing* it.

No one else was there. Not one person pushed through the curtain of darkness Aiko was still maintaining around the scene.

It was quiet. Very quiet.

"Nice work," I said to Aiko as I stood up, more just for something to say than anything.

"You weren't too bad yourself," she said, smirking.

"How did you get rid of it?"

She shrugged loosely. "I figured we know where they come from, and we know they can't get in on their own. All I had to do was send it back. And it did most of the work itself, breaking down the barriers. I just...finished the job."

I nodded. "You were always good at that kind of magic," I commented. I wasn't entirely sure whether I was praising her, or trying to convince myself.

"She really was," Loki said, appearing where the abomination had been when Aiko sent it bad. He flicked his fingers a few times, looking a bit like an artist correcting an errant bit of paint, and the streaks and trails of nothingness that still carved paths in the world's skin disappeared. "Well done. A bit clumsy, but a fairly decent tactic, and you pulled it off."

"You," I said, pointing at him. "What the hell? Why did you make us deal with that thing?"

"Because it amused me," he said, as though explaining to a child that knives cut. I noticed, absently, that no one else was reacting to this conversation. We weren't perceiving time on different levels—they didn't seem frozen—but I was betting they weren't capable of perceiving it.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I'm not buying your 'I just do it for fun' line. Not anymore. I mean, look at where we've wound up. This is not something that happens by *coincidence*. You've been planning this all along."

"You act like those are mutually exclusive statements," he said with a twisted grin. "What, does planning things preclude me from seeking my own amusement?"

"Well, it sure as hell suggests that you've got a bit more in the way of intent behind what you're doing than that," I said. "And it occurs to me that saying you're just doing things to entertain yourself would make a *great* cover for your plans. With your reputation, you could do *anything* and write it off as just a bit of fun."

"It's true," Aiko added. "I know. I've used that trick."

"Ah," Loki said. "Let's assume that you're right. If, and I feel I should stress the *if*, I'm going to those lengths to conceal some sinister plot...what on earth makes you think that I'd tell you what that plot might be?"

I ground my teeth, hard enough that the ice started to splinter. "Nothing," I said. "I just felt a need to comment on it."

"Comment noted," he said. The wildfires in his eyes seemed to accelerate slightly, although I wasn't sure what that might mean, or whether I'd really seen it all. "Would you like to say anything that *isn't* pointless speculation, or should I just go?"

"Yeah," I said. "I've got something to say. That guy. He was clueless. He didn't even bother reading the book he was copying his circle out of."

"They just don't make them like they used to," Loki sighed. "He is dead, by the way. I don't think you had time to notice, but the beastly that he summoned annihilated him. Don't call up that which you cannot put down, and all that."

"That's just it," I said. "Those things are freakishly powerful, terrifying monsters. As I understand it, having *one* of them get loose is an apocalyptic threat. How did that dweeb know how to summon one?"

Loki smiled. "Now *that*," he said, "is an extremely good question. I strongly suggest that you find out."

And then he vanished. Completely, and instantly. Even with my newly expanded senses, I couldn't even begin to figure out how he did it. It was like watching a movie, and having someone turn off the projector. Which, now that I thought about it, might not be a wholly inaccurate analogy.

"Beautiful," I said. Well, growled, really. "Just *beautiful*."

"Look on the bright side," Aiko said. "At least you're not bored."

I glowered. "Yeah," I said. "Boredom is not a thing I complain about. Pretty much ever."

"I know," she said happily. "So you're following up on that, I'm guessing?"

"I don't think I have a choice," I said. "That might have just been a suggestion, but I don't think I get to ignore it. Loki's good at that."

"I remember," she said. "Okay. I need to be back in Faerie now. I was right in the middle of beating some sense into some skulls when you called, and I don't think I should put off finishing any longer than necessary."

"You need a hand?" I asked, instantly.

She hesitated, then shook her head. "Not at present, I think," she said. "Currently, I'm still in the stage where I'm better off doing it myself. I'll let you know if that changes."

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to follow up on this one. Seems like it should be a priority at this point."

"Call if you need some backup," she said. "Seriously. I'll appreciate the break, trust me." She grinned, then stepped closer and kissed me.

I lingered over that touch. In that moment, I needed the contact. I needed very much to remember that there was more to me than the monster, something more than just bad choices and necessary evils. Judging by the intensity with which she held to me, Aiko did too.

And then she let go, and turned, and walked off into a shadow, and was gone.

I stood there for a moment, then turned to face the onlookers. There were more of them, now. The privacy curtain of Midnight power had vanished when Aiko did, leaving a couple dozen human bystanders staring at me.

I thought about trying to explain, and then thought better of it. People were dead. The property damage would probably be in the tens of millions. Nothing I could say would make this all right, ever again.

"Come on," I said to the housecarls, who jumped to comply. I sheathed Tyrfing, and grabbed the unconscious man on the way by. He'd been far enough from the fight not to get annihilated, and he was still unconscious. He started moving as I picked him up, struggling, but I ignored him. I was so much stronger than him that I really didn't have to worry about him getting loose.

Snowflake walked beside me as we left the scene, her shoulder a comforting presence against my hip. Behind us, the emergency services were just now arriving, starting to try and get a handle on what was happening.

A part of me wondered whether the witnesses would describe things accurately, or I would end up being the bad guy. Another part didn't care.

Nobody tried to follow us.

Back at the mansion, Kjaran parked the car and Vigdis hauled the leader of the human supremacist delegation out. He was fully conscious now, and seemed to have no negative effects from being choked unconscious. Not that I could really say with confidence, on that topic. He hadn't said one word on the way here, and I hadn't tried to make him.

I found it notable that while the site had been crawling with cops by the time we left, not a one of them had followed us. Not a single car had tailed us down to the mansion, though several of them had seen us dragging a struggling man away, and probably at least one had watched him being forced into the back of the car.

I was glad that my unofficial truce with the police was still holding. At least enough that they were willing to turn a blind eye to me doing some extralegal work in a good cause.

Kjaran opened the door and I strode into the mansion. I'd taken the time to fix my face on the way, and now looked almost like a human being. As close as I had in a long time, at least. The captive tried to get loose and run between the car and the door, but Vigdis subdued him easily, almost pulling his shoulder from the socket in the process, and then literally dragged him in with a satisfied expression.

I pointed at him as faces turned towards me. "Somebody get answers out of him," I said. "Who he is, where he's from, where his people are. Don't much care how you do it."

Some of my people—the humans, mostly—looked a bit uncomfortable and hurried on about their tasks. Some others looked a little too enthused for comfort. Most, though, just looked professional. This was a job, like any other.

"I won't talk," he said, the first words he'd said since the fight started back at the cafe.

"I'm not expecting you to, honestly," I said. "But with the stakes this high, I've got to try, and I dislike you enough right now not to be particularly upset by that. On that note, though, I want people trying other avenues. I want to know where these people are hiding out, soonest. Get some werewolves out there to try and track them back, talk to Pellegrini, talk to Frishberg. Make it happen."

"On it," Selene said, nodding sharply. She walked away, rattling off instructions to some of her minions.

I didn't recognize all her minions. In my absence, Aiko had been preparing my organization for an all-out war, which had entailed some aggressive recruitment. Luckily we were now getting support from the massive, mind-boggling economic powerhouse of the Midnight Court, taking any lingering concerns of finances from minor to utterly insignificant. We weren't completely subsidized, by any means, but just knowing that we had that support to fall back on had taken a lot of the stress off of Tindr.

The end result? I had a *lot* of minions. Enough that I wasn't even trying to keep track of them individually, except for the relatively small proportion that had been with me since I was the start.

While they were working, I ate half a dozen sandwiches, then went upstairs to take a nap.

Sleep didn't come. It seemed that I'd finally finished the conversion. First, sleep had been an unfortunate necessity, something that took my time but which I couldn't really avoid. Then it had been a luxury, something that I did when I could, but which I could go without when I needed to.

Now, when I wanted to sleep, I found I couldn't. I lacked the capacity.

It seemed a bittersweet trade.

A few hours later, I walked up to the door of an apartment building.

They'd tried to hide their tracks. They'd done a fairly decent job of it, actually. They just hadn't quite anticipated the degree of tracking they had to evade.

They'd switched vehicles a few times, taking a twisty, crazy route to the meeting. They'd worn heavy perfume which they'd covered over a few times, and dropped pepper and silver at intervals along their way. They'd gone to considerable lengths to conceal where they'd come from.

Half a dozen werewolves, with assistance from the police, and from Pellegrini's mafia organization, and Jackal's gang of changelings and half-breeds, and all the information Luna could scrounge from her extensive network of contacts, had been a bit more than they'd been prepared to deal with.

I could not in all fairness blame them for not anticipating that. Even a few years earlier, there was no way in hell I could have managed a manhunt quite this extensive. Back then, the lengths they'd gone to would have been a serious, maybe even insurmountable, obstacle.

As with a lot of other things that had once been problems for me, it had ceased to be relevant somewhere along the way. I'd traded those problems up for another set.

Probably I could have safely handled this assault myself. Probably.

I hadn't lived this long by betting on that, though. And what was the point of having a small army if you didn't *use* it?

So I walked up to the door, but I wasn't alone. Snowflake was at my side, of course, and Kyi was walking on my other side, flipping a knife around casually in her hand. They were wearing matching black eyepatches, which I found bizarrely amusing. Kyra was busy at school, but Anna was there, as were two more werewolves that I didn't know. They were visiting, and they'd wanted to pitch in.

Behind us, half a dozen ghouls and twice as many jötnar were following. Another two dozen humans and near-humans were scattered around the neighborhood with radios and rifles, in case someone tried to run.

I'd considered, very seriously, the possibility of just blowing the building up. It was a strategy that had worked for me in the past, after all. But we were here to find information, rather than just for destruction, which required a slightly more subtle approach.

Not a whole lot, of course. I did still have a small army. But slightly.

I flexed my fingers with a quiet crackle of breaking ice, and then kicked the door down.

Chapter Eight

Like most apartment buildings, this one hadn't been intended to withstand military assault. The door, a pretty standard sliding door, shattered when I kicked it. I stepped inside, and absently noticed a couple shards of glass getting stuck in my feet. It didn't really matter; I didn't feel any pain, and it wasn't like I was going to bleed out. Hell, if anything it was more material to work with, and it would probably hurt more if I wound up kicking someone for some reason.

There was a desk just inside the door, and an attendant sitting at it. She was staring at me, and reaching for the telephone.

I looked at her as my minions streamed in behind me. "Leave it," I said. That was all.

She got the point. Her hand fell back to her lap, and her lip trembled. "I'm going to die, aren't I?" she asked.

"Probably not today," I said. "Just don't do anything stupid."

She nodded weakly, obviously scared and pretty sure I was lying. I almost felt bad about it. She was probably still in high school, working this job to scrounge up a bit of petty cash. She didn't deserve the bad day she was about to have.

Then again, what people deserved had never had much in common with what they got.

"We're looking for some people that are staying here," I said. "You've probably seen them go by. They'll have been armed, probably moving as a group."

"That's most of the people that live here," she said. "Nobody wants to be on the street alone and unarmed." She didn't quite say *moron*, but she didn't quite need to.

I felt a spark of amusement, although my lips didn't twitch. That immediate response didn't exist anymore; smiles were a deliberate action, not an instinctive one.

"Fair point, these days," I said. "Different approach, then. Is there somewhere in this building where not many people go? A place that the residents, maybe even most of the staff, aren't allowed?"

She considered that for a moment, then shrugged. "There's the basement, I guess," she said. "It's just storage down there, I think. Only the manager goes there most of the time."

"The basement," I said. "Good. Where's the entrance?"

"In back," she said, gesturing behind herself.

"Thanks," I said. "You've been very helpful. Tape her up and leave her somewhere she'll be found by morning."

She started to protest, as three of my minions jumped to comply. I held up my hand, and she went silent, instantly.

Huh. I'd always wanted to do that, but I just hadn't had the presence for it. Apparently the authority vested in me as a champion of the Midnight Court carried some weight. That, or the presence of a lot of heavily-armed lunatics made up for any deficiency of innate charisma.

"I'm sorry to do this," I said to her. "But it would be dangerous for you to stay here, and the stakes are too high for me to just let you leave. This is the best compromise I have available. It'll suck for tonight, but tomorrow this will just be a bad memory. Okay?"

She still looked scared out of her mind, but she nodded. Kyi and another jotun quickly, efficiently hogtied and gagged her with industrial-strength duct tape. The other jotun—one I didn't recognize; Aiko's recruitment drive had been quite thorough—picked her up effortlessly and carried her to the door.

"Make sure the snipers keep an eye on her," I called out as they left. "I'll hold you personally responsible if anything happens."

He nodded and left. The rest of us went behind the desk.

It wasn't hard to find the basement. There were only so many doors back there, and most of them were obviously not what we were looking for. Mostly it seemed very mundane—an office, a sort of breakroom, a back exit. The process of elimination didn't take long.

I led the way down the staircase, which was surprisingly spacious, with my army of monsters and killers behind me. A couple of ghouls and a jotun stayed up top in case anyone wandered by and saw the broken door, and started asking inconvenient questions. It wasn't a perfect solution—they'd have a hell of a time explaining things to the police, for example, and they only had enough tape to hogtie a few people. But at some point you've to call it good enough and take the risk, or you never get anything done.

At first, I was a little disappointed by what we found down in the basement. It seemed to be about what it claimed to be, just storage. Not even storage for particularly exciting things. There were lots of cleaning supplies, maintenance materials, that sort of thing.

Down here, out of sight and out of mind, we didn't have to be gentle and delicate about searching the place. The thugs ransacked the place while Kyi and Snowflake and I stood and watched.

It took a while. They'd buried it behind a bunch of crates of bleach and cleaning solvents, somewhere that not even the employees would have seen. I had to respect their dedication, on some

level. It must have been an immense pain in the ass to move that whole stack every time they wanted to use this door. I could admire the dedication and discipline that had kept them doing it anyway.

The rest of me was just annoyed at the delay. This plan was, of necessity, a time-limited one. Every moment wasted was a moment we couldn't afford.

But finally we dug it out, and reached the door. It was a simple metal hatch, one that looked like it had been jury-rigged into place long after this basement had been constructed. It was heavily locked, a problem I solved with Tyrfinn rather than a set of picks. Subtlety was not high on my priority list.

The raw, aftermarket feel continued as I started down the other side. The tunnel was roughly cut into the stone, seemingly by hand. Sections of the walls and ceiling were reinforced with unfinished concrete, but by and large it was crude at best. It was unlit, a problem I was not terribly concerned about. None of us needed much in the way of light, and my minions had brought what they needed. The shadowy, unsteady illumination the flashlights cast was perfect for me. It gave me lots of shadows to work with, darkness to bend to my will.

I was more concerned by the temperature. It was hot in that tunnel. Not just casually warm, but sauna-hot, more than hot enough to be uncomfortable for a human, which made it far too hot for my happiness. The presence of the jötnar was enough to keep it at manageable levels, but I was still having to work to maintain my frozen body. Finding enough ice to scrape another one together out of in this heat was out of the question.

So. If I took enough of a hit to wreck the body I was manifesting through, my options were limited. I wasn't entirely sure how I could adjust to that.

It was almost like old times.

How do all these people manage huge underground lairs? Snowflake asked as we hurried down the tunnel. We were setting a pace considerably faster than most humans could sustain, which was part of why I hadn't brought any humans down in here. Speed was important here, and with a crowd in enclosed quarters, guns weren't a great choice anyway.

That's actually a good question, I replied. *Most of the ones we've seen, the people that built them have serious connections. But these guys are new on the scene. Call it more evidence that they've got some kind of sponsor, I guess.*

You know what the problem with you is? she said after a moment. *I want to laugh and call you paranoid, but then you keep being right.*

Trust me, I'd rather be wrong. Speaking of, looks like there's another door up ahead. Think we're about to meet the welcoming committee, and I somehow doubt they'll be glad to see us.

My only response was a delighted laugh and an increase in her pace. If she were wearing a leash, she'd have been pulling me along rather than the other way around. I could feel her eagerness, the thrill she felt at the prospect of violence.

Snowflake wasn't a very good person. It was time I stop beating around the bush on that one. I'd lived with her inside my head for a long time now, and somehow I'd kept making excuses for her, and dressing it up in pretty words. The reality was that she quite simply was not a good person.

Not everybody could be. Not everybody even got the choice.

I arranged my thugs at a distance from the door, in case something bad happened when I opened it. I chopped through the locks with Tyring, and then shoved it open.

I promptly took a shotgun blast to the chest.

I stumbled back a step, glancing down. "Huh," I said. "Guess they had a trap for someone who opened it without a key."

"Are you all right, jarl?" Kyi asked promptly.

"Should be fine," I said, pulling the holes in my torso closed again. I didn't bother pushing the pellets out first. There wasn't any real need. I didn't have any actual control over the metal, but I could carry it along without any particular trouble, I was pretty sure.

Moments later, I continued, continuing to go first in case there were any more traps. I pulled the shotgun down, and then we kept going.

As underground lairs went—and Snowflake was right, I *had* seen a bizarrely large number of them—this one was...odd. It felt too new, too modern. It almost felt like a hospital, with the bright fluorescent lights, the white walls and gleaming tile floor, everything kept fanatically clean. Maybe I'd just spent too much time around extremely old-fashioned people, but this was not what I'd been expecting. Even if it hadn't been built with a medieval design aesthetic, I would have expected it to feel more tired, more rundown.

As it was, I was starting to get a distinctly ominous feeling about this place. I felt like there was something I was missing, some obvious piece of the puzzle that I hadn't quite slotted into place.

"Okay," I said, looking around. It seemed like a fairly normal hallway, fairly generic. There were doors opening off it at regular intervals, none of which had a convenient label on it. "Spread out, small groups, start looking. I want anything you can find that might have information we can use. That means files, computers, anything that might seem remotely useful. Assume that everything is trapped, and if you find *anyone*, shout."

A wave of nods swept over the group, and they started fanning out and opening doors. They were professional about it, which I was glad to see. Every movement was coordinated, and nobody was taking chances. That boded well for our chances here.

I stayed where I was with Kyi and Snowflake, and waited. I was confident our entry had not gone unnoticed, and I was fully expecting them to respond to it rapidly. Nothing I'd seen from this group suggested that they were less than efficient.

And what *did* they call themselves, anyway? I hadn't heard a name for them. It was a minor issue, admittedly, but it was starting to bug me.

In any case, I didn't have to wait long. Not two minutes after I triggered the shotgun trap, I heard footsteps and a group of people came around the corner. They were wearing modern camouflage gear, and heavy, face-concealing helmets, and they were carrying guns.

Once again, I was the first off the line. No one else—not even Snowflake—had so much as started to move before I was sprinting in their direction at full speed.

Unfortunately, I was fast enough now to run into the same problem I'd often exploited in the past. Reacting *quickly* is not the same thing as reacting *well*.

Because I'd put such an emphasis on reacting fast, it wasn't until I'd almost reached them that I noticed a few important details.

One, the guns they were holding were oddly light, lacking the bulk of military-grade rifles.

Two, they were all carrying large metal tanks on their backs. It looked like they were connected to the guns with hoses.

And three, I could smell petroleum.

The resulting chain of logic was enough to instantly and completely reverse my focus. I'd had some bad experiences with fire in the past, enough to have a healthy respect for its destructive potential. Now that I was *made of ice*, I somehow didn't think that I would enjoy it any more.

The moment I realized what I was dealing with, I stopped and threw power out into the hall. Again, it was a sloppy, inefficient bit of magic, but it did what it was supposed to do. It flooded the space with frigid, semisolid darkness a moment before they pulled the triggers on their flamethrowers.

Flamethrowers are scary weapons. Not the most effective, necessarily—they have a lot of limitations. But they're *terrifying*. I mean, there are reasons so many of the most horrific events in the history of war involved fire, from sacking cities when "salt the ashes" was a literal phrase all the way to the Dresden bombing. Nearly every living thing has a healthy fear of fire, and millennia of civilization aren't enough to remove that animal terror.

I didn't feel fear in the same way I had, not quite. It lacked the same immediacy, lacked the physiological element.

When I saw the napalm chewing through my barrier, I still panicked.

I tried to smother it with another wave of magic. That proved to be an exceptionally bad idea. Trying to split my concentration when I was already maintaining a complex bit of magic just meant that both of them collapsed for a critical moment.

It was only a second. Just the space of a heartbeat in which I didn't have defenses in place.

That was too long.

Napalm washed over me, and eradicated me. I wasn't any better protected from this than anyone else. Hell, I might have been *more* vulnerable than a normal human. I was made of cold and darkness, and I'd just been immolated in flame and light.

I was knocked out of my embodied state, and the body I left behind was turned into nothing but steam. I was left implicit in the shadows and the cold and the hunger in that space, but I was pretty far out of it. I thought there was definitely something to my idea that having to put more bodies together took something out of me. I wasn't sure how many more I had in me.

Come to think of it, I didn't really know if I was going to recover. I'd sort of been assuming that I would, because the idea that I would heal with time was one that had been drilled into me throughout my life. But I *wasn't* alive anymore, and I didn't know all the rules of what I *was*. It was entirely possible that I'd already burned through most of the chances I'd ever get, without realizing what it meant.

With that comforting thought in mind, I turned my attention back to what was going on around me. It took a moment, and when I did my view was fuzzy, even more so than usual while I was in this state. It felt like my connection to physical reality was more tenuous, more fragile than it had been.

From what I did see, it seemed like the fight was most certainly not over. The flamethrowers hadn't had enough fuel to keep going for very long after incinerating me, or else it was too hot for safety, because they'd stopped firing. They were grabbing for pistols instead, but they were too slow, because Snowflake was already in the middle of them.

She'd run straight through the lingering fires, barely skirting around patches of freaking *napalm*, to get to them. Unbelievable.

She pulled one of them down and started biting at their throat, but apparently the uniform was made out of some toughened fabric or the mask was getting in the way or something, because blood didn't immediately start flowing.

One of the others pulled a grenade off their belt and threw it at the jötnar and ghouls who were streaming out of the doors into the hallway.

I felt a moment's impotent rage. This fight was suddenly and rapidly turning more dangerous than I'd expected, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Kyi threw a knife and hit the grenade out of the air, sending it spinning back to the ground. Snowflake bolted away, jumping through the fire *again* in her haste to get away before it blew.

It went off a second later with a flash bright enough and a noise loud enough to be annoying, even through the veil between me and the physical world. It was clearly enough to stun the people with guns, and even most of a hundred feet away, my minions were obviously not happy about it.

A flashbang. That made sense; in these enclosed spaces, a fragmentation grenade was just a fancy way to commit suicide. Then again, they'd been willing to use *flamethrowers* down here, so obviously that wasn't something they were too worried about.

That burst of impotent wrath proved to be the motivator I needed. I transitioned into the shadow of one of the masked humans, and then manifested myself through that patch of darkness, filling it with Midnight power and making it more *real* in the process.

I grabbed them by the head and wrenched it back towards me with awful force, more than enough to destroy the spine. In the process, I got a good look at myself in the dark lenses of the mask.

I was an animate shadow, a vaguely humanoid piece of darkness that blurred seamlessly into the darkness I stood in. The only thing that stood out clearly were the eyes, which burned with a dull amber glow. Lines of brighter light and total darkness crossed them in subtly moving patterns, evoking the pictures frost makes growing on windows.

That was all that I had the chance to see before one of the others fumbled a high-power flashlight off their belt and caught me in the beam of light, tearing apart the shadow I was forming myself from and scattering it. It tore me apart in the process, leaving me disembodied once again.

Huh. It hadn't occurred to me that I'd be vulnerable to something quite that...*mundane* as a result of what I was using as a door into the world. It made sense, though. Hell, that was probably why they'd brought flashbangs.

These people knew more about my weaknesses these days than I did. There was no question about it, somebody was way too well informed here.

Unfortunately for them, they'd focused too much on me, and left everyone else free to act. Some of the jötnar got close enough to the napalm to put out the fires with the cold that was their nature, and then the ghouls pounced.

The resulting bloodbath was mercifully short. That was about all that I could say for it.

I thought about trying to form a permanent body out of shadows, but it didn't seem like a great idea. I hadn't done anything more than disposable shells out of darkness alone, and I wasn't sure that I could. It was clearly a secondary element, not something I could work with as well as easily or well as ice. And besides, they were prepared for darkness here. Getting more bodies destroyed by flashbangs and flashlights and who knew what other light sources just seemed like a waste of effort.

Instead, I picked the deepest patch of shadow available and pieced together another crude temp body, just enough to speak through.

"Keep going," I said, surprising myself a little with the eerie, hollow sound of my voice. "Remember to search them, and keep an eye out."

Apparently the sound startled them too, because my minions seemed more inclined to run than obey. It probably didn't help that they'd just seen be burned alive, and they didn't know the details of my current arrangement. From their perspective, this whole thing was probably starting to seem more than slightly freaky.

But Kyi acted like obeying creepy voices from the shadows was totally normal, and in the face of that unflappable calm, the unease faded quickly. By the time my body dissipated into wisps of shadow, they were already back at work searching the rooms.

I slipped into Snowflake—very gently, very delicately, not imposing myself, just a presence. *You mind if I ride along?* I asked.

The immediate response was shock, swiftly followed by sardonic amusement. *Why not?* she said. *It'll be just like old times. So what now?*

Now we go check out where these nuts came from, I thought. *I've got a sneaking suspicion that there are more where they came from.*

Let's hope so, she said, standing and shaking herself. *All right, let's do this.*

Chapter Nine

Following the hallway the masked lunatics had come out of, at first we didn't see anything special. There was a dormitory, full of empty beds, each neatly made, impersonal as a doctor's examination room. There was a large kitchen, complete with a long table to act as a dining table, the sort of place that served enormous quantities of food that would sustain vital functions and not a whole lot more. There was a large office area, half a dozen computers set up on another large table without any partitions between them.

I'd want those computers, in case they'd stored any useful information on them. But for the moment it was more efficient to keep moving and leave the heavy lifting for the minions.

The hallway continued for a long ways after that, with just a couple of doors. Snowflake opened a couple of them, finagling the handles with her jaws or just shattering the latches by main force, always with the same result. The large—huge, really, far larger than they needed to be, even if the ceilings were rather low—rooms were empty.

Not just in the sense of having no people, either. They were literally, absolutely empty, not even any furniture. They were just empty space, waiting to be given a purpose.

Who went to the effort of carving this massive complex out of the bedrock just to leave most of it sitting empty?

I felt like there was something I was missing, some obvious detail that I just wasn't seeing. But this was not a good time to be distracted, so I tried to push that feeling aside and focus on my immediate surroundings. Sharing Snowflake's mind did a lot help with that; she'd always had a certain *immediacy* about her, like most animals. It was one of the few really animal things about her, actually.

Not that it turned out to matter that much. We didn't see one other person on the way. Not a single one.

It was hard to believe that the group we'd dealt with earlier had been all the people here. A lot of this place was empty, admittedly, but we'd only killed around ten of them so far. There had to be more than that.

The only conclusion I could come to was that this compound had been abandoned, and that group we'd run into had been a rear guard of sorts.

It was getting old having people be one step ahead of me. I was getting *really* sick of being a day late and a dollar short.

Finally, the hall ended at a simple, plain lobby of sorts. The only feature was a large, stainless steel door with a white button next to it. It took a second for me to recognize it as a large elevator. It only took a moment longer for me to recognize it more specifically than that.

Damn it. I'd known it was too good to be true, but somehow I'd still wanted to think that they could be what I'd wanted them to be.

Hope springs eternal in the deluded breast, I suppose.

Snowflake went to hit the button, but I stopped her with a gentle reminder. If I was right about what was above us—and I was pretty freaking certain about it, it all just *fit* too well to be a coincidence—then we did not want to go up there alone. There's confident, and then there's stupid. Picking a fight with all of them at once, by ourselves, was solidly in the second category.

We turned around and went back to check on the minions instead.

I'd been half-expecting to find them all dead. It would fit with how well the rest of this whole project had gone. Apparently my luck wasn't quite *that* bad, though, because they were still working on searching the place, seemingly unharmed.

They were efficient. I had to give them that. They already had most of the complex ripped open, papers and computers dragged out into the hallway and stacked neatly in a pair of heavy-duty black duffel bags.

The corpses had been stripped and searched, very thoroughly. Some of the ghouls were chewing. I didn't look closely enough to see any more details than that. I didn't think that I wanted to know.

Snowflake sat and watched as they finished ransacking the complex. The duffel bags were zipped shut, and two of the jötnar heaved them up off the ground. The things must have weighed a couple hundred pounds each—computers are heavy, and I hadn't wanted to take the time to pull out the hard drives and such. It didn't matter. The giants looked human, but they were far stronger than anyone short of a serious bodybuilder. The bags wouldn't slow them down appreciably.

They started towards the entrance we'd come through, but Kyi knew enough to look at Snowflake, and Snowflake looked down the hall towards the elevator. As simply as that, the direction of travel shifted, and I was guessing that most of them didn't even realize how it happened.

The elevator was more than large enough to handle all of us at once. Unsurprisingly, really; it was a heavy-duty model, almost a freight elevator.

I was fully expecting a fight when the elevator doors opened again—or, if not a fight, certainly a confrontation of some sort.

I was not disappointed.

The doors slid open with a gentle chime, and we crowded out into the lobby. As expected, it was a familiar lobby, complete with a gift shop and a cafe. It looked like they'd just about finished remodeling. The entrance was across from us, and as expected, there were some people between us and it. As expected, I recognized all of them.

I wondered, idly, how many of them had known what was going on beneath their feet. David had known, must have, he was too much in control of what happened here for it to have gone on without his notice. Elyssa, similarly, must have been aware. Awareness was her whole *thing*, what she did; it was pretty much impossible to keep a secret from someone who had magically sharpened focus and perceptions when she was living in the building where you wanted to keep that secret.

The rest? I wasn't so sure. I hadn't spent enough time with most of them to really get an idea of who they were. On some levels, sure, but I didn't know them well enough to really guess on this. There were too many unknowns. And all of that was assuming that the Guards hadn't been lying to me, which they rather obviously *had*.

Regardless, though, this was a conversation I wanted to have for myself. So I slid out of Snowflake and wove myself a body of darkness from the shadows of the jötnar and ghouls. They moved away slightly to give me room as I manifested, seemingly out of instinct.

It was probably a pretty freaking dramatic entrance. I'd have to remember this for later use.

"Hi," I said, in that same eerie, hollow voice. "Been a while."

David regarded me cautiously for a moment, then inclined his head slightly. "Jarl," he said. "Reports of your death were somewhat exaggerated, it seems."

"Only somewhat?" I said lightly, taking more pleasure than I should have in the way Tony flinched a little at the sound. "You wound me, David. Do you not like the new look?"

"I told you not to call me that," he said, sounding impressively casual.

"I forget what your name is in-costume," I said. "Which is, by the way, *still* a ridiculous thing to do. I do remember the rest of them, though."

"I do feel special," he said dryly.

"Happy to help. Here's the interesting thing, though. I had no idea this building had a basement level. Did you guys realize that?"

Tawny and Derek—or Crimson and Chainmail, or whatever the hell I was supposed to call them—exchanged dubious glances for a moment before looking back at me. It wasn't much of a tell, but it was enough. They didn't have a clue what I was talking about.

"This building has been renovated several times now," David said smoothly. "I'm not surprised that there would be features we weren't informed of, especially since we acquired it while local affairs were particularly unsettled."

"Right," I said sarcastically. "And I'm guessing you had *no idea* that there were a bunch of people living down there. People who, at the moment, I really don't like."

"Do you have an actual grievance with us?" David asked.

"Yes," I said. "I have a *great many* grievances with you. But at the moment, you're a secondary priority. So you're going to provide me with any information you have on the people that have been basing their operations out of the complex under this building, and then you're going to get out of my way. And later, if I have time, maybe I'll lodge a complaint with your bosses or something."

"We could stop you," David said, in a rather conversational tone.

"Maybe," I said. "But we had a deal, sort of. And I thought that meant something for you." I paused. "Also, think about this. Yes, you could maybe stop me from leaving, and definitely you could stop me from getting the information I want. But if you start a fight here and now, it's going to be a bloody mess. You and I will get out fine, sure, but a lot of other people will die. And while you're certainly *involved* with some unpleasant dealings, I don't think you're really a bad enough person yourself to be willing to do that."

I smiled, though I doubted it was visible on a face made of darkness. "So what's it going to be, David?"

He stared at me. I stared at him. The tension in the room could have been cut with a rolling pin, let alone a knife.

Finally, he nodded.

I managed to keep from letting out a relieved sigh as I melted back into the shadows.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to gather all the relevant information and get back to the mansion. I had a strong suspicion that David wasn't half so opposed to the whole thing as he'd wanted to seem. He didn't put up nearly as much resistance as I would have expected, and I saw him smiling when he thought no one was looking.

In a way, it made sense. David had struck me as a fairly upright sort of guy, on the whole, and I doubted he was terribly happy about being forced to cooperate with those lunatics and house them in his basement. I could see the Guards as a whole seeing them as a useful tool, a deniable weapon to be used on inconvenient parties. But David, personally, didn't have to be happy about that.

It was basically the same relationship we'd always had. He was using me to do something he really wanted to, but for political reasons couldn't.

We spent so much energy on lying, when everyone knew the truth. It wasn't the first time I'd had the thought, but this was one of the more annoying occasions. It was just such a huge and pointless *waste*.

But eventually we figured it out, and lugged the bags back down to the mansion. I sculpted myself a new body on the way, one a bit more stable than pure shadows, out of a cooler of packed snow in the back of the car. The extremely excessive force around the apartment building cleared out, leaving behind nothing but a mess and a woman covered in duct tape in an alley. I expected that situation to arouse some questions, and also for it to be rapidly hushed up. No one wanted too much investigation into that, and some of the people that didn't had more than enough pull to make it happen.

Hell, these days I was one of them. It would only take a few phone calls to make that problem disappear.

I opened the front door of the mansion and walked in with my minions arrayed behind me. There were more minions waiting for me inside, along with some people whose names I actually knew.

"Get some people to sort through this," I said, as the jötnar set the duffel bags down behind me. "Some people who know what they're doing, please. Call me when you've got answers."

Unsurprisingly, it was Selene who nodded and stepped forward to start getting things under control. "Where will you be, jarl?" she asked.

"I'm going to rest for a while, I think," I said. "Then go see how Aiko is doing with the faeries. She might want me to beat some heads in by now."

Chapter Ten

Getting to Faerie was always a fairly easy task. It was the closest part of the Otherside to the real world, on a metaphysical level, as a general rule. There were exceptions, and there were individuals who were tied to another domain on a level that left them more easily able to connect to that domain. Jötnar were a good example of that; they could find their way back to Jotunheim, generally, but anything beyond that was unlikely.

More often than not, though, some part of Faerie is the option of choice for staging areas when traveling through the Otherside. I couldn't even guess at how many times I'd been through there over the years.

This was a bit different. It was easier, for one thing. I'd never been much good with portals; I'd gotten better over the years, with a great deal of practice, but it had been a slow process, and even then the results were limited. It wasn't a magic that came naturally to me, and that showed. I'd been slow and clumsy at it, even with the focus I'd made for the purpose, and I didn't have that focus now.

But at this point, going to the Midnight side of Faerie was easy. It felt simple, natural. It was just a matter of wanting to be back there, and letting the power flow out to make that want a reality. A pool of shadow deepened, became more real, and after a minute or so ceased to be a pool of shadow entirely, and became a hole in the world, the portal appearing so smoothly that I wasn't entirely sure when it happened.

How much of the focus on darkness in the power I'd gotten was inherent to its nature, I wondered, and how much existed only in my mind? It seemed like it was probably the latter. The Unseelie Court wasn't inherently dark, wasn't really the *Midnight* Court except in the sense of having that title assigned to it by outsiders. Night had some thematic elements in common with it, some similar energies, but they weren't at all the same. It was just such a pervasive element of how I saw the Court that it colored every element of how it manifested through me.

The second difference was something I noticed when I stepped through, and found myself standing just outside of Aiko's new castle. I felt more coherent, more *real*, like the body I'd woven for myself had more substance to it.

It made sense, in a way. I'd noted in the past that magic, and especially more creative magics like building constructs, were considerably easier on the Otherside than in the world I was native to. Now that I was, effectively, dependent upon that kind of magic just to maintain my existence, I got a considerable benefit for being there. It was easier to put together a body, easier to maintain it, with the fabric of reality so much more amenable to being warped.

Snowflake still passed out, though. That was, in a strange way, almost comforting. I was so accustomed to being bad at portals it would have been more disturbing if it was a smooth transition.

I wasn't in the mood to wait for her to wake up, though, and it didn't seem prudent to wait outside anyway. I might be a VIP around here, these days, but that wasn't at all a guarantee of safety with the Midnight Court. It just meant that killing me would be more of an event to celebrate, rather than just another day.

So I picked her up and slung her over my shoulder. The weight was negligible to me at this point anyway. She barely twitched as I did, and the only sign of her displeasure as she started to regain consciousness was a faint mental grumble, though I knew that once being moved so soon after a portal would have left her violently and messily ill.

We'd both come a long way. For better or worse.

In the castle courtyard, I paused and looked around, unsure which door I should choose. Then I shrugged and picked one at random. I was guessing whatever I chose would turn out to have been the right choice all along anyway, since this was sort of my place now.

The first room in was one which I hadn't seen before, a sort of long gallery. Windows along one side provided an expansive view over the moonlit water, though there had been more castle there from the outside, and I was reasonably confident that side of the room shouldn't have had a clear view out from the island anyway.

There were more people than I'd seen on my previous visits here. The room wasn't crowded, by any means, but various fae things stood in small groups here and there, talking quietly in a language I didn't recognize, or doing things I couldn't grasp at all.

I walked past them without hesitation, and none of them questioned my presence. On the contrary, every one that I passed close to nodded politely in my direction.

The next room in was darker, though I could still see. The walls, floor, and ceiling all glittered with faint sparkles of light, giving the illusion that I was walking through an endless field of stars, and providing just enough light that a human could have barely functioned. I could just make out another door across from me, and walked in that direction. Snowflake prodded me when I was halfway across, and I set her down again with a gentle *clink* of armor on stone.

Past the next door, illogically and unsurprisingly, was the throne room. It looked much the same as the last time I saw it, dim and red and cold. Aiko was lounging on her ruby throne, and some Sidhe lady was standing in front of her. It looked like she'd paused right in the middle of some wild gesticulation when we walked in, giving her a rather comical look.

"Winter!" Aiko called out, sitting up a little straighter. "You have really good timing. Have I ever told you that?"

"Probably at some point," I said dubiously. "What is my timing good for, specifically?"

"Well, I was just explaining to Sylfaenwe here that continuing to be an obnoxious pest was liable to have some detrimental effects in her immediate future," Aiko said cheerfully. "But actually demonstrating my point myself might require me to stand up, which I'm not feeling terribly inclined to do at the moment."

"Cool," I said. "You want her dead, or just maimed?"

"Let's go with maimed for the moment. It should be fairly easy to step that up to dead later if necessary."

The Sidhe woman glowered, her eye twitching slightly. "I am hardly the only person who will object to this," she said. "Do you intend to kill all of us?"

"I could," Aiko said. "I mean, think about it. Who's going to stop me? I've got the capability, and I'll still be filling my role within the Court, which is all the other Queens really care about. You're powerful, sure, and yes, you're useful against the Daylight Court. But ultimately, you're still disposable and we both know it. If I kill you, there are comparably powerful people who will be more than willing to take your place."

Sylfaenwe ground her teeth, but didn't actually disagree.

"Now, right now, you're pretty annoyed," Aiko continued brightly. "In part because, while we both know that this is the reality of your situation, outright stating it is gauche. And I'm telling you this because I want you to know that I'm aware of the implications, and I'm choosing to do it anyway. But believe it or not, I would actually rather not kill you, if only because doing so would make my life slightly more complicated. So what's it going to be?"

Sylfaenwe glanced at me. I bared my teeth in what could charitably be described as a smile, and looked at the snowbank she was standing next to.

She looked back to Aiko. Her eye twitched again, so slightly that I doubted she was even aware of it, and she said, "What would you have of me, my Queen?"

"I would have you accept the reality of your situation, and stop struggling pointlessly against it. I would have you tell your friends, and those who owe you fealty, to do similarly."

Sylfaenwe ground her teeth some more, but she bowed her head. "It shall be done," she said, and beat a hasty retreat out of the room. I caught a glimpse of her face on the way past, and...well, if looks could kill, Aiko and I would both be getting sized for coffins. Ten years earlier, I might have actually been intimidated by it.

"About time," Aiko said once she was gone, promptly standing up. "Took almost an hour for me to get her to agree to that."

"What are you doing that they're so opposed to, anyway?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It's hard to put it into words," she said. "Trying to...adjust how my piece of the Midnight Court expresses itself, I guess. Put more of an emphasis on the mischief and pranks, and less on the political scheming." She collapsed loosely into one of the heaps of snow. "Come on, sit down. That chair is as uncomfortable as it looks, trust me."

We joined her, me sitting in the snow next to her and Snowflake lying across our feet. "I don't know that I would have associated mischief and pranks with the Midnight Court," I commented.

Aiko shrugged again. "It's a valid way to interpret the concept," she said. "There are lots of stories about faeries playing tricks on people, causing mischief. I mean, it's not like we're talking harmless mischief here, this is still the Unseelie Court. A lot of those pranks have an element of real malice and danger to them. But they're still pranks, and I'm a lot more comfortable with that than with politics."

"But your minions don't agree."

"Some do," she said. "Some of them are very pleased with the new focus. But the people that *like* political maneuvering are less than thrilled."

No change makes everyone happy, Snowflake said. Not even a good change.

"I know," Aiko said. "After a while, everyone should adjust to the new regime, and it'll be business as usual again. The transition is just going to be a bit rough in some ways, since as far as I can tell Scáthach's preferences were pretty nearly the polar opposite of mine."

"I'm not sure if there's anything I can do to help with that," I said. "But if there is, just ask."

"Actually, your timing really was good," she said. "I was going to ask whether you could come after I finished with that round anyway. You just showed up a little early."

I paused. "Early for what?"

"Well, here's the thing," she said. "One of the things I'm supposed to do, as the Maiden of the Midnight Court, is do the whole fighting with the Daylight Court thing. It's kind of an important part of the role. So here in a bit, I'm going out to lay a beatdown on them and prove that I can. And I'd kind of appreciate having you there, since this is, um...a *bit* outside of my comfort zone, I guess."

"Wouldn't miss it," I said.

Not for the world, Snowflake added. Really glad that I decided to tag along on this trip now. I was considering taking a nap instead, but this is much more fun.

Aiko snorted and curled a bit further into the snow, resting her head on my chest. "What about you?" she asked. "You find anything interesting?"

"Sort of," I said. "Tracked that group back to their base and cleared it out. Seems like they're being supported by the Guards."

"What kind of support are we talking about here?"

I shrugged. "Hard to say on the grand scale until my people finish sifting through the data we got out of there. Locally, seems like it was quite a bit. They were based out of an underground complex that attached to the building the Guards took over. I think they were providing those nutjobs with logistical support and information too, but I'm not sure yet."

"Using them as a weapon," Aiko said. "Disposable, deniable assets. The Guards are human, so there wasn't much chance of the human supremacists turning on them, and it would be easy to sic them on anyone that was getting inconvenient."

"That's my current assumption," I said. "Yeah."

"This is the same group that attacked that Pack meeting, right? I can't imagine Conn will be happy about that."

"No," I said. "I don't imagine he would be."

I had a brief image of Conn declaring war on the Guards. Now that the unofficial ban on letting people find out about the world hiding behind the scenes was lifted, there was nothing stopping them from going at it openly.

It was not a pleasant image. It really didn't matter who won that fight, it wasn't going to be a good thing.

At the same time, there was a certain...*satisfaction* in the thought. They'd caused me so many problems, always with some excuse, always hiding behind that veil of secrecy, and I'd never had the power to do anything about it. Now that I finally had something solid that I could pin on them, the idea of taking the Pack and the Midnight Court and everyone else that I could convince to help out and just *obliterating* them was surprisingly tempting.

"It might be better not to tell him," I said after a moment.

"You think it's worth more as blackmail material?"

"That," I said, "and also...the Guards have done some shady things. But they are still helping to hold things together. And at this point, we can't afford to lose anyone who's helping with that."

Aiko was silent for a moment. "It's interesting that you still say 'we,'" she said at last.

"I know I'm not really one of them," I agreed quietly. "I guess I never really was, but even less now. But I still like that world."

"So do I," she agreed. "And we've got friends there who don't want the world to fall apart. I get that." She paused. "Although we will have to find out how much they had to do with bringing that thing in from the void. If they were a part of that, you might have to revise that stance on whether they're doing more to help or hurt."

"If they were a part of that I'm prepared to kill every last one of them," I said. "If they were dumb enough to get involved in that? Yeah, they're done. That's too dangerous to take any chances with."

"Just so long as we're on the same page there," Aiko said. "Okay, so you've got nothing to do until that fight with the Daylight Court, right?"

"Nope," I said. "Just waiting on people to go through all those files, and it sounds like it's going to take a while. Some kind of encryption or something."

"All right, then," she said. "That's not for another hour or so. I'm not in the mood to deal with more Court things in between, so unless you have a better idea I'm thinking I'll just stay right here."

This is a good plan, Snowflake said. It means I get my nap after all.

I snorted. "I've got nothing better to do," I said.

True to her word, Snowflake was dozing in just a few minutes, and fully asleep in a few more. Aiko took longer, but it wasn't that much longer before she was out cold as well, eyes closed and mouth slightly open with her head on my chest. Had anyone from Court seen her in such an undignified position it might have been detrimental to her reputation, but given that we were alone, it was harmless.

I did not—of course—sleep. But I didn't get stiff, or tired, or even bored, as such. There was no reason to move, or even to breathe, so I didn't. I just lay there on the snow, alone with my thoughts. They weren't as happy as they should have been, considering the circumstances.

Chapter Eleven

I'd never been in a battle before. A lot of fights, but not a real, full-scale battle. The closest had been that mess with the necromancer in Russia, and that wasn't the same thing at all. I wasn't entirely sure what to expect what to expect from this battle, what might happen. The fact that it was being fought by beings I didn't really understand, divided into factions along lines that I couldn't really comprehend, was just icing on the cake as far as that went.

It started out more...simply than I would have expected. After an hour or so, Aiko woke up and got out of the snow. It hadn't melted appreciably; of the three of us, only Snowflake had any appreciable body heat anymore.

Aiko went to get ready while I woke Snowflake. I didn't really need to do anything myself; the only piece of equipment I needed at this point was Tyrfing, and it was always with me. Given that I couldn't bring physical items with me when I transitioned between bodies, anything else would be more trouble than it was worth.

That was surprisingly upsetting. My ritual before a big fight had always been to check and recheck all of my gear, the weapons and toys and surprises that I might need. I'd spent hours on it, sometimes, and it had become a calming, soothing ritual. Now that I didn't have that, I felt lost.

Aiko still used gear, though. When she came back she was wearing armor, elaborate armor that looked almost exactly like the set Loki had arranged for her, but which didn't have any iron in it. I wasn't sure how I knew that it had no iron, but there was no doubt in my mind at all. I just...*knew*. The blades were similar duplicates, although she wasn't carrying a gun. It probably wouldn't have worked anyway; relying on chemical reactions and physical rules to work exactly the same on the Otherside as in the real world was a fool's bet.

"You ready?" I asked, standing up. It was easier than it should have been, the snow providing resistance to push off of without me even having to think about it.

"Yep," she said. "You?"

I shrugged. "As I'm likely to be," I said. "Where to?"

"Just follow me," Aiko said. "If anyone tries to make an issue out of it, bite them."

I paused. "Are you talking about me or Snowflake here?"

She grinned and started walking to the door. "Both."

It was still hard for me to grasp just how dramatically things had changed recently. I'd been expecting there to be more to it, some kind of hassle. I'd been expecting, at the very least, annoyance and bureaucracy.

Instead, that really was all there was to it. We walked out of the throne room's dark and red confines, and directly into the courtyard. There were a few dozen things there waiting for us, clearly ready for war—Sidhe, trolls, a towering ogre, and stranger, nameless things. Not a one of them challenged us as we walked through the crowd. I thought a couple of them looked offended at the notion that they weren't the ones standing next to Aiko, but if so it was quickly buried.

She opened a portal in the gate—the *entire* gate, an area far larger than I would even consider for a portal—with no evidence of any particular effort, and we marched on through.

The other side of the portal was...well, it was interesting. It was busy, even crowded, although there was a clear space where we came out. Beyond that, though, it was an active, busy camp, packed with every sort of fae creature I could name and a great many I couldn't.

And it was *enormous*. I couldn't really put a confident estimate on it, but I was guessing there were close to ten thousand of them there. Ten thousand things that were, individually, probably the match of five or six humans at least. Hell, there was a whole *unit* of ogres, easily a hundred of them, each a half-ton of muscle towering at least ten or fifteen feet tall.

And this was just one unit, one tiny part of the forces of one Queen of Faerie.

I suddenly felt very small, and like I'd fundamentally misunderstood my place in the universe.

Aiko didn't even pause as we stepped out onto a hill overlooking the Midnight camp, and so neither did I. I absolutely did not at all want to be separated from her here and now. Oh, theoretically it should probably be fine—in principle, after all, I was at least equal in rank to every member of the Court short of the Queens themselves. In practice, though, I was somehow very confident that I would be better off not being on my own for my first encounter with the Court military.

The portal was very smooth, smooth enough that even Snowflake and the fae didn't so much as miss a step during the transition. The lot of us walked forward, the bustle of the camp making sure not to do anything remotely resembling getting in the way, until I got my first look at the battlefield.

It was a broad, open plain, knee-high grasses waving in a gentle, inconsistent breeze. There was no sun, but the golden light had a strong quality of *evening* to it all the same, long shadows dancing across the plain. On the other side of the plain, maybe a mile and small change away, the ground rose into more hills.

In those hills, the Daylight regiment was waiting, their camp looking a very great deal like this one. The standards had brighter colors over there, as a rule, and the Daylight fae were somewhat different in appearance, but the size and layout of the two camps was almost identical.

There was no snow out there, I noted. No ice. There were shadows, at present, but they were limited, and around the Daylight Sidhe I was guessing they'd be effectively nonexistent. Even if the light and dark division was largely the produce of my mind, there was no denying that things tended to be bright around the Daylight fae.

I didn't want to have to change bodies in this fight, then. Not unless I absolutely had to. And since I was guessing that light and fire would feature strongly in what the enemy was going to be throwing around, as far as magic went, that meant that I really didn't want to take a hit. Dodging and hitting the enemy from odd angles was going to be the best option for me, I thought.

"Oh hey," Aiko said. "We're just in time."

It took me a second to realize what she meant. Then I saw that, across the plain, the enemy troops were moving. It was hard to see at this distance, subtle, but they were getting into formation and starting out.

"Where do you want me?" I asked. It had to be obvious that I was obeying her, and not the other way around. This was, after all, primarily a political event, a way for Aiko to cement her position as an authority figure. For her to seem like she was taking instruction from her minion would be...counterproductive.

"You can hit them from the side after the fighting starts," she said. "Wait for them to commit first, then hit them hard. Oh, and they'll probably have some ridiculously powerful thing. After that shows up, you can deal with it."

"Got it," I said, as the Midnight troops around me started to form up and head down to the battlefield as well. They looked, generally speaking, to be impressively disciplined and coordinated. Then they started getting closer to the field, and I saw that that description didn't apply to the front ranks. There, the discipline and coordination broke down into a jumbled, chaotic mass, less an army than a horde of armed lunatics who happened to be traveling in the same direction. Looking across the way, it seemed like the same pattern was true for the other side. The bulk of the force was tight, organized formations, but the front ranks were sloppy as hell.

They were cannon fodder, I realized. Inexperienced fighters, being marched out in front to absorb the shock of the impact when the two armies crashed together. They would get slaughtered, leaving the more experienced troops to actually fight.

I could understand it on a tactical level. Hell, on some level I'd made similar choices myself. When you were assigning people jobs, you had to base it on what they were capable of. There had been

times when I sent people to a fight knowing that they might die as a result. That was the nature of violence.

But doing it so deliberately, on such a large scale, was something that I was...not entirely comfortable with. I'd faked it on occasion, but at heart, I really wasn't a general. That kind of ruthless calculation wasn't something that I was suited to.

But I wasn't sure what, if anything, I should do about it. And before I could decide, it was too late. It only took a few moments for the cannon fodder to be cut down. I couldn't have reached the front even if I'd wanted to.

Aiko and I just stood and stared as the two forces crashed together. It was loud, shockingly loud, with the clamor of metal hitting metal, metal hitting flesh, people and things that didn't remotely resemble people screaming. It was like any other fight that way, but on a vastly increased scale.

I stared for a long moment, before Aiko glanced at me and reminded me that I had a job to do. I startled, then leapt into motion.

I couldn't step through shadows here. It could be done—Carraig had pulled that trick in Faerie when I fought him, so I knew it could be done. But there wasn't enough noticeable darkness to make it a viable tactic. I was better off just running, I thought.

I could run fast. Really, really fast. Even without magical shenanigans, I was faster than I had any right to be. I blew past the fae troops in a blur, sprinting past them in long, leaping bounds.

I didn't go straight for the fighting, though. That would have been directly at odds with both my tactical awareness of the situation and my instructions from Aiko. Instead, I ran out in a wide arc, sweeping out to the side of the main engagement.

It was a larger fight than anything I was accustomed to. Huge, really. But in the grand scheme of things, it wasn't *that* big. The battlefield was only around a mile across, I was guessing.

If you had to run it at a human pace, that was still a considerable distance. Several minutes' travel, even if you were good at running.

For me it was a casual jaunt. Not even really something worth considering. It took maybe two minutes, or a little less. I wasn't out of breath or tired afterward. It was just...a thing I did. Easy.

I stood there for a second, watching the battle. It showed no signs of slowing down, which wasn't surprising. Two minutes was forever in a fight, but with so many participants fighting an old-school battle like this, the situation changed. There were people who were just now reaching the actual fighting, and plenty more behind them.

I watched for a second, then waded in.

There were fae beings that could put up a solid fight against me, still. There were some that could crush me like an empty can. I knew that; I'd met some of them.

These were not those beings.

Oddly, it didn't feel much like a fight. Not really. There was no challenge to it, no element of uncertainty. It felt...well, more or less the same as running had. It was a mechanical exercise. The repetitive nature of what I was doing, combined with the lack of any meaningful risk or challenge, made it feel more like chopping wood than really *fighting*.

Some of them had magic, either classic fae-style trickery or more direct magic. Neither of them mattered, really. Trickery was only really useful when you were fighting someone who could be mislead or duped, and I was playing the role of the unstoppable force here. Clever tricks didn't help much when the person attacking you was just cutting a broad swath into your ranks and ignoring everything else. Brute force defenses were useless for...well, pretty much the same reason. Nothing they could do could really stop me with Tyrfing.

Some of their attacks were closer to solving the problem. Fire and light were both as common as I'd expected, and either could plausibly have brought me down. Some of them had silver weapons, as well, which I found out the hard way. I wasn't sure why, or even how, but apparently silver still *really hurt*.

Most of them I could dodge, though, and the rest weren't enough. I was wrapped in enough darkness and cold to shrug off the magic, and when they did manage to get through with weapons they couldn't do more than take chunks out of me. That didn't really do much; it took massive trauma to stop me anymore, since anything short of cutting off a limb was just a mild annoyance.

I cut a broad path through their rear ranks, Aiko did...something, I was too busy to really pay attention to what...and on the whole the Daylight forces were definitely losing. We were progressing across the plain, and there were far more of their people on the ground than ours.

And then progress slowed, before grinding to a halt. The Daylight troops rallied and began to push back.

At first, I wasn't sure why. It was hard to tell, in the thick of things, hard to get a broader perspective of what was happening. But I kept pushing, and they kept pushing, and eventually we met in the middle, as a pocket of space opened up to accommodate us. Nobody wanted to be near this, and I didn't blame them in the least.

At first glance, he didn't look like much. He was shorter than me, and plain at best, with ugly features and a scraggly beard. But he was wearing heavy mail, and carrying a heavy axe, and literally dripping blood.

And he was very obviously and very undeniably human.

Emrys Vaughn

Well, well. Seemed it was time for me to meet my opposite number.

Chapter Twelve

I was torn as to what the appropriate response in that moment was. There was a part of me that said I should hesitate, maybe try talking to this guy. We were, after all, basically in the same situation. Not completely, but we had enough in common that we could probably have sympathized with each other to some degree.

Most of me, though, was still caught up in the fight, in the rote, mechanical act of killing. And since that was the part of me that was in control, the conflict didn't really manifest physically. My *mind* might have been torn as to what the appropriate response was, but my *actions* seemed very certain. The instant I saw the man, I lunged for his throat with Tyrfing, moving fast enough that I wasn't sure whether a human would really have been able to see me move as anything more than a vague blur.

Naturally, that wasn't a problem for this guy. He was, after all, a Champion of the Sidhe, and thus only human in the most technical sense of the word. He certainly wasn't subject to many human limitations. He was moving before I'd covered more than a fraction of the distance to him, and while that axe *looked* heavy and slow, he could whip it around like it weighed nothing at all. Which he did, batting my sword away before I got anywhere near actually hitting him.

I was still fairly satisfied with the outcome, though. If nothing else, I'd closed the distance without getting slaughtered. That, in and of itself, was a win in my book.

Or, at least, that was what I initially thought. I was then forcefully reminded that while I was physically stronger than the vast majority of people, this was one of the few that I *couldn't* say that about. So when I got close to him, he didn't panic. He just picked me up and threw me with his spare hand.

I'd noted that I didn't weigh as much as a flesh-and-blood person of my build would have. I hadn't fully thought about what that might mean with, for example, being thrown.

It was a pretty strong throw. This was, after all, a champion of the Courts, and as such a hell of a lot stronger than any human could really expect to be. But where a person my size might have been tossed back a bit, maybe gone far enough to crash into people and stop that way, I *flew*.

I had a long moment, hanging in the air, to look down at the battle raging on the ground below me.

There were a lot of bodies in the grass.

When I crashed to the ground, I'd left the fighting far behind. I was up into the hills on the Daylight side of the plain, a fair distance from their camp.

I caught myself with a cushion of thickened air. This, too, was easier with my decreased weight; with the density of my body so much lower, air resistance could stall my movement much more effectively.

I still landed hard, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. I hit the ground with a quiet *crackle* of breaking ice, but all the actual parts were still there afterward. It only took me a few moments to piece it all back together, and once I did it froze back together almost instantly, cords of darkness winding over it to hold it all in place while it did.

I'd stopped keeping up a human-ish appearance at some point during the fighting. I wasn't entirely sure when. I wasn't breathing, either, now that I thought about it.

Once everything was back more or less where it belonged, I pushed myself to my feet and started thinking about getting back to the fight. Running was still probably the best answer, I thought. Probably not the fastest, but it was simple and I knew it would work.

Before I could even start moving, though, a sunbeam bent and split, and the other champion stepped out of it.

I tensed, but he didn't immediately start swinging. His axe was hanging by his side—still in position to defend himself if it became necessary, but not in an aggressive stance.

"You must be Winter," he said. "Heard you'd taken the job. Aodh, nice to meet you." He extended his hand.

I hesitated, then moved Tyrfing to my left hand and took it.

It was...just a handshake. He had a firm grip—hell, he could have crushed my hand to powder if he wanted to, probably—but that was all. No magical trap, no sudden attack.

He let go and stepped back a moment later. "Now, you seem to be under some misapprehensions as to the nature of your role," he said. "And as I'm the only person who's been *doing* it for any appreciable length of time, it falls to me to explain some things to you."

I blinked. "What?"

"You heard me," he said. "Look, there are certain things that anyone in this position will figure out given time. But waiting for you to catch on by yourself will just be inconvenient as hell, and I happen to have the day free, so I decided to come and educate you."

"Okay," I said. "Um. When you say you're the only one who's done this for any appreciable length of time...what does that mean?"

He shrugged. "Around three thousand years now. I stopped keeping track a long time ago."

Three thousand years of this. Three thousand years of near-constant war. Three thousand years to practice with the kind of power that I'd had for a couple of days.

At that point, actually *beating* him ceased to be a possibility. It just...wasn't a consideration. He was easily the match of Carraig, and while I'd gotten a lot better since I killed Carraig, I still wouldn't bet on myself against him in a fair fight. Not remotely.

"All right then," I said, taking a step back. "So...what did you want to say, again?"

He smiled slightly, in a way that made me think he knew *exactly* what I'd just been thinking. "Well, what it comes down to is this," he said. "There's a strong tendency, when people start out as champions, to think that the job is about winning fights."

"And...it's not?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. It's not. You see, Winter, there's a secret, and as of now you're on the inside of it. The Midnight Court doesn't *want* to win."

"It doesn't?"

"No. Neither does the Daylight Court, for that matter." Aodh shrugged. "Think about it, Winter. This war has gone on for four thousand years now. Do you *really* think that in all that time, neither side could have won? Do you think that there's never once been an opportunity for one or the other to get an advantage that the opponent couldn't recover from?"

I frowned. "I...don't know. I guess I never thought about it."

He nodded. "Most don't. It's a very good ruse. But that's all it is. A ruse. The reality is that the war is convenient. It's *useful*, to both sides."

"Useful?" I asked. "How?"

Aodh sighed. "Now that is a good question," he said. "And a few steps beyond the secrets that I'm sharing. Ask your Queen, and if she wants you to know, you will."

"I'm not sure *she* knows."

"If she doesn't, she will soon," he said. "It's a part of her role."

"That's what I don't get about this," I said. "Role. If they don't want to win, why do they have us? What's the point?"

"We serve a purpose," he said simply. "*Purpose* is the filter you need to think through. For example, what's the purpose of this battle? The real purpose, mind."

"Well," I said slowly, "the purpose is supposed to be to take this scrap of land. But if I assume that's a lie, I'd say...probably a chance for Aiko to establish herself. If both sides want to keep things stable, ensuring a smooth transfer of power is in everyone's best interest. So she needs to show off in a fight."

"Precisely," he said. "Now consider. If you were to win here, by simply killing your enemies, what message would that send?"

I frowned. "I guess it would suggest that I was the one who won. Maybe even that she was relying on me to win."

"You see?" he said. "Purpose. Had you kept on as you were doing, you would have actively undermined the purpose of this entire exercise. That would make my life more complicated, and I'm opposed to that."

"This really isn't how I pictured this going," I said after a moment. "Aren't we supposed to be...I don't know, fighting or something? I mean, we're enemies, aren't we?"

"You could look at it like that," Aodh said. "Or you could say that your job, here, was to remove a significant portion of the enemy's forces. Which you did, in that you removed me from the field. The fact that we're having a pleasant conversation rather than trying to murder each other is pretty immaterial, all things considered."

"I...suppose so," I said. "That seems like a weird way to look at it, though."

"My advice? The sooner you break the habit of thinking that the rules of logic you're used to apply here, the happier you'll be." Aodh grinned. "Now, I'm going to leave. I recommend that you go take a look at the rest of the battle. I think you'll find it an...enlightening experience."

Before I could respond he stepped into another ray of sunshine, and vanished.

Chapter Thirteen

The one and only time I'd seen Scáthach really fight, it had been a fairly straightforward deal. Terrifying, yes, but straightforward. She'd been all aggression, quick and deadly to an extent that very, very few people could ever hope to match. It had, essentially, been a manifestation of the ruthless, predatory nature of the Midnight Court.

But Aiko had never been that sort of person. Like she'd said, the aspect of the Midnight Court that she was most comfortable with was the deceptive, mischievous one. She was first and foremost a trickster, and that showed in how she manifested the power of her role.

So where Scáthach had been a straightforward and vicious fighter, Aiko was more of a *presence*. She'd always been good with illusions and deceptions. But that wasn't even in the same *world* as what she was capable of now. I saw that very clearly when I climbed back to the top of the hill and got a good, bird's-eye view of the battle.

At first, it wasn't really obvious. That was the craziest thing about it. At a glance, it was hard to tell what was even happening. It was clear, after a moment, that the Midnight forces were generally prevailing, but it was hard to say quite *why*.

Once I looked closer, though, I saw the layers of potent, subtle magic drifting over the fight. Here, a strand of darkness obscured a blade at the critical moment, and the parry wasn't quite at the right angle to stop it. There, a Sidhe warrior threw a burst of fire at the wrong targets, duped into thinking that a group of his own allies were Midnight gnomes about to fall on him with their knives. A troll placed its foot ever so slightly wrong, and brought a dozen other people to the ground with it when it stumbled.

Once I realized what I was seeing, I just stared in shock. It was...hard to process quite what was going on. Individually, none of this was beyond what I'd seen her manage before—particularly on the Otherside, where that sort of magic was so much easier than in my world.

But this wasn't magic on the individual scale. This was juggling dozens of spells at once, every one of which was perfectly crafted and deployed at just the right moment. Moreover, she was using this magic on the *Sidhe*. They had a well-deserved reputation as masters of deception; this kind of thing was second nature to them. Before this, I would have said that fooling even one of them with a magical illusion would be a chancy endeavor for her, possible but not by any means certain.

Now, she was managing it on hundreds of them, at once, without any particular sign of difficulty.

The moment when I realized that was...well, it was sort of the same as when I'd seen the scale of this engagement. It was something that utterly redefined my image of the world and my place in it.

I'd always known that the Faerie Queens were far outside of my level, beyond anything that I was capable of even putting up a struggle against. But it was one thing to know that, and another entirely to *see* it.

And this was the weakest Queen of the Court, after having her power for a very, very short time. Just a handful of days. Relative to the other Queens, Aiko was pretty much a fumbling child.

As I watched, the Daylight forces stopped fighting, and started retreating. It was a neat, orderly retreat—the undisciplined mob had long since been slaughtered, leaving just the disciplined soldiery left. But it was still very much a retreat, very much a sign that they'd *lost*.

The Midnight army chased them up to the top of the other hill, to where they'd made their camp, and then stopped. Which made sense; following them past that point would be a dangerous move, one that would leave them exposed and probably surrounded. The fae were many things, but impatient was seldom one of them; immortality tended to do that to a person.

I wasn't really watching that, though. I was mostly staring at the field behind them. And the bodies lying there.

There were...an awful lot of them. Hundreds, at least. Maybe a couple thousand. I wasn't about to count them.

Aodh hadn't been wrong. Watching this had been...enlightening. On multiple levels.

I suddenly realized that I should probably not be standing and staring like a moron, and jerked into motion again. I started walking towards the Midnight camp, slowly at first, then at a run.

As before, nobody tried to stop me. I got a few respectful nods as I passed, a few scowls. But nobody got anywhere close to getting in my way.

I found Aiko almost exactly where I'd left her. She was still surrounded by the elite troops of the Midnight Court, enough people that it would take a small army to even get to her. Which, going back to what Aodh had been saying, was probably more a political statement than anything. It wasn't that she was worried about being assassinated; at this point, there couldn't be that many people capable of murdering her if they wanted to, and anyone who could wasn't about to be stopped by this.

But being surrounded by those people was a statement of power. It said that she *had* them available if she wanted to. On a more subtle level, it said that she could win this battle so easily that she didn't even need to send her best troops. I was guessing that any one of these people could have taken a sizable chunk out of the enemy army, and there were dozens of them.

Snowflake was rather noticeably out of place, lying on the ground next to Aiko's feet. She was panting, and her teeth were stained with fluids in a startling variety of colors. Through my bond with her, I could feel a tired, satisfied smugness from her.

"That went well," I said.

"It did, too," Aiko agreed, grinning. There was something forced about the expression, though I doubted I'd have realized it if I didn't know her so very well. I'd realized fairly early on that a lot of her cheerful persona was a mask. And while that mask was very, very good, in that moment I'd have bet a fair amount that she wasn't happy in the least.

But with the fae, appearances were a very real, tangible sort of power. The difference between what something *seemed* and what it *was* was, on a basic level, a blurry one. That was the whole point of this exercise; it wasn't enough to be powerful, for her to fill her role. She had to be *seen* as powerful. That was why she'd had to be the one to win this fight in the eyes of the Courts, and that was why she had to seem like she enjoyed doing it. Anything else would be seen as another kind of weakness, in the Midnight Court.

For me to express sympathy or concern, even casually, would undermine that message. And that would just mean that we had to do this whole thing over again.

So I grinned back. "Shame I had to go so soon," I said. "But I was...unavoidably detained."

"Indeed," she said. "Your opponent escaped you, I take it?"

"This time," I said, feeling very conscious of the Sidhe watching. "Next time? We'll see."

"I expect we will," she said. "In any case, today has been...productive. Now, I believe that our agents in the mortal world have found your next target. Go and confirm this. If you do find them...well, do what you need to do."

I wanted to argue, to offer to go with her back to that dark castle and provide what comfort I could in the wake of the battle. But she hadn't left much room for me to do so without, again, undermining her authority, which she wasn't established enough to afford at this point. And she *knew* it, which meant that she wanted to be alone.

I couldn't blame her. I mean, what was I supposed to do here? Tell her that everything was okay? That would be a blatant lie, and we both knew it. Faerie Queen was not a job you could quit once you started. Once you were in, you were in for life.

This was the reality we got. It was too late for us to change that. It was probably too late a long time ago. Nothing to do now but play out the hand we were dealt.

I opened my mouth, then closed it a moment later. There was nothing to say, even if we weren't being watched. So I just nodded.

Aiko opened the portal, and Snowflake and I left.

I didn't waste any time getting to the next part of the job. That would have meant time to think, and I didn't want to think right now. The idea of being alone with my thoughts at the moment was...not appealing.

Aiko's portal dropped us just out front of the mansion in Colorado Springs. Inside, things were a chaotic mess. Or, rather, a different sort of chaotic mess than usual. I'd gotten fairly accustomed to the throne room being slightly crazed, full of activity and people running around on various jobs. This was more or less the same, but everything was focused around a single task. Folders and notebooks were splayed out on tables, hard drives were attached to computer equipment several steps more complicated than I was capable of understanding, with people standing around and comparing notes.

"Tell me you've got something," I said, as I walked in the door. People stopped what they were doing, and turned to stare at me. And then kept staring.

I realized, somewhat belatedly, that I'd forgotten to put a guise of flesh and blood on over the constructed body underneath.

Well, *that* cat was out of the bag. It was bound to happen eventually. Granted, I hadn't expected it to happen quite this soon, but it didn't really matter. As far as I could tell, my position was still secure, and even if they figured out what was going on here, most of my minions were unlikely to desert me on the basis of this.

Somewhat to my surprise, the first person to speak up wasn't one of my usual minions. He was one of the computer nerds Selene had brought in to work on the encrypted files.

"We, ah, we've got something," he said. "Still working on getting past some of this, they were fairly thorough. But the paper trail, the parts that they've decoded, it's making a lot of reference to a headquarters of some kind. They don't actually list an address, but some of the electronic records weren't completely scrubbed, and—"

"Okay," I said, interrupting him. "Let's be honest, I'm not going to understand what you did here. I don't have the grounding to appreciate your work, and I won't insult you by pretending otherwise. Do we have a location, or not?"

He paused, then nodded. "We think we managed to piece together a set of latitude and longitude coordinates. I checked the paper files that they haven't managed to decode, and the same numbers showed up a couple times there. Looks like a warehouse complex in Philadelphia, near the docks."

"Cool," I said. "Can you get me a picture? Satellite photography or something?"

"Already did," he said, grabbing a stack of papers off a table. "Satellite photos, topo map of the area, and building blueprints for the complex. Also information on the companies that maintain warehouses in the area, partial records from the construction process, and some information on people who might be involved with operations there, although that's highly speculative." He handed the papers to me.

I paused before taking them, and would have blinked if that was a thing I did. That kind of initiative was...impressive. And the ability to dig up that much information, of course, but I was really more impressed that he'd taken the initiative to do so. "What's your name?" I asked, taking the papers.

"Greg Baker," he said.

I nodded. "You ever want a steady job, Greg," I said, "you call me. I've always got room for skilled people."

He smiled, a very thin smile that didn't reach his eyes at all. "I'll keep that in mind," he said.

"Do." I turned, looking for Selene, and as usual she appeared next to me before I could do much more than glance around the room. "Get a team together," I said to her. "And...crap. I guess I need some information on who matters in Philadelphia. So get that together, too."

She paused. "When you say 'who matters,' what sense are you looking for?"

"Well," I said, "if these people really are out to get anyone who isn't pure human, it occurs to me that there are probably a lot of people in Philly who would be interested in giving us a hand cleaning them out."

Selene smiled at that. It was a rather more...honest expression than Greg's, I thought. "Excellent, jarl. I'll start making inquiries."

"Great," I said. "Let me know when you're done. I'll be looking over this stuff."

Chapter Fourteen

Philadelphia smelled wet.

I knew that was in my head, most likely. The city wasn't even technically coastal; the port was on the river, not on the ocean. But that was still the first impression I got after stepping out of the portal that one of my hired mages had opened for us. It smelled wet.

A small swarm of minions followed me out, leaving the alleyway packed with semiconscious forms. There were a few giants, a few ghouls, a couple of mages who specialized in things that were useful at the moment. I hadn't brought the snipers, for reasons that were more political than practical. I was hoping to come up with some local assistance by framing this as, essentially, a human-nonhuman conflict. That meant that for once I was better off by seeming as *inhuman* as possible.

Which was...well, it shouldn't give me too much trouble at this point. But it did mean that having plain human soldiers with me might be more problem than benefit.

Selene, being Selene, had already made arrangements for me to meet with two important people in the city. One of them was the Alpha of the local werewolf pack, a man called Elijah Carpenter. It should be fairly easy to convince him, I thought—this group had, after all, been attacking werewolves around the world, even going so far as to attack a high-level Pack meeting. I was counting on that to do most of the persuasion for me, and counting on his wolves to provide the bulk that I would normally have in the form of human mercenaries and werewolves.

The other was...well, something else. None of the people we'd talked to had really been able to provide any better picture than that. Antonio—no last name given—had gone out of his way to be an enigma, to leave people without a clear understanding of what he was or what he could do. Apparently he'd walked into town about ten years ago, taken out a handful of the midgrade powers in the city, and consolidated their territory into a fiefdom for himself. Since then he'd held it against all contenders, more or less by himself.

I was...not looking forward to that meeting. Nobody got that powerful while also being that mysterious unless they *really* went out of their way to stay mysterious, and nobody did that without some kind of a reason. It was, on the whole, ominous. To say the least.

I was supposed to be meeting with the werewolf first, though, which meant that I could at least put that off a little longer.

There was a guy in the alley when we showed up, apparently a homeless dude that lived there. He stared, and then I stared back, and he got up and started backing away slowly. He made it around five feet before he turned and bolted.

I let him go. Why not? It wasn't like anyone would believe him. And even if they did, so what? This stuff wasn't a secret anymore. The normal people still didn't *know* about it, but it wasn't really *secret*. I couldn't get in trouble because someone saw something they weren't supposed to.

I put on a more human appearance while the others were waking up and getting their bearings, since wandering around the city without it would probably attract a bit too much of the wrong kind of attention.

I didn't bother with trying to figure out where we were within the city, or keep track of where we were going. Elijah had sent a driver to pick us up, as part of the arrangement Selene had made, and he presumably knew his way around the city well enough that I really didn't need to worry about it.

Like most of the werewolves I'd been around, the Philadelphia kept a large van on hand for just such occasions. It takes a lot of cargo space to haul a bunch of werewolves in fur, and while it's not *often* necessary, it's worth keeping something on hand just in case.

This one, which was illegally parked in front of the alley entrance, was a little more obviously sketchy than most. It was painted solid black, and rather than tinted windows, it had gotten around the issue of someone looking inside and seeing something they weren't supposed to by having *no* windows beyond those that were strictly necessary for driving.

The driver didn't do much to mitigate that impression. He was leaning against the van, and everything about his appearance gave off a very clear "societal reject" image, from the piercings in his face to the leather jacket and combat boots. All of which was, of course, fairly mainstream these days, but he managed to wear them in a way that evoked the times when someone looking like that was practically imprisoned on sight.

"You'd be Winter, then?" he said. He tossed a casual, almost mocking salute my way. "Nice to meetcha. What are you here to talk to the boss about?"

I stood there silently for a few seconds as the minions opened the van and started climbing into the back. The seats had been removed to leave a large, open cargo space; it would be a squeeze to get them all in, but not impossible. I was fairly confident that it was technically illegal to have them riding like that, but as usual, that just wasn't something that we really *cared* about, necessarily.

"War," I said at last.

The driver looked like he was about to make a joke. Then he met my eyes, and any trace of laughter died. He gave me a jerky nod, and got in the driver's seat. I got in the other side, and once everyone was more-or-less secure in back, he started driving.

I didn't say anything on the way to the meeting. There was nothing to say.

Most of the packs that I knew held their meetings in a large house or mansion. Territory was important for werewolves, and having a consistent location to act as the center of that territory mattered. It made it easier to focus those instincts and keep them from being a problem in daily life elsewhere.

Philadelphia, though, was a bit more of a major, old city than anywhere I'd lived, and property prices were correspondingly high. The pack here was also a little bit more...*aboveboard* than most that I'd seen. Between the two, the center of the pack territory here wasn't a house. It was an office building, and more specifically the third to seventh floors thereof. The corporation the pack used as their front for official finances owned the whole building, as I understood it, but that was the portion that they actually used as their own headquarters.

Most of the minions stayed outside. Only Kyi came up with me to the meeting. I figured she'd better be there for it, since if this worked out she'd be the one acting as my proxy later.

There were a handful of people in the lobby, including a receptionist and a few security guards—probably redundant, considering the nature of the building's ownership, but I supposed he had to keep up appearances for the less informed occupants. Not a one of them batted an eye as we walked through to the private elevator. Presumably, our guide was known here.

He was not, however, so well known as to actually be a part of the meeting. He showed us to a conference room on the third floor, but didn't actually follow us in.

I would have been just fine staying outside with him, all things considered. But that wasn't exactly an option, so I took a deep breath to remind myself that breathing was good, and went inside.

The conference room was...really, really nice. Not, like, otherworldly nice, but it was well appointed. Expensive furniture, some tasteful art on the walls. I was guessing it had cost several thousand dollars to decorate the room. Which, considering that it was used to host meetings of high-ranking business executives, made a fair amount of sense.

All of which, of course, paled in comparison to the people in it. Elijah Carpenter was no Conn, but he was still a werewolf Alpha, with all the meaning that carried. When you entered his conference room, he was what drew your eye. It was as inevitable as rocks falling when you dropped them.

He was, at least, more physically imposing than most such, making it easier for the uninformed to explain why he had such a *presence*. He was a tall man, lean almost to the point of looking drawn, wearing a suit that cost more than a lot of houses, with a neatly trimmed black beard and features that were just slightly too stern to call attractive.

"Elijah," I said, inclining my head slightly and looking to the side. It was a very slight display of deference, the sort you might extend to an equal when you were in their home. Since that was, more or less, exactly the case, it seemed appropriate. "I'm glad you could find the time to meet with me."

He was silent for a moment, then nodded. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, extending his hand.

Elijah had a stronger grip than Aodh. Well, not really—a werewolf was not the match of a champion of the Sidhe. But he gripped my hand more tightly than Aodh had, trying to make a point out of it.

I squeezed back. Not as hard as I could, I wasn't trying to hurt the man, but enough to make him very much aware of who the strongest person in the room was.

He was surprised. He covered it well, but I could tell. He was surprised that I was stronger than he was. And also, probably, at how very cold my "skin" was. I was guessing that he was currently trying to figure out just how badly misinformed he was.

Somehow, I didn't think he was going to reach the right answers. It was hard when you were working from a wildly inaccurate starting point.

"Please, take a seat," he said, letting go and pulling a chair out himself. I sat opposite him, with Kyi next to me.

He hadn't come alone, either. There were two other guys there, both of whom smelled like werewolves. They were obviously minions, though, and I didn't pay much attention to them. This was a meeting of me and Elijah; the rest were, essentially, window dressing.

"I'm sure you're a busy man," I said. "So I'll get straight to the point. I presume you're aware of the radical pro-human group which has been attacking werewolves recently?"

"You mean the Light of Reason?" he asked.

I stared for a second. "Is that really what they're calling themselves?"

"Evidently," he said. "They've published a few pamphlets, and some documents online. Mostly a poorly-edited mess of logical fallacies, political propaganda, and scripture taken out of context."

"What the hell do they even call each other?" I asked. "Lighters?"

"You're likely putting more thought into it than they did," he said dryly.

"Probably," I said, then shook my head. "Anyway, the point. I've got reason to believe the...Lighters have a major base in Philadelphia. Maybe their actual headquarters, maybe not, but either way a major center of activity." On cue, Kyi pulled out a copy of the information we'd gleaned on the place and handed it to him. The people I'd hired had gotten more while Selene set these meetings up, and all of it continued to point at the same location.

"Interesting," Elijah said, leafing through the papers. "You're here in person rather than just sending me these. That suggests you're planning to do something about this yourself, correct?"

"Yeah," I said. "Figured I'd clear it with you first."

His lips twitched. "Clear it with me," he said. "Really?"

"It seemed polite to ask before I killed a bunch of people in your city."

"Right," he said dryly. "And that's all? Let's not beat around the bush, Winter. You're looking for help, correct?"

"You do have the numbers," I said. "And you're familiar with the city. I'm not. I was hoping you might be willing to have some of your wolves watching the area. Keep civilians away, make sure none of them manage to slip out, that sort of thing."

"It's werewolves they've been killing," Elijah said. There was an undertone of anger in his voice, a very quiet and very intense current of rage. The other werewolves edged away from him slightly, without probably realizing it, and even Kyi looked like she wanted to cringe. "My people may want to take a more...active role in this."

"If your people go in there, they'll be massacred," I said bluntly. "Think about it. The Lighters have a hate on for everyone that isn't purely human, but like you said, it's werewolves they've been killing. They'll be ready for werewolves."

"And they won't be ready for you?" he asked skeptically.

"No," I said quietly. "They won't. They really, really won't be." I met his eyes for the first time.

I looked away first. I had to; he was the Alpha here, and making him lose face in front of his minions was an excellent way to lose any chance of gaining an ally I might have had.

But when I did look away, he was clearly a bit relieved. "It's good tactics," he said. "I'll be going in with you, though."

"Of course," I said. It was, again, a status thing. The Alpha faced things head-on. It was a necessity of the role. "I have equipment if you need it. Rifles and such. Other than that, I can meet you there in an hour or so."

"That long?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I've got...another appointment first."

My next meeting was in...well, it was a very different neighborhood. *Very* different.

The werewolves, in Philadelphia, made their home in the nice part of town. They were in Center City, the business district, downtown. Their reach extended beyond that, of course, but that was the seat of their power. Or, at least, of the pack Selene had put me in contact with; there might be more than one, in a city the size of Philadelphia. I'd never really cared enough to check.

This was northeast of that, and it wasn't the nice part of town. It was, to put it bluntly, a slum. It looked like the sort of place where you'd be justifiably afraid to go outside after dark, where a stranger might stab you just to take your shoes. A girl who looked like she couldn't be much more than sixteen was turning tricks on the corner, a dog with a bit of ribbon around her neck sitting on the sidewalk beside her. The dog had a festering sore on her face, and a quick glimpse of her mind suggested that she was in constant pain, hungry and cold.

A quick glance sent a couple housecarls her way. It was, in some ways, a silly gesture. I couldn't save every homeless kid with a dog. I knew that.

But hell. I could maybe save this one. And it made me feel better.

Our destination, here, was an industrial complex that had ceased to be industrial without actually becoming anything else. It looked like it had been sitting empty for a long time now—years, at least. This hadn't been a good neighborhood even before the world went to hell in a handbasket. I didn't think it had gotten better since, although I wasn't sure it had really gotten *worse* either. More open about it, maybe.

The gate was padlocked shut, and it looked genuinely abandoned. Between the two, I wasn't entirely sure this was the right place, but it matched the address, so I popped the lock and went into the yard.

The yard area also looked abandoned, the large overhead doors locked and rusted shut. One of the smaller, personnel doors was open, though, and there was a light on inside.

I glanced at Kyi, then shrugged and went in, once again leaving the rest of the minions to wait outside. One of the housecarls already had a flask out before we'd climbed the few steps up to the door.

There was a dim light on just inside the door, and I could see another down the hall. At the end of the hall, I could see more light coming from around the corner. Each pool of light was just barely in contact with the next, forming a sort of corridor. Outside of that corridor, in the rooms and even at the edges of the hallways, it was pitch dark.

The darkness held no terror for me. It had never been much of a problem, and with what I was now, it was none.

This darkness, though, felt more real, like something more than just an absence of light. There was a presence to it, and not, I instinctively knew, something that I had dominion over by virtue of my new role. I got the distinct impression that, champion of Midnight or not, I would be wise not to look too closely at the shadows here, or to stray from the lit path.

Following that lit path led us through what had once been the public areas, down a rather meandering route, and out onto what had once been the assembly line of the factory. It had been gutted, all the machinery hauled out to leave an enormous open space.

I was only dimly aware of that, mostly through my perception of how the air moved. It was dark here, too. Low ground lighting of the sort they used in theaters formed a dimly-lit path out into the middle of the room, where a spotlight shone down from the ceiling to illuminate the person we were here to meet.

He looked human, though I had my doubts as to the accuracy of that impression. He smelled *mostly* human, but there was a trace of something else in his power, something darker. I wasn't quite sure what it might be—it was too subtle, too fleeting, to really identify—but I got the distinct impression that calling Antonio human was, at best, an incomplete statement.

There were a handful of people standing in the pool of light with him. But it only took me a moment to realize that they were...even less significant than the other werewolves with Elijah had been. Those had been minions; these were *puppets*. There was a blankness to their expressions, a total lack of any response as we approached, that gave it away. I wasn't sure whether it was drugs or magic or something else entirely, wasn't sure whether it was temporary or permanent. But what I was sure of was that these people were...barely even people.

Antonio himself was lounging on a throne that looked to have been assembled out of bits of machinery and scrap metal. It should have been hideously uncomfortable, but he looked as relaxed as a cat on a warm blanket.

He didn't look our way at all until we were at the edge of the pool of light from the spotlight, at which point he pushed himself upright in his throne. "Winter!" he said cordially. "So glad you could make it. I've been wanting to meet you for years, you know, it just never worked out."

That gave me a moment's pause. "You...wanted to meet me?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "You're...well, quite an interesting person, by all accounts. And we are, after all, in somewhat similar lines of work. Though you claimed a whole damn city for your piece, and made it stick. Huge respect for that, by the way. I have a decent idea of how difficult that would be."

"It sounds like you did something similar here," I said. "From the account I heard, at least."

"Not entirely dissimilar, yes," he agreed. "But I only claimed a small piece of the city. Just one neighborhood, really. I'm not nearly so ambitious as you are."

"But you're ambitious enough. And I've heard about some of the people that tried to take this neighborhood. You managed to stop them all. Without, from what my sources said, even needing anyone else's help."

He smiled. His teeth were very white, and very even. "It seems we both know something about each other," he said. "That makes it easier. For instance, I happen to know that you're currently on the warpath."

"How'd you find that out?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Antonio scoffed. "Winter, please. You're not the only one who makes a point of keeping up on current events. Word gets out. Word *always* gets out. Now, why don't you tell me how being on the warpath led you out here."

"You're familiar with the Light of Reason?"

"The extremist group?" he asked distastefully. "I've heard of them, yes."

"They're the ones I'm after currently," I said. "And they've got a major base in Philadelphia that I intend to clear out."

"Why are you after them?" he asked. "They seem a little...small-fry for you."

"I've got a personal grievance against them," I said, carefully leaving out any mention of things summoned from beyond the limits of reality.

He smiled again, a little wider. "Oh? Do tell."

I considered for a moment, then shrugged. The direct approach had usually ended best for me. Or, more accurately, everything else tended to end so *poorly* that the direct approach looked good by comparison.

"They killed me," I said simply.

"You seem remarkably alive for a dead man," he commented.

"It didn't take. But it still left me rather annoyed."

"I know the feeling," Antonio said. "But really. Why are you telling me this?"

"It occurs to me," I said, "that someone of your obvious abilities could be of considerable assistance in clearing out the Lighters. And you know this city a hell of a lot better than I do."

His lips twitched. "That I do. But why *should* I assist you?"

"Self-interest," I said promptly. "Think about it. Do you *really* think that they won't try to take you down eventually?"

"So your answer is that I should fight now to avoid a fight later," he said dryly. "Seems a bit...counterproductive."

"Now you have me to help," I pointed out. "And besides. An infestation is always easiest to dig out before it puts in roots."

Antonio considered that for a long moment, during which time I noticed that all of the people-puppets were breathing in sync. Exactly. And they were all in time with him.

Well, that ruled out pretty much anything *other* than magic that I could think of.

"I'll do it," he said at last. "On one condition. After we're done, you'll answer one question for me."

"I know a lot of things that I'm not permitted to share," I said.

"That's fine," Antonio said. "If the answer touches on any of those, you can just tell me, and I'll ask something else."

"You aren't concerned I'll just keep putting it off indefinitely?"

"No. You have a reputation for dealing honestly, Winter. You keep your deals. I don't think you'd risk that reputation to get out of answering one question."

I nodded. "True. All right, then. Deal. You need the address?"

"No," he said. "I know where to go. Run along, now. I've got...arrangements to make before we do this."

I didn't wait to be told twice.

Behind us, the lights went out one by one as we left them behind.

Chapter Fifteen

I'd seen a lot of warehouse complexes while doing this sort of work. They had a lot of qualities that made them appealing to the aspiring evil overlord; they were cheap and easy to rent, had a lot of open space, and it was much less likely that your unsavory activities would attract attention than in, say, your average residential neighborhood.

It was no wonder that I'd seen so many, really. And by now, I'd seen enough to be something of a connoisseur.

I had not, however, seen one quite like what the Lighters had taken over. It was a gated complex, with the actual warehouses behind a concrete wall. I hadn't seen a similar layout in the past, though I wasn't sure whether that was just because I was used to a more low-brow sort of warehouse or this was genuinely unusual.

By the time I showed up, the werewolves had already installed themselves around the district. They were loitering in nearby streets pretending to be dogs, eating in cafes, in one case even standing next to a stalled car at the side of the road. A handful of them with firearms experience were waiting with large, heavy rifles in places with good views, positioned to have someone looking over the scene from every angle. That had required a bit of finagling—I'd had to buy a freaking *ship* to get one of them out on the river, and even for someone who could afford to throw a million dollars at a problem without really thinking about it, buying a container ship on short notice was *not* cheap.

But, again, money just wasn't an issue anymore. Besides, I was confident Tindr would figure a way to turn a profit on the whole thing. Probably just by selling it at a profit, although I supposed it was possible I'd end up being a shipping magnate on top of everything else.

I debated walking right in the front gate, since it wasn't like their security system could even slow me down. But while that idea had a certain dramatic appeal, it seemed...imprudent. This was more of a fact-finding mission than anything, and while I highly doubted the Lighters had anything capable of *stopping* this crew, they might be able to delete some vital scrap of information if we gave them warning.

I walked around a ways to a quiet spot out of sight of the gate instead, and then just jumped the wall. It was ten feet tall, the kind of wall you put in when you *really* took your privacy seriously. I vaulted it cleanly, not even touching it on the way past.

Elijah was only slightly more hindered by it, putting one hand down to give himself that last bit of height to get over the wall. Snowflake cleared it easily, and then the ghouls and jötnar started clambering over it. I never saw Antonio actually jump the wall, but when I glanced around I saw him standing on the same side with the rest of us. He was sucking on what smelled like a cherry lollipop, and smirked at me when he noticed me looking.

Show-off, I thought, then glanced around to make sure that everyone had made it. It seemed like we were all present and accounted for. The wall had taken us, at most, thirty seconds to get past.

A ten-foot concrete wall was a decent defensive measure. But it was...rather insufficient here.

I knew that the Lighters had their headquarters here somewhere, but the information hadn't extended to actually saying which of the warehouses they were based out of. Greg hadn't been able to narrow it down at all—not without taking more time, at least, and I wasn't willing to wait any longer than absolutely necessary. I'd been planning on figuring it out here, if necessary sneaking into the buildings myself to take a look before bringing the horde in.

This turned out to be unnecessary. I'd forgotten that I was dealing with...well, *people*, as opposed to the things that I'd gotten used to. They were normal humans in most respects, with everything that implied. And as such, they'd made a choice that would normally be a perfectly decent one, but which in this particular case was very much not.

They had *guard dogs*.

I could feel the presence of the animals from across the lot. There were nineteen of them spread between a pair of large warehouses on the other side of the complex. It seemed implausible that there would be quite that many dogs in a warehouse for any *good* reasons, but I took a moment to check just in case.

It only took a second for me to slide into one of the dogs and look around through her eyes. At a glance, it looked like the right place. There were some people standing around with guns, and they smelled like magic to me, but it was very much *on* them rather than *in* them. It seemed like the usual Lighter base. Good enough for me.

I was in for a nasty surprise when I returned to my own body again. Namely, I didn't exactly *have* one. The body I'd built for myself out of ice and darkness was already collapsing by the time I got back, both in the sense of falling down and in the sense of falling *apart*.

Oh. Of course. In the past, when I'd occupied an animal's mind, I'd been able to rely on autonomous bodily functions to more or less continue in my absence. Now, I didn't exactly have those anymore. I was, on some level, nothing *but* mind, and when I wasn't occupying my body, it ceased to be a body.

I caught myself before I actually fell, and took a moment to piece my body back together. Some of the people with me looked concerned, but none of them were actually freaking out, and none of them asked questions.

"This way," I said, before they could change their minds on the questions, and then started across the lot. I wasn't too terribly concerned about being spotted—I was even less scared of the security

guards here than of the Lighters—but I stuck to more shadowy areas on the way regardless. It wasn't too hard, anyway; it was almost sunset.

The two warehouses were detached, maybe ten feet of open asphalt separating them. I was suspicious that there was a more direct connection underground, but I wasn't certain; none of the dogs I'd felt had actually been below ground.

In any case, that left two entrances to cover, and we couldn't really afford to do them sequentially. I was reasonably confident that we still had the advantage of surprise, but I was expecting that to end the moment we opened the door. That being the case, giving one of the warehouses time to get ready would kind of negate the whole point of being sneaky about this.

"You take the team and clear that one," I said to Kyi, pointing at the warehouse on the right. "Antonio and I will take the other."

"We will?" Antonio asked. He sounded vaguely amused.

"You wanted to see me in action, didn't you?" I asked. "Well, here's your chance."

And, more importantly, I wasn't at all confident that I wanted him around my people. I was guessing that probably everyone knew that was the real reason behind how I'd divvied the teams up, but they wouldn't call me on it. It was a courtesy thing.

Kyi wanted to argue. I could tell. But she wouldn't show any disobedience in front of outsiders. She nodded sharply instead, and turned towards her assigned target, her one eye hard and cold.

I started toward the other, with Antonio slouching along beside me. He was still sucking on that lollipop, or possibly another one; I hadn't been paying that much attention. Snowflake came with me as well, which was some comfort.

I thought about being subtle and picking the lock. I really did.

I justified kicking in the door by telling myself that it was marginally quicker, and they'd know they were under attack when we walked in anyway. And if it really had more to do with me feeling a lot of generalized, pent-up frustration and wanting to express it physically, that didn't make the justification any less correct.

It was a tough door, heavy and bolted shut. Most people would probably have had to batter at it for a while with a ram to have any chance of getting through.

I managed it on the first kick, and walked in while the echoes of the *crash* were still ringing in the air.

Inside, things were...well, a lot like I'd expected from the raid in Colorado Springs. The room was very clean, very bright—it looked more like a lab or a supermarket than an evil lair. That impression was reinforced by the contents, which looked a lot like an office. There were several long Formica tables, each of which was a white so blinding that it had to be scrubbed daily, if not hourly, and a few large metal cabinets stood at the back of the room. Maybe twenty people were sitting at the tables, each of them sitting at a computer and wearing a headset. A similar number of armed guards were spaced out around the walls, along with another nine that were specifically there as dog handlers.

The dogs, really, were a brilliant touch. There were a lot of supernatural critters out there that could have walked right through this crowd and never been noticed. But dogs were harder for most people to hide from, between having better senses and being *different* enough mentally that most mental magic would have a hard time affecting them. Add in some cameras to cover those more susceptible to less biological mechanisms—and they had cameras, I could see them—and you had about as good of a security system as a normal human could manage.

I had to appreciate the thought they'd put into it. They'd done a really decent job of setting this up.

I could not, in all honesty, blame them for not realizing the weakness they'd built into their system by doing so. There really weren't all that many people in the world who could exploit it. It was just their bad luck that one of them had happened to show up here.

I didn't want to take any time over it, and I really didn't want to have to take the time to piece myself together again. So rather than do anything fancy, I just sent a quick wave of magic out, and every dog in the room collapsed, instantly and very deeply asleep. Snowflake wasn't affected, whether because of her resistance to mental magic or because she wasn't exactly a dog or because I didn't *want* her to be. It probably had something to do with all of the above.

If they hadn't realized that shit was hitting fans before, *that* definitely gave it away. A couple of the dog handlers tried to get their charges to wake up for a few seconds before realizing that it was a lost cause. Otherwise, the guards mostly went for weapons, while the rest of the people opted for more of a "duck and cover" response.

Again, I had to respect the speed and precision of their response. The Lighters had a ridiculous name, but their training was solid. It was probably only two seconds after I'd kicked the door down when they had guns trained on the doorway. That was a pretty fast response time, as such things went.

Considering what they were up against, it was two seconds too slow. In that time, Snowflake already had two of the guards down and bleeding, and she was jumping on the third.

I followed her in at a slightly slower pace, going the other direction. It was still faster than they'd anticipated, and mostly their shots went well wide of me. A couple did hit, but they were using small-caliber weapons—the sort that was designed for use in places where you didn't want bullets flying for

miles, or going through walls. Birdshot and hollow-point nine millimeter, for the most part, I thought. It was still dangerous—hell, a .22 caliber could be lethal under the right circumstances. But that kind of ammunition just wasn't suited for the kind of massive damage that it took to put me down. Long before they'd done enough raw physical damage to do the job, I was on them.

They had body armor—magically reinforced body armor, probably, based on the equipment these nutters had used previously. But I had Tyrfin. Even discounting my raw physical strength, that wasn't a fair contest. The first few went down hard and fast, and didn't get back up.

Apparently they realized just how badly out of their depth they were at that point, because the ones on my side of the room fell back, dropping or holstering their guns.

Then one of them grabbed a grenade off her belt, and I realized that what I'd taken for a retreat was really just a change of tactics.

I was quick enough to catch the grenade in a web of air and darkness before it could reach me. An instant later, though, it burst into intense, highly localized flame. I managed to keep it at a distance from me, but it was *hot*, and even as far as I was from it, the front of my body still started to melt.

I started to move, thinking that I could close the distance to them enough that they couldn't really afford to use that sort of weapon, but there was already another incendiary headed my way, and I couldn't afford to just take that hit. I caught the other one as well, but holding both of those magical constructions steady took all of my focus; I couldn't really move at the same time. It was looking very much like I'd have to come up with another body—irritating, particularly in such a bright, sterile environment. There wasn't a whole lot here to work with.

Then Antonio, very clearly, said, "That's enough."

An instant later, something seized control of the darkness I was holding in midair. I was pretty sure I could have stopped it from taking control pretty easily, but there wasn't any particular reason to, so I let him have it.

He used it to flick both of the incendiaries back towards the Lighters, angled in a way that knocked the *third* one back with them before it could even get near me.

There was some screaming then, and the next grenade didn't come.

I ran in a wide arc to avoid the fire, jumping from one of the tables to the next, and circled around behind the Lighters. Once again, they weren't prepared for me to move that fast, and I hit them before they could adjust to the change. I'd learned my lesson, and now I didn't stop to give them a target for the weapons that could actually *hurt* me. I just kept moving, taking one out and then continuing without pause.

I was fast, and with Tyrfin I was pretty much guaranteed to kill these guys in one swing. I could make *very* effective use of hit-and-run tactics, here, and they just didn't have enough people to take long enough to figure out a response.

Less than a minute after I walked into the room, I cut the last of the guards on that side of the room almost in half, and turned to see how the rest of the fight was going.

Snowflake had done a comparable job on the other side. Her armor could shrug off small caliber fire just fine, and she was just too fast for things like those incendiaries to be viable. Every one of the guards over there was lying on the ground, most of them visibly mangled. None of them was going to be getting up again.

None of the other people in the room—the ones who'd been looking at computers when I came in—was doing a thing. It took me a moment to figure out why.

They were all staring at Antonio, a flat, fixed stare. And they were breathing in sync.

I could smell his magic, now. And it did not smell human. Oh, there was a bit of human to it—enough that I was sure human was a *part* of what he was. But the dominating tone was something else entirely, something sour and greasy, sulfur and foul, sickly-sweet rot. I'd never smelled anything quite like it, but it was familiar enough that I could make a decent case what it came from.

"How stable is that?" I asked, nodding at the crowd of mesmerized humans.

"Not very," Antonio said absently. "I have to concentrate to keep them like this. It's delicate."

"Okay. Let me tie them up first, then." I'd brought a pack, since I was rich enough that replacing it if I had to abandon this body wasn't a big deal. I didn't have a whole lot, but I *did* have some heavy duct tape, and now I took it out and started gathering up the Lighters.

"Not killing them?" Antonio asked. He sounded vaguely curious.

I shook my head as I started taping them up. It wasn't a great job—I wasn't really any good at this—but I was standing right there watching. It really just had to slow them down enough that I'd have a chance to react before they could do something stupid. "They might know something important," I said. "Can't afford to kill them until I find out."

"Makes sense," he said. "Though I think you already got lucky. Those cabinets at the back are server farms. I'm guessing there's a lot of data there."

"I'd rather not take chances," I said, and then nothing else until I was finished taping them up.

Antonio blinked then, and that foul magic that had been throbbing in the air faded. The humans started to shake it off, and their breathing went back to normal. It took a moment before they realized

that they were bound and gagged, seemingly. The dogs were still asleep, and even if they woke up I wasn't too concerned. Dogs were not a threat to me.

"Fascinating," Antonio said, looking at me. "You look somewhat...melted."

"Oh, right," I said. "I can fix that."

He nodded. "When you said that they killed you, and it just didn't take. This is what you meant?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's not something that I want to advertise too broadly."

"I'll not tell anyone, then," Antonio said. "You don't have to worry about me spilling your secrets. I respect you too much for that."

"Why?" I asked.

He pursed his lips. "I suppose you're something of a role model. You're one of the few people that's managed to really make it *work*."

"I guess I can see that," I said. "Oh, while we're on uncomfortable topics. You're a cambion."

"A what?"

"A cambion," I repeated. "The child of a demon and a human."

"Ah," he said, with a slightly twisted smile. "That. How could you tell?"

"You smell like Hell," I said simply. "I've had some dealings with them. Enough to recognize the smell. But you're not a full demon."

"Interesting," he said. "I've never really had much interaction with them myself. Though I'm told that I take after my father more strongly than most...cambions? That's a good word."

"How did you get this kind of power without even knowing what you're called?" I asked.

Um, Snowflake said. Maybe not antagonize the half-demon warlord quite so much?

Don't worry, I sent back. He's...not harmless, exactly, but I don't think he's that much of a threat to us.

"I figured some things out," Antonio said, shrugging. "And honestly, a lot of that power is just bluffing. I picked those first few fights to favor me, heavily. What I've got makes me decent at defending my home turf, so once I established myself, it wasn't too hard to keep. Got lucky a few times, and I've mostly been coasting on that reputation since."

I laughed. There wasn't anything inherently funny about it, but something about it was...I had to laugh. It was contrast as much as anything, I thought. I'd gotten so used to people being a hell of a lot scarier than I initially gave them credit for that having the opposite happen was strangely amusing.

"Okay," I said. "This is dealt with. You know how long we have before the cops show up?"

"Doubt they're coming," he said. "One of the things I can do is mess with sounds. I muffled everything in here, and the other building went down quiet. Shouldn't be anything to tip off the police, and if somebody does file a noise complaint, they're too busy to follow up on it."

"All right, then," I said. "Guess this is it, then. I think you're entitled to a question."

Antonio nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I want to know...is it worth it?"

I paused. "That...is a very open question."

"Here's the thing," he said. "I've never really...*done* the cambion thing, to speak of. Got my position, but I've been sitting on it ever since."

"I saw the people you had with you earlier," I said dryly. "Seems like they'd disagree if they could."

He laughed. "I hire them by the hour. I pay well, and I'm told the experience is actually quite pleasant. A mild high, something like laughing gas, from how they describe it. It's easier for me to hold someone the more time I've already had them for, so it works out fairly well." He shrugged. "Anyway, I've never really done the cambion thing much. I've got a lot of potential, everyone I've asked says so, but I haven't followed up on it. And I figured I'd ask your opinion, since you *have* followed through on your potential, you know?"

I nodded slowly. "I'd have to say it's not worth it," I said. "Every step I've taken on that path, I've regretted it. But...ultimately, we can't change our nature. We can only be what we are. And in hindsight, it would have been less painful for everyone involved if I hadn't tried to fight that. Take that for what it's worth."

"I see," Antonio said thoughtfully. "Well, thanks. That answer was...more honest than I was expecting, actually. Good luck with the Lighters."

The cambion stuck another lollipop in his mouth and sauntered out into the night, leaving us alone with a lot of prisoners, a lot of computers, and a whole lot of bodies.

Chapter Sixteen

I wasn't sure whether I'd ever had a plan go this smoothly before, *ever*. It was kind of worrying, really. I was not a lucky man. If things went well now, that just meant that I was freaking out about what would happen when they inevitably went back to their usual state of barely-controlled disaster.

For the moment, though, I could ride out the high while it lasted. The warehouses had been captured in less than two minutes, without even alerting the complex security. The occupants of a third warehouse, which hadn't had any dogs and had thus escaped my detection, tried to run. With people watching from every angle, they hadn't had a chance of getting away clean. The snipers had kept eyes on them the whole time, and after they made it out of sight of the complex the werewolves on the ground had taken them. No one made it through the net.

Since we had the luxury of time, for once, I brought the experts to the information rather than the other way around. It seemed like the more logical answer; I wasn't as out of touch with technology as a lot of the older supernatural things out there, but I'd never had any need to work with a server farm. I had no idea how to move it without causing damage, and I did *not* want to lose any of the data on those computers.

I couldn't reliably open a portal to Philadelphia, and it would take me a few hours to get that well-acquainted with a spot in the city even if I felt like going to the effort. So I took the mundane route instead, and had Selene charter a plane.

Or, rather, that's what I'd planned. It turned out not to be necessary. Apparently, one of the things that I'd acquired from my association with the Midnight Court was a private jet, complete with crew on retainer. So I didn't have to charter a plane. I already *owned* one.

That was...well, it was another of those moments when I felt like my understanding of the world was changed on a fundamental level. I'd known that the Faerie Courts had an immense amount of money, enough that the actual number was immaterial. But this really put that into perspective. It also made me wonder just how much of the wealth in the "normal" world was really controlled by supernatural interests. I mean, I'd known that Zhang's smuggling ring had been worth billions, and there were plenty of other individuals that had finances on the scale of major corporations.

It also gave me a much better idea of why someone might be inclined to take a job as the champion of a Faerie Queen. Buying a plane like that was...it must cost tens of millions, at least. And for me it was a casual perk of the job, not even worth mentioning. For most of my life, that had been more money than I'd ever had, *all put together*.

I'd never thought of myself as a particularly materialistic person. And I could still see how that kind of thing could make one hell of a tempting offer. Sure, it was guaranteed to end badly, but when you're on your third week of living on ramen and peanut butter, that starts to seem like a fair trade.

It took a few hours for them to get there, though, during which time the last few loose ends of the operation were tidied up. Under cover of a darkness that I made just a bit deeper than nighttime in a quiet part of the city, we dragged all the prisoners into one building and made sure that their bonds really were secure. Kyi personally searched all of them, which took a while—between the two buildings and those the werewolves brought down outside, we had almost fifty of them.

They probably should have been able to attract notice, since even with their mouths taped shut, fifty people can make a fair amount of noise. But the warehouse was fairly well insulated, and given what kinds of activities the Light of Reason got up to, I was guessing that muffled sounds of fear emanating from these buildings was not a terribly unusual event. Not to mention that they were surrounded by the bodies of their former associates, which tends to lend a certain credibility to threats of death for making too much noise. Between the three, I was not expecting them to bring security down on us.

Antonio was already gone by that time, of course. Once all the prisoners were present and restrained, Elijah shook my hand, congratulated me on a job well done, and left as well, taking his wolves with him. They took the dogs, as well, saying that they knew an animal shelter that would know what to do with them. Something about having someone there who was really good with animals that had been involved in violence. I was just glad not to have to kill them.

I thought that Antonio didn't entirely approve of the crowd of restrained prisoners on the floor. I couldn't really blame him. Werewolves tend to be violent—it goes hand-in-hand with their predatory nature. But at the same time, the hunt is quick, and clean. A werewolf's victims don't, generally, linger long. I could see how Elijah could disapprove of this without really being a hypocrite.

I wasn't entirely sure I approved myself. But the stakes were too high to be squeamish about this.

After they were gone, things got a little more relaxed. I had people watching the empty warehouses to make sure that nothing went wrong, but that didn't take all that many people, and the rest had nothing in particular to do at the moment.

The jötnar passed the time in ways that were fairly similar to what humans might have done. Some of them had brought flasks, and some others had brought dice. They appropriated one of the tables, and sat around drinking, gambling, and conversing quietly.

The ghouls, on the other hand, were...well, ghouls. Aside from their ability to create a humanlike mask over their true features, they weren't really much like humans. For one thing, they were always hungry. And there was plenty of meat lying around. The results were entirely predictable, and somewhat messy.

I noticed that that upset the Lighters, in some cases seemingly more than the actual deaths. I didn't have that response, myself. I was enough of a werewolf that the idea of eating my kill wasn't really a taboo. If anything, it meant that there was less flesh to dispose of later. It was convenient.

For my part, I just stood and waited. I spent a while considering plans for magical items that might be more useful to me in my current state, and almost got out a piece of paper to start writing out formulae and schematics. But ultimately, that just didn't fit the image well enough. The jarl as a cold, distant figure that didn't require diversion was better than the jarl as a distractible nerd. Particularly given that I would almost certainly make a lot of errors in the first draft, and there was an outside chance that someone would notice. That was something I wanted to avoid.

So I stood apart, and just...waited. It wasn't as hard as I would have guessed. I didn't get tired anymore. I still felt a need to fidget, to pace, but it was entirely mental, and relatively easy to suppress. I got bored, but I didn't show it outwardly.

Finally, a little less than four hours after I'd made the phone call, the specialists arrived. It seemed awkward to try and smuggle all of them and their equipment in, so we'd gone for a more direct approach. As far as security was concerned, they were from a local tech support company, here to do some work for the Lighters.

I'd been concerned that I might have to buy a company, to sell the story. I'd already spent a *lot* of money on this, and while I had the funds, I didn't for an instant think that I could spend them like that without it having consequences. That wasn't how the world worked. Fortunately, one of the companies Antonio's pack operated was in that business, and he was willing to let me borrow some of their accoutrements.

As expected, the security guard wasn't about to accept their story at face value. She called for confirmation; one of the jötnar I didn't know very well answered the phone, and did a remarkably good job of sounding bored. Hell, he probably *was* bored; waiting on specialists for hours was, as it turned out, not a bad thing when it came to pretending to be a bored receptionist at the end of your shift.

I tugged the borrowed—well, *stolen*, but it wasn't like they were going to miss it—clothes on, and checked my face in the mirror one more time before leaving. It hadn't quite occurred to me, until about an hour into the wait, that being able to shape my features out of ice and magic could probably make a much more effective disguise than I was used to having.

It hadn't been easy. I'd lived in my old body for a long time, after all; even when I was building myself a new one, I automatically, instinctively made it resemble the one I was used to. But I had plenty of time to work. The result was...well, not that great, honestly. But serviceable.

The vans, with the company logo prominently displayed on the side, were stopped at the security gate. The guard and the driver of the lead van were both standing around, looking bored. Boredom, really, seemed to be the order of the day.

The guard looked at me as I walked up with, if not quite recognition, at least a certain degree of *familiarity*. "These the guys you're looking for?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's them," I said, then coughed. The cough came out sounding a bit wrong, almost tinny, but not so much so that it would be obviously unnatural. And if, by some incredibly unlikely sequence of coincidences, she happened to be familiar with the guy I was imitating and my voice sounded noticeably wrong for him, a sore throat could explain a lot.

I'd had *way* too much time to think about this plan.

"Huh," she said. "What do you need them for?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't need them," I said, letting a bit of my exasperation leak into my voice. "It's all buttons and lights to me."

She should probably have asked to see pressed for details, or at the very least asked to see my identification.

But it was almost midnight, and she'd been on the clock for nine hours. So while she knew that there was something suspicious about this, and that she was really supposed to follow some fairly strict security protocols, in that moment she was bored and she was tired and she didn't want the hassle. So she hit the button, and the gate slid open, and the van drove through.

I was almost disgusted. The whole thing was so...easy. It shouldn't be that easy.

I got into the vans, ostensibly because I didn't feel like walking. In reality, it had more to do with the driver having no idea where he was supposed to go, and it being easier to give him directions without anyone knowing when I was in the van with him.

I didn't help them carry the boxes and bags of equipment in. Menial did not fit the image I was trying to cultivate, here.

There were some gasps when they saw the inside of the warehouse. One woman even screamed, though I was quick enough to cover her mouth before she got out more than a quick yelp—easily explained as the result of having dropped a box on her toe.

"What's the problem?" I asked, a little annoyed.

Greg cleared his throat. "Um," he said. "There are, um. A lot of dead people here?" His voice was a little shaky.

"Oh," I said, as understanding dawned. "Right. Sorry, forgot you guys are civilians. There should be clear space to work."

"That doesn't explain why there are a lot of *dead people* in here," one of the other technicians said. He sounded a little hysterical, and I thought the only reason he hadn't also been screaming was that I'd acted before he could process the scene. "And holy shit, what's with the people on the floor?"

"Don't worry about that," I said. "They won't get in your way."

I saw that this wasn't helping, and sighed. "Look," I said. "You knew when you took this job that you might see some things of...dubious legality. And some things that you don't like. We were very clear about that."

"Well, yeah, but I was expecting corporate espionage or something," the hysterical guy said. "Not a fucking massacre!"

"Nobody's asking you to kill people, Jim," Greg said with what was obviously forced calm. "And I'm guessing nobody's going to find the bodies, either?"

"No," I confirmed. "I'll bring out some people to clean things up after you're done here. They're very good at their jobs."

"See?" Greg said. "We'll be fine. Just do your job and we can all go home as wealthy men."

The woman who'd screamed earlier cleared her throat pointedly. After that initial yelp, she'd adjusted rapidly; she seemed less freaked out than the majority of them.

"And wealthy women, of course," Greg said. "But the point still stands."

"I don't know," Jim said, hesitating. "I'm...not sure I can do this."

"If you don't feel you can continue to work for me, you can leave now, no questions asked," I said. "You'll be compensated for your time, and I'll arrange for transportation back to Colorado. I do, however, require that you keep the nondisclosure agreement that you signed as a part of your contracts. Otherwise, there will be consequences."

I didn't make a threat out of it. I figured that a couple dozen bodies would do that job better than I could anyway.

"I don't know," Jim said. He sounded uncertain.

"Just think of the paycheck," Greg said enticingly. "We're talking about a lot of money here, Jim. You could finally pay off that mortgage. And besides, you've read the files on these people. You saw some of the pictures. Are you really going to miss them?"

You know, Snowflake commented from her spot curled up on the floor, I'm not entirely sure I like how good he is at this. He's playing that guy like a fiddle.

Yeah, I said. I'm not thrilled by that myself. Though he is at least using it in my favor.

Sure enough, Jim was visibly on the fence already. He knew he should leave. He knew it was the better idea, that getting involved in this would end badly. But the reward was so tempting, and then the prospect of annoying me was scary.

I was reminded of my earlier thoughts about what might convince someone to take on the role of champion. In a way, on a much smaller scale, this was the same. Money and protection as the carrot, the fear of me as the stick, and something that was unthinkable starts to seem like a pretty reasonable option.

Finally, after maybe ten seconds of agonized silence, he caved. "All right," he said. "I'll do it. Just...this had better work."

A couple of other people had looked like they were also on the fence. But when Jim said that, they wilted. I looked at each of the techs in turn, and none of them said a word.

"All right then," I said. "The computers are back there. There are two other warehouses to go through; I don't know how you want to go about it, but I'll trust that you know what you're doing here. I'll leave some of the troops in case things go wrong. They'll do what you tell them so you can do your job, within reason. Kindly return the favor if a fight starts. Other than that, you know what to do, and you know how to contact me if you find something or if a problem comes up. Questions?"

"Don't think so," Greg said. Nobody spoke up to contradict him.

"Great," I said. "Kyi, help me get these guys ready for transport. Want to get them back to Colorado so you guys can start getting information out of them."

The housecarl started to stand, then paused. "How are we supposed to do that?"

"You've got Vigdis, Selene, Aubrey, and a whole bunch of ghouls," I said, somewhat irritably. "Between them, one of those approaches ought to work. You've got enough people to practice on, you can figure it out."

The people in question looked more than a little nervous when they heard that. Kyi's lips twitched slightly. "Yes, jarl," she said, nodding. "Where you will be?"

"I'm going home for a while," I said. "It feels like it's been forever since I was home."

Chapter Seventeen

Transylvania hadn't changed.

It was funny, the extent to which that dominated my thoughts. As Snowflake and I climbed the winding path to the castle, avoiding the booby traps with the ease of habit so ingrained that it had ceased to even be a thought, I found myself thinking that very strongly. Transylvania hadn't changed.

Compared to the rest of the world, that was already enough to make it a very exceptional place. It had been five months, now, since Loki issued the broadcast heard round the world. In that time, the fundamental nature of the world had changed on almost every level. Nothing was the same. Nothing would ever be the same again.

But in the remote mountains of Transylvania? Here, the changes were...immaterial. There were no people here, no governments, no cities. It was just mountains, hills, and forests. They were still changeable, of course; nothing really lasts forever. But they were on a scale that didn't even recognize the petty squabbling of humanity. They were here before people; they would be here afterward.

It was a thought I'd taken comfort in before, when the chaos first broke out. The notion that some things were stable, that there were things that wouldn't fall apart, had been a comforting one.

Now, I still found it a comforting notion. But it was for an entirely different reason. Then, I'd been concerned about the changes in the world. Now, I was concerned about the changes in myself.

I started to unlock the massive front doors, then paused. I didn't have keys. I'd had a set when I left, but somewhere along the way they'd gotten lost. Probably when my body was incinerated by napalm, in the first Lighter base; that seemed like the sort of thing that could do that.

It didn't matter. The main defense here was the warding spells, and those didn't respond to a physical object. I took them down, then popped the locks open with a quick twist of air and magic. Once inside, I activated the wards again, and locked the many locks, and then continued into the castle. I didn't turn on the lights. I didn't need them.

Snowflake was with me, walking at my side. I could feel her quiet happiness, the same vague comfort that I'd been feeling moments earlier. The idea that maybe, just maybe, things would be all right after all, that there was going to be something left after this chaos burned itself out. I could feel, too, her awareness of my mood, and that she was not thrilled by it, and didn't know what to do about it.

Neither of us put words to the thoughts. There weren't words for this.

In the lab, I did turn on the lights. I had an acute sense of darkness, along with the other sense I'd picked up, and I didn't need light to navigate, but I wasn't sure I was ready to trust to that for writing.

And besides. The lab was supposed to be brightly lit, the cold glare of fluorescent lights gleaming off the counters and the floor. That was...part of what made the laboratory what it *was*. Working there in the dark would just be weird.

"Legion," I said, sitting down and pulling out a notebook and a pencil from one of the drawers. "Wake up."

Nothing happened for a long moment, long enough that I was seriously wondering whether I was going to get a response. Finally, just when I was about to try something else, lights flickered on in the skeleton's eye sockets, and thick black fog spun itself around the bones.

"Boss," Legion said, before he'd even finished manifesting. "This is...wow. I am impressed. You've been all kinds of busy. Kudos."

Great. The demonic embodiment of culling weakness was complimenting me. In case I needed another reason to feel a little bit freaked out about the turns my life had taken.

"Thanks a bunch," I said dryly. "Now can you explain...this?" I gestured vaguely at myself.

"You'll have to specify that one a bit, Boss," he said. "You've got a lot of 'this' going on right now."

"We'll just have to go through it in order, then," I said. "Start with the whole...not having a body thing. Fenris tried to explain what he did, but he's not exactly great at explaining things."

"It's not his forte," Legion said, though he didn't seem happy about it. In the past, I hadn't even been able to get the demon to say Fenris's *name*, he didn't want to talk about it so much. "What do you know?"

"He said something about having stripped me down to the essence and separated that from my body, then holding it together on its own until I didn't need the body anymore. He said some other things, too, but that was the part I understood."

"That's not *wrong*," Legion said after a moment. "But it is incomplete. You still have a body. It just isn't physical."

I frowned. "What does that even mean?"

"Essentially? You're transitioning to a more spiritual state."

I paused. "You mean like you," I said. "Something that's...more an idea than a thing."

"Not like me, no," he said. "But that's as close as you're likely to get at present. You still have enough connection to the material world that you can influence it, and you still have the same

relationship to space and time. But yes, your existence is largely independent from any physical embodiment."

"That's why I can make these things," I said, holding up one hand and letting the mask of flesh fade from it. Not that Legion would care; I doubted that he'd even noticed that mask. "Because I still have that connection to the physical."

"Yep," he agreed. "It's a pretty sweet deal, really. You've got a lot of the strengths of being a physical person *and* a spirit."

"Yeah," I said sourly. "It's just great. Okay. What happens if I'm somewhere that doesn't have anything that I can control?"

Legion didn't say or do anything, but I got a strong impression of frustration from the demon all the same. "This is one of those things that's hard to convey to you," he said. "You don't have the right conceptual models to make sense of it."

"Try."

He sighed. "Okay, I'm going to dumb this down a lot so that you can grasp what I'm saying. No offense, but you need the help. Your question doesn't make any sense. You can't *be* somewhere that doesn't have anything within your sphere of influence. You only *exist* in places that have something you can use as a connection to the physical world."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said irritably. "I've been in places like that already. I can walk right in."

"It's not you doing the walking," he said. "It's a moving construct that happens to provide you with that conduit. Basically, that puppet *is* your connection."

"Okay, that makes sense. So if it's destroyed, and there's nothing else for me to manifest through, I die?"

"Not as such," Legion said. "You just don't have a physical presence. You'll be in a spiritual state again until you find something else that you can act through."

I nodded. "I think that's already happened," I said. "It's annoying, but not a huge problem. So what *can* kill me?"

"Not a whole lot," he said cheerfully. "Like I said, it's a pretty cushy deal. In principle, you're susceptible to the same things as a genuine spirit. So a strong enough expression of concepts opposed to your nature could, conceivably, destroy you. Shamanic magic could also kill you. Well, alter your nature enough that you cease to be you, but from your perspective it's basically the same. It's possible

to make a weapon that can get at you directly through that physical connection, in principle, but the energy requirements would be...fairly extreme."

"So it's all specialized stuff, for the most part."

"Exactly. Not to worry, though, Boss. If anyone can manage it, it's you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I said dryly. "Okay. I think I've got a decent handle on that. About as much as I'm going to for the moment, at least. Topic two, the Courts."

"Ah," he said. "That."

"Yeah. That. What does it mean to be a champion for one of them?"

Legion hesitated. "Keep in mind that this is the first time I've gotten to examine one in any detail, and this is a pretty complex bit of work. Way more than I can sort out in this much time. So basically everything I've got here is speculation."

I nodded. "Got it. Speculate away."

"Right then," the demon said. "Looking at you, I don't think you've actually got that much Midnight power in you. You've just got a connection to it."

"What, like a pipeline?"

"Nooo," he said slowly. "Not...as such. More like a contractual agreement. You're entitled to draw a certain amount of power from that source. But until you do, it's not really *doing* anything. It's just sitting there as potential."

I nodded. That fit with what I'd felt. "So if I wanted to be stronger, I'd tap that connection and channel the power into strength."

"Seems reasonable," he agreed. "Though it did also integrate itself into you on some level. I can see a definite Midnight signature running through you, and I'm guessing it'll give you some kind of a boost as a constant thing. It's just minor in comparison to what you've got the potential to access."

I frowned. "So why wouldn't I just draw on that all the time?"

"I can think of a few reasons," Legion said. "First off, like I said, it resembles a contractual agreement. I'm not sure what the terms of that contract were, but I'd guess they don't allow you unlimited access. Second, you aren't king of the hill, here. You *do* have to answer to the Queen for what you do with her power. Not as much of an issue for you, considering, but most champions don't happen to work for their wife. Third, the more of that power you're channeling, the more it'll influence you."

"I've drawn on it a fair amount," I told him. "I didn't notice any particular influence."

Would you? Snowflake asked. *Think about it. The Midnight Court is all about violence and hunger and death. That's...kind of a thing you already do. If it was pushing you further in that direction, would you know the difference?*

I frowned and stared at her. "That is a seriously disturbing idea."

"I think the mutt's got the right idea," Legion said. "I mean, the whole reason you got the job is that you're already fairly Midnighty. It's easy to notice that kind of influence when it tries to change you. When it makes you more of the same, it's a lot trickier to recognize what's happening."

"I think I've got a good idea of why I got the job," I said quietly. And I was pretty sure Legion had something to do with it, knowingly or otherwise. It fit together too well to be a coincidence.

There was no point in mentioning that, though. If he didn't know what was going on there, he couldn't really tell me about it. And if he did know, he *wouldn't* tell me about it.

So instead, I just said, "Okay, I think those were the big two for the moment. Later I'll want to talk about making some new foci, but that's something I want to approach with a clear head."

"Sure thing," he said. "Oh, and Boss? Nice work in Philly. Knew you had it in you."

"Thanks," I said, standing and walking towards the door. I flipped the notebook closed on the way. I'd been taking notes, although they didn't have a whole lot to do with what Legion had been saying. For once my conversation with the demon had been simple enough that I could keep it all straight in my head.

No, those notes were all about...significance. Drawing connections between my current situation and other information. Things I'd heard Loki say, for the most part, although there were plenty of other sources to take into consideration.

In a funny way, it felt like growing up. For most of my life, I'd been preoccupied with the immediate, with questions of *who* and *what* and *how*. Now, I was finally starting to look past that. I was finally starting to think about *why*.

All of which could wait. For the moment I could feel a...*presence* upstairs. The feeling was nothing I could pin down or name, but it was very much there. It wasn't magic, exactly. It was just an awareness that I was being called.

As I'd expected, when I got up to the main hall of the castle, I found Aiko waiting for me. I noted, vaguely, that she didn't look quite like herself. The narrow bone structure of her face was more exaggerated, the dark color of her eyes more intense, her features in general more intense and beautiful. She was still wearing casual clothing—loose green silk shirt and black silk pants, expensive as hell, but clothing that she'd worn back when she was just a kitsune. Her hair was cropped unevenly just above her ears and dyed with highlights of deep, rich red.

It was almost like looking at a fusion of Aiko and Scáthach—the general look and style of Aiko, but refined, elevated, and made inhuman. Which made sense, I supposed. In a way, that was what she *was*. She was still Aiko, but only a fool would try to argue that taking on the role of a Faerie Queen hadn't changed her.

"Hey," she said, scratching Snowflake's ears. "How's it going?"

"Fairly well," I said. "Think I've got the information I need to track down the people who've been using the Lighters."

"Lighters?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, right," I said. "Apparently that nutty human supremacist group calls itself the Light of Reason. Thus, Lighters."

"Nice," she said. "Okay, you've just about got them?"

"Hoping so. I've got minions going through their servers now. I'm hoping they'll be able to track down Jason with what they find there. I owe him one."

"You and me both," Aiko said darkly. "When you do find him, call me. I want to take him down in person."

"I was planning on it," I said. "Speaking of, how's it going for you?"

She shrugged loosely. "Not bad. Ran into some trouble with people thinking the rules I set didn't apply to them. I'm getting bored of this, so I decided to make a bit of a demonstration of showing them they were wrong. I think the people who've been causing problems got the picture this time."

"You think this is the last time you'll have to deal with this?"

"Nah," she said, with total confidence. "There'll always be people causing trouble. We're talking about the fae; it's like herding cats, but worse. But I think after this it'll be about the same degree of trouble that anyone in the Courts has to expect."

"That's something, anyway."

"Yep," she agreed. "Anyway, I thought the best thing to do was give them some time to think things through, and I knew you were here. So I thought I'd see if you want to take a day off."

I shrugged. "Sure. There are things I should do back in Colorado, but nothing that can't wait for a day."

Lovely, Snowflake said. I'll be out hunting rabbits. Try to leave the castle standing.

Chapter Eighteen

Taking a day off wasn't like it had been. We couldn't just be faces in the crowd, anymore. We weren't unimportant people. When we stepped out onto the street in El Dorado, the crowd didn't just flow around us. They stopped, and stared, and then didn't stare so pointedly that it was somehow more pointed than the staring had been. In the domain of the sketchy alleyway, not only did no one try to mug us, but even the barkers at the dive bars and twenty-four-hour nightclubs ducked out of sight, the prospect of luring us in outweighed by the fear of what might happen once we were there. Even in the Grand Market of the Otherside, where I'd thought that literally anything could happen without anyone batting an eye, people stopped and stared and whispered.

I didn't think they actually recognized us. Not as such. But the kind of power we were carrying around was...it had a *presence* to it. I remembered that very clearly, from the first time I'd met Scáthach. I hadn't had any notion of what she was at the time, beyond "very scary." But her significance had still been obvious; she'd seemed like she was just *more* than the world around her.

You don't last long on the Otherside without learning to recognize that kind of presence, and treat it with the utmost respect. Word might not have spread that there was a new Midnight Lady, and most people wouldn't recognize Aiko as such even if it did, but they had some idea of what they were looking at. I was sure that my presence had some degree of impact, as well—if nothing else, there weren't a whole lot of partially-physical things walking around. And Snowflake, as usual, just looked scary.

Between the three, we were basically celebrities on the Otherside. And we were treated like it.

In its own way, that wasn't bad. It was almost fun, in a "this is different" sort of way. But at the same time, it wasn't really what we'd wanted, and it got old fast. So after not long at all, we ended up drifting back into the mortal world, and more specifically into Leipzig.

It was...surprisingly intact, all things considered. There was a construction crew clearing out a demolished building across the street from the alley we stepped out into, but the roads were open and functional, and the people on the streets were only slightly tense. The church near Aiko's destination point was, seemingly, untouched by the chaos.

I wasn't entirely sure why that was the case. It could have something to do with it being, well, a church; there were plenty of things that didn't like holy ground. It could have something to do with protections built into the structure, since that church had been built almost a thousand years ago now—more than old enough to predate the retreat of the supernatural from daily life in Europe. Or, hell, it might just have been that nobody wanted to damage it. Nikolaikirche was a very *significant* location, a landmark with a lot of meaning and history behind it. It wouldn't surprise me if, even among

nonhumans, there was reluctance to damage such a cultural heritage site. Or, at least, there was reluctance among enough of them that the remainder decided to pick easier, less controversial targets.

That was one of the few bright sides of the entire world going utterly insane at once, I supposed. You didn't have to have great defenses. Just better defenses than your neighbors.

We ended up sitting in a park not too far away, just sitting on a bench and watching the world pass around us. It was late morning, locally, but it was a weekend and it was just starting to get warm, and there were plenty of people out in the park. Snowflake, having already hunted her fill of rabbits and gotten into a really nasty fight with a pair of faerie hounds from the Daylight Court when she wandered off on her own in El Dorado, was content to doze in the sun. We could almost have been a normal family, until you looked a little closer.

In a way, we fit right in. Everything in this park looked normal and peaceful, until you looked a little closer. The numerous injuries—it seemed like half the people in sight were injured, or at the very least had freshly-healed injuries. The blank, traumatized stares. The way a lot of people were tense, jumping or going for weapons at any loud noise or sudden movement.

"Do you think things are going to go back to normal?" Aiko asked suddenly, echoing my thoughts.

I thought for a long moment, scratching Snowflake's ears. She arched her back and pushed her head into my head with a feeling of sleepy happiness.

"Sort of," I said at last. "Things won't go back to the way they were. But I think they'll settle out into a new normal state."

"As much as things ever settle down, at least."

"Yeah." We just sat in the sun for a few moments in silence. Then, on impulse, I asked, "Why do the Courts keep fighting? Aodh said I should ask you."

"Aodh?"

"Titania's champion."

"Ah," she said. "We haven't been introduced, I don't think."

"Well, he *does* work for the other side," I said dryly. "It would be a little weird if you had been."

Aiko snorted. "Said the guy who's worked for how many sides now?"

"Point," I admitted.

"Honestly, I don't quite know yet," she said after a moment. "I'm starting to get an idea, I think, but there's still so much of this that's...it's out of my scope, you know? The obvious answer would be that having a ready-made enemy is politically convenient for the people in charge. It makes it easier to control people. But I don't think that's all there is to it. I think the people in charge *want* constant conflict, for its own sake."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said.

Aiko shrugged. "It makes sense to someone. Just not from our perspective."

"But it hurts both sides. I mean, how many people died in that fight? Hundreds, at least. And that's going on all the time."

"How many people have died in this?" she asked quietly, gesturing vaguely at our surroundings.

"You mean since Loki's broadcast?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"The last count I heard was a little under four hundred million," I said.

"That's higher than the one I heard."

"That was a while ago," I said quietly. "It's been slowing down, but...well, it's not over."

Aiko nodded. "That's a lot of people," she said. "Doesn't seem to have bothered the major players to have kicked this off, does it?"

I stared. "That was Loki," I said. "And the other gods, I guess. Not the Courts."

"I'm starting to wonder whether there's as much distinction there as I thought there was," she said. "Not that the Courts are run by Loki and his guys; as far as I can tell, that's not the case. But I'm starting to think that a lot of the people in charge of things are...sort of all involved with the same schemes, maybe, is how to phrase it."

"That's sounding uncomfortably like a conspiracy theory."

She snorted. "Winter. Are you really in a position to say that there couldn't be a conspiracy of insanely powerful *things* controlling what access the rest of the world has to information?"

"When you put it that way, maybe not," I admitted. "It just...wow. If they're orchestrating something like the war between the Courts behind the scenes, that's...huge. I'm not sure I can really wrap my head around that."

Aiko nodded. "It's hard to conceptualize," she said. "And something tells me it's not the kind of thing you want to talk about much. As far as anyone else is concerned, the Courts just fight because they hate each other."

What, we shouldn't go talking about the massively secret conspiracy that controls every aspect of the world and goes to ridiculous lengths to keep people from knowing about it? Snowflake said. *Gosh, what gave you idea?*

"Don't be a wiseass," Aiko said. "That's my thing. And believe me, it's harder when you can't tell a lie."

"I'm amazed you can even do that, honestly."

"It's not as hard as you might think. Mostly you can phrase things in a way that doesn't really have enough meaning to be a lie." She grimaced. "It does make being a wiseass harder, though."

Glad to know you have your priorities straight, Snowflake said. *You've got crazy power, a role of literally cosmic importance, and a universal-scale conspiracy to deal with, and that's fine. But not being a wiseass? Problem.*

Aiko sniffed and pushed the dog with her foot. "Don't knock my priorities," she said. "The little things are important, too."

I know, Snowflake said lightly. *But I've got to start being the wiseass, since you can't do the job anymore. Oh, and since neither of you is likely to notice at this point, it's been a while since food. We should do something about that.*

I laughed, but I didn't argue.

A long while later, we were back in Transylvania. It was dark out, suggesting that we'd just about literally taken a full day off. It hadn't felt nearly that long, though I didn't think it had anything to do with time shenanigans. It was just a case of time flying.

Aiko was lying next to me, solidly asleep. She was in her human form—well, mostly human, at least—though she'd been a fox earlier. I'd been a little amused to see that she still only had two tails. Apparently whatever mechanism caused a kitsune to sprout more tails as they grew in power didn't count the role of a Faerie Queen. It seemed quite likely that she'd keep growing as a kitsune in addition to the power she'd taken on with that title.

That thought was amusing for a few seconds, until I remembered what Kuzunoha had been capable of, and added the power of the Courts to that in my head. The result was...rather scary, really. It

was entirely possible that the Midnight Court had gained a significant advantage by taking on a queen that could grow in power in her own right on top of what was granted by the role.

That was the state of things when I heard my phone chime as a message arrived. I reached out to grab it, stretching a bit to avoid moving. It felt like reaching out from under the covers into a cold room, except in reverse. I was a source of cold rather than heat, and the insulation of the blankets trapped that and held it in, leaving the rest of the room warm by comparison.

I glanced at the message, then grinned. "They found something."

"Something useful?" Aiko asked instantly. Apparently she hadn't quite been as sound asleep as she'd seemed. That, or she'd gotten a lot faster about waking up.

"Apparently the person providing the Lighters with those magic toys always meets them at the same island outside of Boston, and the next meeting is in about twelve hours."

"Cool," she said. "I'm coming."

"You don't need to be there."

"I know I don't *need* to," she said. "But I'm bored, and the idea of stomping on them sounds fun. Besides, the last time these guys were around, they just about killed you. I'd rather not give them another shot at it."

"You've got a point," I admitted. "Should probably get moving, then. I've got a couple of things to take care of in Colorado first, and it'll probably take a while to get out there."

About time, Snowflake said, standing and shaking herself. Her teeth gleamed in the faint moonlight coming in the window. *I've been waiting to sink my teeth into these bastards for a long while now. Let's get started.*

And on that slightly ominous tone, our vacation was officially over.

Chapter Nineteen

I'd shown up to fights in a lot of circumstances, to the point of being something of a connoisseur.

Driving a rented sedan across Boston at an impressively unsafe pace while blasting Vocaloid music at a volume that had people wincing as we drove by was one of the stranger ones. Not the strangest; it wasn't like this was my first time with Aiko. But it was up there.

She skidded to a stop just short of the docks, grinning. Snowflake was grinning too, draped so far out the window that I had one hand on her back in case she slipped and I had to catch her before she fell out.

It was horribly dangerous to drive like that with the roads so bad—Boston, as it turned out, hadn't made as much progress as Colorado Springs on clearing up the streets, and a recent blizzard hadn't helped matters. I wasn't terribly concerned, though. I'd gotten used to Aiko's driving skills a long time ago. And besides, what did it really matter? A high-speed car crash wasn't much more than an inconvenience to me. It wasn't like there was any shortage of snow. Boston in early March had that much to recommend it, at least.

We got out and started getting ready while the rest of the crew caught up. Being somewhat less confident and more sane of drivers than Aiko, the housecarls were still a ways behind us. That was fine. It gave us time to get ready before we got started.

The first thing I did was help Snowflake into her armor. I wasn't entirely sure how to feel about that; it was pretty essential when there were liable to be a lot of people with guns out on this island, but it also made swimming also impossible, which was...less than ideal given that we had to get *to* the island first. But she'd been in favor of it, and it was ultimately her decision, so armor it was.

Aiko had her armor as well—the set she'd gotten as a part of her ascension within the Court, rather than the one Loki had arranged. She had her wakizashi and her knives, which she'd gotten from the same source. She also had a gun, a carbine that looked very much like the one she'd had for as long as I'd known her. I was guessing that it was the product of a similar manufacturing process to the one used for the armor, though. It didn't smell like iron.

That was funny, in a way. For most of my life, iron had been essential, sometimes the only weapon that could balance the scales with the fae. Now, it was something we went out of our way to avoid, for the same reason.

For my part, I didn't have a lot to bring. There just wasn't a whole lot that I needed. I was wearing casual clothing, and a replacement for my cloak of shadows—the one I'd actually used had been lost with my original body, but I'd had a backup just in case that had most of the same properties. I had

a number of toys in my pockets, stored spells and grenades and such. Beyond that, I was unarmed and unarmored.

Once we were ready, we stood and looked out over the ocean while we waited. It was almost midnight, and the moon was hidden behind clouds, leaving the water dark and cold. There was no light out there, not that I could see. It was dark, a storm was brewing, and the water was full of monsters. Nobody smart was sailing tonight.

Finally, after several minutes, half a dozen white vans pulled up next to us and started disgorging people. There were a dozen jötnar there, including most of my original housecarls. Another dozen ghouls and four werewolves rounded out my frontline troops, and then I had a mix of human mercenaries and mages for other roles.

I'd brought out the big guns, this time around. Jibril was leading the ghouls personally, and Kyi was there to fill that role for the jötnar. I had some of the stronger mages in my employ, too. Brick still wasn't on the best of terms with the rest, but they could work with him, and then there were Jack, Shadow, and a handful of more recent hires. Selene had even managed to come up with a Bostonian water mage who swore that he could ensure we got out there safely in addition to actually fighting, at only moderately obscene rates.

In principle, I could bring that much force to bear on any given target. In practice, though, it usually wasn't worth leaving my forces in the city that short-staffed. Not to mention that a lot of those people were only very slightly under my command. They might work for me, but the relationship wasn't as straightforward as it was with the housecarls. If I asked too much, I might end up losing them entirely.

For this, though? It was worth it.

They piled out of the vans and started getting ready for the fight. As the jötnar were getting into their armor, and the ghouls were eating, the mercenaries unpacked some inflatable boats and a compressor from the last van and started getting the boats ready.

These weren't your average inflatable raft. They were motorized boats of the same type used by the military, designed to cover short distances quickly and without being noticed. And they weren't just *similar* to the military version; they were the exact same boat. Being on fairly good terms with a mobster kingpin was helpful when you wanted to get your hands on some military gear that you really weren't allowed to have.

It took some time to get all four of the boats inflated and in the water. Snowflake passed the time telling dirty jokes; I was mostly occupied with not laughing. Aiko didn't bother, which really didn't matter much. If the Maiden of the Midnight Court broke down laughing for no apparent reason, it was unlikely to do much but cement her reputation as a frightening and unpredictable person.

Finally, everything was ready, and I stepped gingerly out onto the rubber boat. I knew that it was safe—worst case, it wasn't like I could drown when I didn't *breathe*—but still. Boats were...a bit outside my scope. The fact that it shifted and flexed under my weight didn't help.

It didn't collapse, though, and after a moment the rest of the crew started to follow me out. I noticed, not entirely gladly, that almost all of them seemed more comfortable with the situation than I was. Even Snowflake, who I was fairly confident had never been on a boat in her life, seemed just fine with it. Aiko carried her onto the boat, since the claws and spikes on her armor weren't likely to get along particularly well with a boat that was made of rubber. For much the same reason the dog ended up stretched out across Aiko's lap and mine, dangling her front paws in the water.

The rest of the passengers of that boat were mostly the more important members of the group. Kyi was there, along with Jibril, Brick, and the local mage who was acting as our guide. His name was apparently Josiah, though he quite reasonably preferred to be called Joe.

I wasn't entirely happy trusting a total stranger to guide us out to this island and keep the ocean from swallowing us. It would be pretty damn easy for this guy to sabotage us. I was counting on a mixture of being very well-paid and having a very acute awareness of the likely consequences of failure to keep him from doing that.

The last person on the boat was one of the human mercenaries to act as the pilot. Luckily I had enough of them in my employ that all of the boats had someone who knew their way around this kind of boat to pilot it; as I understood it, you really didn't want a novice in that role.

The engines whirred quietly to life, and we headed out onto the water.

Hangman Island, aside from the rather melodramatic name, was a good place to have a clandestine meeting. It was closer to the mainland than most of the islands in the bay, but it wasn't much more than a speck, and there wasn't a lot of reason to go out there.

More to the point, it wasn't somewhere that many people would be able to get if they wanted to. It wasn't one of the islands that had public accessibility, so the only way you were getting out there was with your own boat. Even then, most people wouldn't want to risk it. The island was tiny, but it was surrounded by an extensive network of shoals and rocks that could shred a boat if you weren't careful about how you approached it. As I understood it, unless you knew your way around the island your chances of getting there safely by boat were slim at best.

That had been the main reason to hire Joe. I had my own people to run the boats, and while the threat of storm was a serious one, if it got really nasty not even a water mage would be able to save us on these inflatable boats. But he'd been hanging out in this bay for almost thirty years now, according to him. He knew his way around the rocks. There was no doubt about that.

We showed up just over an hour early, stopped at a distance from the island, and killed the lights and engines. Aiko promptly started weaving an illusion around us, a web of image and shadow that should take the chances of us being seen from slim to none.

The timing on this was going to be tricky. We wanted to catch them by surprise, which meant that we couldn't really be on the island before they were. It was just too small for that—not even an acre in size, and there was no real cover to hide behind. Aiko could spin a hell of an illusion these days, but even with the power of a Faerie Queen no illusion could be quite perfect, and everything on that island was going to be the subject of intense scrutiny. So we really had to be at a distance from the island to have a chance of making the ambush work.

At the same time, though, we couldn't be far. There was no way of guessing how long this meeting would take; it might be hours, or just a couple minutes. If it was the latter, our window of opportunity here was going to be very small.

We sat there, just bobbing on the waves, for around half an hour, before the quiet of the night was broken by the sound of motors. A few seconds later, I spotted the Lighters approaching. There were close to thirty of them, packed into a pair of the same boats I was using. Not just a similar design of boat; as far as I could determine, it was the exact same model. Which made sense—they had the same needs as I did right now, and it wasn't like I was the only one who had contacts that could get their hands on military supplies.

But still. It was amusing.

They made their way through the rocks to the island, passing within around fifteen feet of us without noticing a thing. They landed, got out of the boats, and searched the island thoroughly. *Very* thoroughly; I was pretty sure they physically touched every square inch of the island between them.

I was feeling pretty smug about having decided to wait out here. It was more work, but these people were serious and efficient. They might just be humans, but that didn't mean that we could afford to get sloppy here.

Once they'd satisfied themselves, they settled in to wait, the same as we were. They had some portable lights, enough to make the island clearly visible. The fact that it also blinded them to what was outside their light was just a nice perk for us.

It felt a little odd, being the monsters lurking in the darkness and waiting to ambush our enemies for once instead of the other way around. We could kill them all if we wanted, almost certainly. Hell, just a quick round of gunfire could probably drop half of them before they realized what was going on.

Around forty-five minutes after they showed up, Aiko suddenly stirred. She'd been still and silent since we got here, just focusing on keeping up the illusion around us. She was starting to look strained, too; that was a hell of a long time to maintain an illusion, even for her. Especially on the ocean.

Water was a good solvent, and as was often the case, its magical properties reflected the chemical properties. You could do magic in the water, but it tended be harder to maintain a spell when it was being eroded by water.

So when she said, "Start heading in," I didn't argue. I just gestured to the pilot, who started up the engine again. On that signal, the rest of the boats started up again, and they followed our lead into the rocks.

Joe knew his business. Well, that or he just got all kinds of lucky, but I didn't really care. His directions got us through the shoals safely, and that was really all that mattered.

And the whole time, Aiko kept that illusion up. I'd been impressed when she was just hiding the boats, but this really drove home just how good at illusions she was. Managing to conceal four moving boats, the water they displaced in their wake, and the noise their engines made, after you'd already been working for close to an hour and a half? That was pretty freaking impressive.

We'd just about reached the island when I suddenly smelled magic, and saw a patch of air at the center of the island go blurry. It took me a second to recognize it as the ending terminus of an Otherside portal; they were a lot more dramatic from the other end.

After a moment, four people stepped out of the portal onto the little spit of rock called Hangman Island. I recognized one of them, an older man called Reese who was apparently Jason's second-in-command.

Well, then. Confirmation that the Lighters *were* tied to Jason. Or close enough to confirmation for me, at least.

It's showtime, I thought, as the boats ground up against the island and Aiko finally let the illusion fall.

Chapter Twenty

Our first few seconds on that island were one of the most brutal, decisive openings to a fight that I'd ever seen. They hadn't seen us at all, didn't have a clue that the shit was about to hit the fan.

The mercenaries were on a boat, in the middle of landing, at moving targets. It wasn't a situation that lent itself well to precise marksmanship.

But there were quite a few of them, and they were good at their job. The shots were mostly on target. The Lighters' body armor stopped a lot of it—that stuff really was high-quality—but enough hit vulnerable spots or just got lucky that it had a visible effect. People started falling.

As they started to react, the gunfire stopped. That wasn't a particularly good thing for the Lighters. The werewolves—loners, who for one reason or another wouldn't or couldn't be in a regular pack, but were willing to work for me—were the first to reach them. As was the usual approach for werewolves in a mixed group, they didn't really concern themselves with injuring the enemy, as such. They focused on chaos and disruption, knocking people down and tossing them around, moving too quickly for the counterattack to land. The jötnar and the ghouls, following close behind them, could capitalize on that. The mages I'd brought would, hopefully, be able to counter any tricks the Lighters pulled out, and the mercenaries could shoot anyone who ran.

That left me, Snowflake, and Aiko to take care of the enemy mages. That was about what we'd planned. They were the real threat here, the same as Aiko and I were the meaningful power on our side. The mages I'd brought were good, but I wasn't expecting them to be the match of the people we were fighting. Everyone else was...largely irrelevant, basically.

They weren't unconscious from the portal. That was the first thing I noticed, as I approached them, running forward and then sidestepping into and through a patch of shadow. None of the four were unconscious. They didn't even seem discomfited. I could only think of a very few explanations for that, and none of them were good.

I got to them fast—faster than Snowflake, even, and that was saying something. They were already reacting by that point, though. One of them, a pale blond man with a nice suit and a smile that probably cost more than a lot of cars, looked in my direction, and then golden flame blossomed in the air between us.

I could have blocked it. I was reasonably confident of that. It should be straightforward; cold and darkness to counter the flame, making it a straightforward contest of power. I was probably considerably stronger than he was, considering the well of Midnight power I could draw on. If any of it did get through, I could cut it out of the air with Tyrfin.

It should be straightforward, simple, and relatively safe. But I was used to thinking of myself as weaker, in terms of pure magical power, than a competent mage. And then again, there was a chance that my estimate was wildly wrong. I kept thinking about how they weren't affected by the portal, and then there was the fact that the whole reason I'd gotten into this was that someone had summoned something from the void. The implication was...disturbing.

So rather than try to block it, I dodged. A quick sidestep, a jaunt through the dark place that I could find behind any given shadow now, and I was on the other side of them, with the Atlantic at my back.

It was already getting to be second nature. I didn't really even have to think about the process, didn't have to make a conscious effort to do anything. It was just a matter of intending to be somewhere else, and then letting action follow intent.

I was stepping out of the other shadow while the fire was still fading where I'd been a moment earlier. I saw them start to relax, thinking that they'd gotten me, that the very first thing they tried had been enough to kill me. And I saw the sudden fear in their eyes as they realized what had actually just happened.

Snowflake didn't have freaky teleportation, but she was still fast. Faster than anyone had a right to be, really, and it had a definite tendency to catch people by surprise. These guys were used to things that were supernaturally fast, though, and they were ready for it. Even though she was reaching them just as the fire died, they were still able to react in time. One of them, an Asian girl with a serious face whose magic smelled like smog, threw out her hands, and Snowflake flew backwards in midair.

It was not, I thought, just a blast of force. It looked more like it had reversed her momentum, reversing her direction of travel. She was good, to do that on the fly; that kind of spell was fairly standard in permanent wards, but it was too complex for most people to do without a lot of setup. I had to admit, I was impressed.

I did not, of course, let that stop me from stepping forward and shattering it with Tyrfing.

She fell back, while the blond guy threw another fireball at me. Once again, I dove aside, into and through a shadow, and then I was approaching them from another direction.

The inconsistent illumination here was good, at least for me. It meant that there was lots of darkness, places that the shadows were thick enough to act as doors. It also meant that their vision was impaired, made it harder for them to spot me again. Needless to say, the darkness wasn't a problem for my eyes. Not anymore. This power might come with a hefty price tag attached, but damn, it was useful.

And that was when Aiko got there.

She wasn't running, wasn't even walking particularly quickly. She slouched lazily, her weapons still sheathed, hands hanging loose at her sides. One of the Lighters managed to focus on her long

enough to get a shot off before being dragged back into the fray; she didn't even react as it ricocheted off her armor.

And yet for all of that, she still looked...scary. Once you looked close enough, she looked scary. Her shadow was too tall, and crooked, managing to look strange and inhuman while still somehow lining up with her proportions in every particular. She didn't look like she was moving fast, but it only took her a few seconds to walk across the island.

The fire mage tried to set her on fire. The flames just sat on her armor for a second without doing much of anything, and then blinked out.

"You guys are kind of annoying," Aiko commented mildly.

"What are you doing?" Reese asked. Unlike the rest of the mages, he wasn't moving, didn't seem to have reacted to the fight at all.

"I'm giving you a chance to back down," Aiko said. "See, normally I'd just murderize you. But at the moment my frustration with having to be responsible and do a job outweighs my annoyance at not just annihilating you, and I'm pretty sure that the 'murderize' option is more in line with being the Lady of the Midnight Court. So you get a chance to not die. Guess it's your lucky day, huh?"

"I meant, what are you doing helping them?" Reese asked. "This is an unprovoked assault on a neutral party. I expect that kind of thing from a lot of people, but not from the Courts. This isn't your fight."

"You made it my fight," she said. Her tone was still light and cheery, but there was something about it that wasn't pleasant at all. A couple of the mages actually shivered when they heard it, and I couldn't blame them. If I were on the receiving end of that voice, from her, I'd probably be pretty terrified too.

"Hang on a second," I said, walking up next to her. "Do you actually not recognize me?"

Reese frowned. "Should I?"

"Well, seeing as you *killed me*, maybe just a little," I said dryly.

He stared for a second. Then he said, "Oh. It's you."

And then things started getting crazy again.

Generally mages had abilities that were based around some specific, tangible thing. You could learn to do other things with magic, but it was harder, and there would always be some connection to the trick that came most naturally to you. So you got fire mages, and force mages, people that

specialized in wind or electricity. Sometimes people favored more abstract concepts, like shamans or a lot of witches. Sometimes that focus was something that wasn't so easy to define.

I wasn't sure I'd ever seen someone who specialized in *space* before.

What Reese did then wasn't teleportation, as such. I'd always been told that genuine teleportation took power on the level of a deity, and as far as I knew that was accurate. This was more a matter of folding space so that two points were closer together than they ought to be, and then simply stepping from one to the other without interacting with the space in between.

The practical result, though, was much the same. In less than a second, he was on the other side of the island. And all the rest of the mages had scattered, too, leaving behind nothing but some lingering fires and the scent of magic.

Again, I had to admit I was impressed. I'd never really looked into that sort of trick, but it couldn't be easy; the only people I'd seen who could do something similar were the champions of the Faerie Courts, and even then it was rather limited. Doing it for four different people at once was...well, it was a hell of a trick.

I started to head for the closest of them, a Middle Eastern woman who hadn't really done much yet. Before I'd taken more than a couple of steps, Reese pulled out a shotgun and pulled the trigger.

I should have had plenty of time to dodge, at that distance. I thought I did. That hadn't been accounting for the fact that he did the same thing in reverse, convincing the universe that A and C didn't really need a B in between long enough for the shotgun to effectively go off six inches from my head.

I collapsed back into a pile of snow, before I'd even realized what happened. Luckily, this island was pretty thoroughly covered in snow as well, and the spiritual representation I saw had almost no dark spots. I shifted myself to another patch of snow, just behind one of the female mages, and started to manifest another body.

Before I'd managed more than an arm and a half, a burst of fire came down and turned that entire drift to steam, shunting me right back into the spiritual side of things.

Well. That could be a problem.

"Okay," Aiko said, her voice echoing strangely to me from across that divide. "You want to do things the hard way? Fair enough. Should be fun."

She grinned, and every light on the island died, all at once. The fires went out, the electric lights exploded into sparks, and in seconds it was pitch black. That didn't last for more than a few moments before it was lit with sharp crimson light, constantly shifting and dancing. The lights didn't stay in the same second for more than a second at a time, leaving the island in a constant state of flux. It was more disorienting than pure darkness; you could get used to darkness. This? Not so much.

After that, the fight got crazy. Crazier, even. Reese was bouncing all of his people around like crazy, to an extent that I wouldn't have thought possible. None of the mages stood in one place for longer than it took to get a shot off, and while the space mage was visibly tiring after just a few repetitions of that, he kept going. Meanwhile, I was stepping through shadows or reassembling myself from snow and darkness every few seconds, between trying to catch them in one of those moments of stillness and getting hit hard enough to necessitate a new body.

In spite of that, though, I was grinning wildly. This was a real fight, a real challenge; I hadn't quite realized how much I missed that. Since I came back as...this, the only fights I'd been in had been against the Lighters or the thing from the void. The first were no challenge, and the second was nothing that I could really oppose. This was...somewhere in between.

They were still losing, though. They could annoy me, and slow me down, but nothing they were doing could really stop me; short of melting all the snow on this island and lighting it up so bright there was no shadow for me to occupy, I could just keep coming back. Snowflake was too fast to hit, and Aiko was...well. *Out of their league* was putting it mildly.

And that was just on this side. The other fight, which was taking place in exactly the same space, was going even more poorly for the other guys. The Lighters were outnumbered, surrounded, and utterly out of their depth in this kind of fight. Most of them were down in the first few moments, and the rest weren't doing a whole lot better.

Snowflake, oddly, was the first person to land a decisive blow. She got lucky, or Reese was distracted at a critical moment, and the fire mage landed a little too close to her. He tried to run, and he tried to set her aflame, but he was too slow and Aiko caught the fire and snuffed it out before it ever got close.

Then Snowflake jumped on him. Metal claws and teeth flashed in the crimson light, blood flowed, and the mage was on the ground with one arm in Snowflake's jaws. She kept mauling him for a second before the force mage did something really clever involving redirecting the energy of a shotgun blast from halfway across the island into the husky and tore her loose. Snowflake went flying and landed ten feet away, but the fire mage was still lying on the ground and bleeding heavily.

The first person to react to the development was the last mage, the one who hadn't really done much. I thought she was a witch of some sort, the sort of person that did mental or emotional magic. She smelled like it, and I thought I might have felt her trying to trip me up a few times in the fight. But I'd never been easy to affect with that kind of attack, and somehow I didn't think it had gotten any easier since I took another step away from humanity.

She shouted something in a language I didn't recognize, and I braced myself for whatever she was doing.

But nothing happened, and I didn't smell any particular magic, and after a second I realized that she wasn't pulling out some terrifying piece of work that I hadn't expected. She was just shouting.

The response was still very noticeable. Reese did his thing again, and they were all standing over the maimed guy. It was the first time they'd bunched up since this whole thing started.

Reese looked exhausted. He'd managed a hell of a lot, but it had clearly taken something out of him. He looked like he could barely stand, and the rest of them weren't a whole lot better off.

Huh. It hadn't occurred to me that this fight had really gone on that long. I wasn't tired, wasn't breathing hard—hell, I wasn't even breathing. But I could feel that Snowflake was feeling it, too.

Reese gestured, and a portal opened next to them. I'd noticed that he was ridiculously fast about opening them in the past. It made a lot more sense now that I knew what he actually *did*.

None of them seemed happy about running, but they didn't argue. The Asian girl, the one who had such a knack for redirecting kinetic energy, was the first to go for it, stepping into the portal.

Then Aiko snapped her fingers, and the portal...wasn't. That patch of absolute blackness, the hole Reese had pulled open in the world's fabric, wasn't there.

I'd heard a lot about how dangerous those portals were. I'd never actually seen what happened when one failed, though.

The girl had only had one arm and one leg through when Aiko closed the door. Those limbs weren't there anymore. They didn't look like they'd been cut off, as such. It was more like looking at a diagram in an anatomy textbook that decided to use a really odd angle for the picture. Just below the knee and elbow, respectively, the limbs just...stopped. It was perfectly smooth and straight, slicing through flesh and bone impossibly cleanly.

She fell straight forward, her leg simply not there to bear her weight anymore. And then the bleeding started.

It stopped an instant later, after a single dramatic arterial spurt. Caps of solid darkness wrapped themselves around the ends of the limbs, sealing them off before she could bleed out.

"Better stop now," Aiko called to them. "Even if you manage to run, it'll only take a couple seconds for her to bleed to death without those. Surrender and you might all make it off this island alive."

Reese didn't look happy about it at all. But at the end of the day, he was a decent guy. He didn't want to condemn a friend to death.

The fact that half his team was now incapacitated, the Lighters were done for, and Aiko demonstrably had the ability to close off his escape routes probably played a role, too. But I really thought that the other would have been enough on its own. Even when he'd been trying to kill me, I'd always gotten the impression that he was basically an all right guy.

"We'll surrender," he said.

Chapter Twenty-One

The interrogation was not going well. Not at all.

At this point, we'd captured close to a hundred of the Lighters alive. That was more than enough for my minions to be trying a broad range of interrogation techniques, everything from the soft sell to the *very* hard one.

I hadn't asked for details on what they were doing. I didn't want to know. I'd never had any taste for torture, and some of what was being done was torture. I knew that, and I didn't want to know any more.

It wasn't an attempt to salve my conscience, or pretend that what was going on wasn't wrong. It very much was, and I damn well knew it. It was my responsibility, regardless of whether I did it myself or even knew it was being done. I'd given the order, knowing what it meant. I'd made the call to do this. I was well aware that what was happening was on my head. I was even conscious of the hypocrisy inherent in not wanting to know what was being done on my orders.

But still. I didn't like this. I didn't *want* to do it, to be a part of it. And knowing all the grisly details wouldn't help anything at all.

In the end, it really didn't matter. None of the approaches had worked, at least not on a meaningful level. A surprisingly large number of the Lighters weren't yielding to inquiry, either Selene's soft touch or the more brutal methods employed by the genuine psychopaths in my employ. Of those who did talk, most were either making things up to try and make it stop, or else simply didn't know much.

In the end, after several days, there wasn't a single usable scrap of information to be had. Nothing.

Which meant that unless I wanted to start from scratch entirely, it was pretty much down to getting answers out of the mages we'd taken in. Which was not a place that I was happy about being in. Particularly given that at least one of them had played an active role in basically killing me. That was not, as a general rule, an indication that someone wanted to help you out.

But it was the only lead I had, and that meant I couldn't just ignore it.

It had been almost a day since I fought them. I kind of had to wait. As much as I hated to think of it this way, these people were important. They had connections, they knew people who mattered politically. With how skilled they were, I'd be very surprised if they didn't have some degree of connection to the Conclave. In short, they were people who could potentially cause a lot of long-term

problems for me if they wanted to. And that meant that I couldn't do things like let the proper treatment of prisoners of war slip.

That was a horrible line of thought, that led to me torturing naive kids that didn't even realize who they were working for and treating the masterminds of the plan like honored guests. I hated that, hated the way it perpetuated the same broken systems I'd been resenting my whole life, hated the way it enforced a set of attitudes that was fundamentally *wrong*.

But at the same time, I hadn't forgotten the stakes involved here. Somehow, these people were related to the amateur mage who'd summoned something out of the void. From what Loki had said, that meant the potential area of destruction was, at a minimum, the size of a continent. That kind of scale made it...hard to justify *not* doing whatever was necessary to prevent it.

It's easy to argue against morality by the numbers, against the greatest good for the greatest number, when the numbers in question are small. It's easy to say that killing one person to save two, or five, or ten, is wrong, that the ends never justify the means.

But if this went really, really wrong, the potential death toll was in the *billions*. That was...impossible for me to conceptualize. It was just too huge, too far outside the realm of anything I could hope to experience.

And next to that, it was hard to argue against anything that might help. However abhorrent I might find it, however unlikely it was to work, it didn't matter.

No matter how dirty it left me feeling.

Around a day later, I walked up to the door of the cell and nodded to the guard. He nodded back, crisp and professional. When it comes to mercenaries, there are very definitely times when you get what you pay for.

Aside from my personal feelings on the whole situation, capturing someone like Reese had a lot of very immediate, practical difficulty associated with it. Keeping someone imprisoned when they had fundamental control over space was hard. It might even be impossible.

In the end, I'd settled on the same general approach as I'd used to capture him in the first place. I'd exploited his mental vulnerabilities rather than physical ones.

There were three cameras in his (very comfortable) cell, which were being watched at all times. If he left, or the cameras stopped working, the person watching the feeds would notify three other groups of my minions, which were scattered across the city. They would promptly start filling his associates with bullets. And he knew it.

I was trying not to make an enemy of him, though, at least to the extent which that was possible. So I'd made sure that he also knew that his associates were, in the meantime, being treated pretty well. They had the best medical care money could buy—even the girl who'd lost two limbs was going to live, since Aiko had stuck around long enough to get her to the surgeons before heading back to Faerie to deal with another issue. They had good food, pleasant accommodations, entertainment.

It was still living in a cage. It was still a pretty appalling thing to do. But it was better than it could have been, certainly better treatment than was strictly *required*.

Once all of that was set up, once I'd had a chance to rest and deal with the routine management issues that had been slipping over the past few days, it was time to go and have a chat with my captive.

The cell, once I was inside, looked fairly benign. It looked like a moderately expensive hotel room, anonymous and fairly nice. In a sense, that was exactly what it was; I'd started out with the assumption that I couldn't keep him here if he really wanted to leave, and I hadn't bothered to try. The only hint of security, the only suggestion that not all was as pleasant as it seemed, was the blinking lights of the cameras.

Reese was sitting on the edge of the bed when I walked in, reading a car magazine. I found that more than slightly amusing, given that he could literally bend the fabric of space to his will. The notion that he needed to look at *cars* was hilarious; he could travel far more quickly and efficiently by just wanting to. Though I supposed that magic and personality had a very strong connection between them, and it was entirely possible that his ability with space was *because* he had a fascination with speed and travel.

"You made it," he said as I walked in, tossing the magazine carelessly aside. It landed half-open on the bed, pages instantly crumpling. "I was starting to wonder whether you were just going to leave me here."

"I wouldn't do that," I said. "When I want someone dead, I don't get all passive-aggressive. I just kill them."

"Getting right to the point," he said. "So why didn't you kill us? We both know you could have, there at the end."

"I don't particularly want you dead," I said, leaning against the wall. "I don't have anything against you. Hell, I think I might like you, given the chance. No, I just want you to tell me where I can find Jason."

"And you couldn't find a better way to ask than this?"

I sighed. "Reese. Come on. He basically killed me. He slit my throat and watched me bleed on his shoes. I think he probably knows that I'm not looking to deliver him some cookies and a fruit basket, you know?"

"So you admit you want to kill him," he said, in a vaguely accusatory tone.

I shrugged. "It's not off the table," I admitted. "It's certainly something I've considered. But honestly, that's fairly secondary. I mostly just want some answers."

"To what questions?"

"Mostly? Why he's teaching total chumps how to call up an abomination from the void"

Reese reaction was interesting. He froze, and his face turned some interesting colors. "You're mad," he said at last, in a rather strangled tone. "That's...you...how? How could you think he would do that?"

"Well," I drawled, "let me put it this way. The group you were meeting with, these Light of Reason people? They're well-equipped, and extremely well-informed. Too much so to just be a bunch of lunatics with a common cause. That kind of organization doesn't just *happen*. Someone has to be supporting them, and the best guess I have for who is your boss. Now, the first time I ran into these guys, they had a mage with them. This guy was a dweeb, had no idea what he was doing. But *somehow*, he knew how to summon something from the void."

"That's impossible," he said.

I shrugged. "That's what I thought, too," I said. "But it happened. And when I try to come up with someone that could have shown him that trick, the only person coming to mind is the same one backing the organization he was working for."

"If this had happened," Reese said, "you would be dead." There was not a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

I snorted. "Who says I'm not?" I asked dryly. "You were kinda there when I died. Remember?"

"I wish I could forget." His voice was markedly sour.

"Yeah, well. More seriously, I had a lot of help, and I still took some hits putting that thing down. More importantly, though, I have an idea of what happens if one of those abominations gets loose. I have an idea of what the response would be."

Reese shuddered. His expression said more about how he felt at the thought than words ever could.

"Yeah," I agreed. "That's about my reaction. You see why I want to talk to Jason now? I don't know for sure whether he's where the problem started, but he's the best guess I have. And this kind of thing...there's no room to take chances with it. Not with the stakes this high."

"It's odd," the mage said after a moment. "I get the idea that you're telling the truth. And I find myself very much hoping that I've just been suckered. The alternative is much worse for the world."

"Believe me, I'd love to be lying right now," I said. "For one of these situations to just be a bluff on my part would be *wonderful*. But this time it isn't."

There was a long moment of silence after that.

"All right," he said at last. "I still don't believe you...but you're right. This isn't something you can take chances with. Ever."

"You'll tell me where to go, then?"

"Two conditions," he said. "One, I'm there for this meeting. I want to hear Jason explain this himself. Two, we're alone."

"I bring Snowflake and Aiko," I said instantly.

"You want to bring the Lady of the Midnight Court," he said incredulously.

"She's my wife," I said. "And I guess my boss, these days. And we've been working together for a long time. If you've got a problem with her coming, I'm a little dubious about your motives in luring me out for a meeting alone with, oh yeah, the guy who *killed me*."

"I...suppose that isn't entirely unreasonable," he said after a moment, with obvious and extreme reluctance.

"Cool!" I said brightly. "So when do you want to go?"

"Immediately," he said. "This isn't something I'm willing to wait for."

"All right, then. Follow me. I've got some things to pick up before we go."

The guard nodded to me again on the way out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was not much of a surprise that Reese could open a portal to Jason's hideout. It *was* a bit of a surprise how smooth it was, though. It didn't matter too much to me, but even Snowflake barely even stumbled on the way through.

That was impressive. It took real skill and a fair amount of power to get a portal that smooth. Obviously it was easier for him than it would be for, say, me, but still. It said a lot about just how good he was.

It also did a lot to explain why his people hadn't been incapacitated when they showed up on that island. I'd been assuming that they were inured to the void, the same way Aiko and I were. The notion that he was just that good at it hadn't quite occurred to me, and it removed a lot of my justification for thinking they were part of some terrifying conspiracy.

Not that the two were mutually exclusive, of course. It was entirely possible that both explanations were true. But that line of thought would almost certainly lead to paranoia. More paranoia, even.

Jason's house was smaller than I would have expected. It wasn't *small*, as such, but compared to the massive, sprawling complexes some mages used as their homes, it was less than impressive. A moderately large house in Scotland, it was just far enough off the beaten path to make the commute an irksome one. Ordinarily, I was guessing it was still close enough to civilization that things like police would be a consideration. At the moment, though, things were still fairly unstable, and the authorities had more than enough on their plates. I doubted they'd bother responding to a call this far from anywhere that mattered.

I doubted that would be significant, one way or the other. Realistically, Jason's defenses were probably such that the police didn't even register by comparison. But it did make things at least a little simpler.

"What's the plan?" I asked, standing on a hill and looking down over the house. Aiko and Snowflake were a few feet away; Snowflake was dozing, and Aiko wasn't a whole lot more engaged. I didn't for a moment think that meant that either of them wasn't paying attention.

It felt a little odd with just the three of us. Good, but...odd. I'd gotten almost accustomed to having a horde of minions with me.

"We go over there," Reese said. "And I get some answers."

"And...you think he's just going to tell you what you want to know?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "I do." He took off towards the house, moving at a fairly impressive pace for a human.

I stared after him for a moment. Then I shook my head, muttered something about how it was amazing he'd lived this long if he was that naive, and followed him. Aiko just snickered.

Reese walked right up to the front door and pushed the doorbell. Literally pushed the doorbell.

I sighed. Aiko snickered some more.

Beyond a quiet chime from inside the building, though, there was no immediate response. Nothing stirred inside. Nothing blew up outside.

Reese, somehow, was enough of a moron to push it again. The response was the same.

"There's no one home here," Aiko said.

"They might just be taking a while," he said.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "There's nobody here. No movement inside, no animals. The building is empty."

Reese frowned. "That's not normal."

I rolled my eyes. "Gosh," I said. "It's almost like he has a reason to think that someone might cause trouble for him."

"I've seen him deal with threats before," Reese said. "It's never driven him to abandon his house. This is something different."

"Well, let's find out what," I said brightly. Then I reached past him and casually shoved the door open.

It was locked. That really didn't matter much. The door splintered and swung in when I pushed on it, leaving the lock just hanging there.

I was sort of expecting for something to happen at that point, be it an alarm or an explosion. Nothing materialized, leaving me more nervous than if it had. This was going suspiciously well.

"Let's take a look around," I said, stepping into some sort of foyer. "Reese, you've been here before, correct?"

"Only in the main rooms," he said. "The public areas. Nothing upstairs."

"Okay," I said. "That leaves us the upstairs and anything you haven't seen on this level to check out. Oh, and the basement."

"I don't think Jason has a basement."

I sighed. "I know how these people operate," I said. "He has a basement."

The next several hours were an exercise in frustration, pointlessness, and intermittent danger.

The house, outside of the "public" areas, turned out to be trapped. Rather heavily so, in fact, with numerous magical traps and wards. Had I been almost anyone else, that might have been an actual threat. As it was, it just didn't have much capacity to actually harm me. Tyrfin could cut right through most wards, and the rest weren't really relevant, for the most part. Explosions and lightning bolts were impressive, but the most they could really do to me was make me go outside and assemble another body.

The only ward that got anywhere near to actually stopping me was some sort of really odd mental or spiritual attack that tried to crush me with lethargy and depression until I couldn't move. That one might have worked, but Aiko snapped it like a twig.

Aside from that, no one else even had to get involved. It was slow, tedious, and repetitive, but didn't represent any kind of threat.

Unfortunately, it also didn't provide a whole lot of reward. Jason had all the things you'd expect—bedroom, bathroom, library, office. But the place was pretty well cleaned out. It wasn't complete; there were personal belongings still there, books, clothing, that sort of thing. I was guessing that it had been cleaned in a hurry. But anything that was actually important? Gone.

Jason did turn out to have a basement, though, the stairs hidden in a closet off the bathroom. That part of the house had the things you'd expect, too. There was another library, much more thoroughly emptied. There was a vault, which was *completely* empty. And there was a laboratory.

The lab was where we ended up stopping. It wasn't much like the lab I used. Oh, on the surface it looked similar. It had the same fluorescent lights, the same tile flooring, the same epoxy resin tabletops. It even had some of the same reagents, in neatly labeled glass vials.

The work being done there, though, was obviously and dramatically different. There were a couple of projects that wouldn't have been out of place in my lab, various half-assembled bits of jewelry and such. Pride of place, though, was clearly held by a more biological sort of research. There were around a dozen animals on the tables around the room, each sitting in a tray next to various pieces of equipment. They were mostly rodents, but there were a few frogs, a cat, all laid out in various stages of dissection.

Or, more accurately, *vivisection*. I realized that when I walked to close to one of the mice, and it squeaked.

I stared. It was alive. Skin flayed and pinned back, organs exposed, eyelids cut off, but somehow, horribly, alive.

I freaked out a bit when I saw that, smashing one hand onto it hard enough to drive half a dozen pins into my hand. There wasn't much left of the mouse but pulp. When Aiko realized what I'd just done—and, more to the point, *why*—a wave of fox-scented darkness went through the room. After it was gone, every one of the animals had a visibly broken neck.

We weren't saints. But there were limits.

"Okay," I said, trying to extract my hand from that tangle. After a few seconds I gave up on it; it was hopelessly entangled with the pins, and stained with *things* that I had no desire to contemplate further. Easier to remove it and redistribute ice from the rest of my body to make another. "That was unpleasant."

"Not my favorite thing to find," Aiko agreed. Snowflake didn't say anything, but I could feel that she was rather unsettled as well, which was rare.

Reese was standing next to one of the bodies, staring at it. "He's not here," the mage said suddenly. "And he's not coming back. He'll have gone to his fallback safe house."

"Any chance you know where that might be?" I asked.

"I ought to," Reese said. "I built it for him."

I paused. "You built it," I repeated. "Um...what exactly is this safe house?"

Now it was his turn to pause. "How much do you know about the basic structure of the Otherside?"

"Plenty," Aiko said immediately. An instant later I said, "Not a whole lot," followed by *Jack shit* from Snowflake.

"I'll start with the basics, then," Reese said. "In this world, a given object can be defined with a set of three-dimensional coordinates plus time, correct? With that information, you can say exactly where it is."

"Sure," I said.

"Good. Now, picture the Otherside network as being the same thing. It's actually got quite a few more dimensions than that, but this is a simplistic model, so three is enough. Now, every Otherside domain has a location that can be defined by providing coordinates in each dimension."

"Um," I said. "What are the other dimensions?"

"They're things," he said, rather testily. "Complicated things that don't have names in this language. In any case, the system is fluid, but within limits. Any given domain will have the same fixed relationship with at least a handful of reference domains—Earth, Limbo, and Faerie are the most common ones. So no matter how the system as a whole adjusts, or how individual domains move, you can always find a domain on the basis of that set of n-dimensional vectors. You follow?"

"But I've opened portals to domains before," I said. "And I don't know anything about these vectors."

"You don't *realize* you know it," he corrected me. "But you know what the place feels like? What associations it has, which other domains are close to it and which are far away, at least in a general sense? That's an approximation of the vector values, and it's close enough to work most of the time."

"Okay," I said. "I can buy that. But as interesting as all this is, what relevance does it have to my original question?"

"I built Jason a domain where those vectors are variable on a second-to-second basis."

I blinked. "So let me get this straight," I said. "Having constant vectors is how you locate a domain. So...without that, nobody can find this place?"

"Basically," Aiko said. "He's using a lot of math words to describe it, but the idea is right. You remember when Fenris's mansion was destroyed, I split us off on a separate domain? Same idea."

I slumped. "So we can't find him."

"Ah," Reese said, holding up one finger with a smug expression. "But in this case the vector values aren't random. They're derived from a pseudorandom number generator. And the algorithm is designed to leave it in a stable location for a short time every now and again. I should be able to open a portal there in one of those windows of opportunity."

"When is the next one?" I asked.

Reese glanced at his watch—a wristwatch, with actual *clockwork*. "Hundred and twenty-one hours," he said. "Best get ready. This place was designed for security; I'm guessing it won't be as easy to get into as this house was."

"Of course it won't," I said sourly.

Snowflake just laughed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A hundred and twenty-one hours gave me just over five days to get ready. I really didn't think cutting it close was a good idea, though. Not when I had no clue how long it might take until there was another chance to get into this hideout. So I figured that rounding it down to four days was probably the safer option.

I spent the first day on prep. I didn't have a clear idea what to expect, what kind of defenses Jason might have in place in his sanctum, but it seemed pretty obvious that I wanted to be prepared for some fairly unpleasant things in there.

I started by spending some time with Legion working on new foci to replace the ones that I'd lost when...well. When I lost pretty much everything else. It was an interesting piece of work, manufacturing things that weren't so much objects as ideas. In some ways it was much simpler, more straightforward than the foci I was used to making. It was the same basic idea of creating a conceptual filter to make a certain type of magic flow more easily, without the added step of tying that filter to a physical object.

It was also very strange, though, requiring me to think in ways that were alien to how I was used to looking at the world. It almost reminded me of that optical illusion that could look like two faces or a vase, depending on how you interpreted it. Either way of looking at it made perfect sense. You could even switch back and forth. But try and make them line up with each other, or see them both at once, and things started to break down.

This was like that. The way I was used to making foci, to thinking of them, was one approach. This was another. Individually, either of them was perfectly viable. But there was such a fundamental difference in how they looked at things that going from one to the other was...hard, to say the least.

As I was working on the foci, I found myself feeling very grateful for the differences in how I functioned. I didn't get sleepy, or tired. I didn't even get bored, at least not the way I used to. Repetitive tasks were still tedious, but that fidgety restlessness just...wasn't there. I could keep working as long as I needed to.

It took around thirty hours straight of work in the laboratory. But in the end I had a couple of the foci that I was more likely to need, and a couple of stored spells.

I'd have liked to make more, but the process was time-consuming, and I was acutely aware of the ticking clock. I still had a lot of other things I had to get done, other commitments to follow up on.

Having a strict, but distant, deadline was an interesting experience that way. I had to balance things. It wasn't enough to want to do something; I had to consider whether I wanted it more than all of the other things that I could do with that time instead. And while I would certainly like to have more

equipment before going into this mysterious hideout of a world, I couldn't afford to spend all my time on it. I had other obligations that I couldn't neglect, especially when there was a very real chance that I wouldn't make it back.

So once I had that basic set of equipment, it was time to wake Snowflake and get back to Colorado, to follow up on some things that needed work.

Once again, there was a dramatic reaction when I walked into my throne room. I was starting to think that would always be the case, at this point. Things had just developed in a way where that was inevitable.

The reaction this time was a little more...frenetic than most, though. There were probably a dozen people instantly clamoring for my attention, each one raising their voice louder than the last in an attempt to be heard over the din.

It made sense, I supposed. I hadn't been here in...I wasn't entirely sure how long. A while. Things had built up that I needed to deal with.

"Hush," I said, loudly enough that I drowned out the shouting. Not having actual lungs was nice that way. A lot of the normal limitations just didn't apply to me.

People hushed. I think they were more impressed by the sheer volume than any great charisma on my part. Snowflake, certainly, winced at the sound. But it got them to quiet down, which was what counted.

"Now, one at a time," I said, walking through the crowd to my throne. "And briefly. My time is very limited."

There was a moment of silence before Tindr stepped forward. He cleared his throat. "Finances are stable," he said. "Assets were...significantly drained by your recent expenditures, but I believe that we have adjusted for them at this point. A detailed breakdown can wait until you have more time."

"Good," I said. "Next."

"Situation is stable," Kyi said. Her voice was crisp, and just the slightest bit cold. "A handful of people were causing problems of one sort or another."

"Were?"

"They were dealt with," she said simply. "There were no particularly powerful people involved. No one that required your attention."

I frowned. "Dealt with how?" I asked.

"Lethally, in some cases," she said. "A group of looters, an arsonist. Most could be discouraged without such drastic measures."

I wanted to be upset that she'd killed people—or, more accurately, that she'd done so without my orders, without even confirming it with me first. But then, I hadn't been around, had I? I'd been off doing other things. And it wasn't like I'd have said anything different if she had asked. I could sympathize with a lot of people. There were a lot of people I could offer a second chance to. But the looters? The people who, with things as bad as they already were, went out and made them that little bit worse? Those people weren't on the list. And Kyi had plenty of ground to know that, too.

As was getting to be a disturbingly frequent experience, I felt like I should be upset by what was happening, like I should be disturbed or morally outraged. But when I actually tried to find a reason to feel that way, it just...wasn't there. Kyi hadn't done anything *wrong*.

I wasn't entirely sure whether I was happy with that thought. But, as usual, I couldn't really take the time to figure out what to do about it, or even if I wanted to do anything about it. So I put it on the list of things to look into later.

That list was disturbingly long, at this point. I was pretty sure there were important things on that list that I'd forgotten about, by now. It was getting to be an actual problem. Which, and this was the really *fun* part, was in and of itself a problem that I had to put off to later.

"Okay," I said. "So the situation is stable. Nothing that needs my attention?"

"Not immediately, no, jarl," she said.

"Good. Next."

The computer expert I'd hired was the next to speak—Greg, I thought his name was. "We've finished decrypting those files," he said.

"Anything useful?"

He shrugged. "There's a lot of information there. I'm not sure whether you'll find any of it useful."

I grimaced. "Of course. There's a copy of the decrypted files?"

"The hard drive is in your office."

"All right," I said. "I'll look at that later, then. And I'll hold you responsible if anything happens to the data in the meantime."

"I'd expect nothing less," he said, with a wry smile.

"All right, then," I said. "Next."

"There are a handful of diplomatic requests," Selene said. "Things that need you to respond to them personally."

"Anything that can't wait for a week?"

She shook her head.

"All right, then. I'll look at it later."

"There are also a handful of personnel adjustments," she said. "Mostly routine, but there is one thing that I think you need to be aware of. You recall the entity from Limbo that you hired?"

I frowned for a moment, trying to remember what she was talking about. Then it clicked. "You mean the one Crim summoned?"

"That's the one," Selene confirmed. "She's...well. She seems to be struggling. We aren't entirely sure why, but it seems like she's losing her grip on things."

"Can you...clarify that a little?" I asked.

"Not really," she said, sounding distinctly unhappy about that fact. "Her behavior has been...inconsistent. Unpredictable. So far she's been willing to listen to us when we rein her in, and the only violence has been fairly minor. But it's anyone's guess how long that will last."

I sighed. "Okay, then," I said. "See if you can find more on...whatever she is. Probably start by asking Alexander. Oh, and find out who she was. There should be records."

"I'll get someone on that," she said.

"Good. And...make arrangements, for if it doesn't work out. She's tough as hell, but she's not invincible."

"I'll see to it," Selene said.

I nodded. "All right, then. Anything else?"

"Yes," she said. "David wants to meet with you."

I smiled without any particular humor. "What a coincidence," I said. "I'd quite like to talk to him too. Arrange a meeting as soon as possible."

"Will do. Should be tomorrow, I'm guessing, from what he was saying about his schedule."

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"Good. Let me know when you know the details. In the meantime I'm going to do something else. Something...restful, I think."

Chapter Twenty-Four

David arranged to meet me outside of an ice cream parlor downtown. It was a place I'd been before, along with a sizable proportion of the city's population. It was a smaller shop, but it had a good reputation, and it was fairly popular. Even in the late evening, in the winter, it was doing a brisk business.

I felt inordinately proud of that. People were still nervous, undeniably; plenty of them still carried weapons, openly or otherwise. But they were out and about, after dark, and they didn't look like people living in a warzone. It was hard to believe that just a couple months ago you couldn't walk down the street without fearing for your life. It was hard to believe that there were so many places that you still couldn't.

Neither of us had brought thugs, this time, by unspoken agreement. This wasn't a meeting between the Guards and...whatever you called my organization. This was between him and me. I did have Snowflake with me, but that hardly counted.

It felt oddly...peaceful. There was very little tension, on either side. I didn't really have to worry about him; his magic wasn't the kind of thing that could present more than a temporary setback to me. At the same time, I was reasonably confident that I couldn't actually get to him before he could escape. It meant that we both knew the other wasn't in a position where they could hurt us, like mutually assured destruction in reverse.

"You've been busy," David said, leaning back on the bench and sipping at a milkshake.

"It's been a busy time," I agreed. I didn't have any ice cream myself. I wasn't hungry. Or, more accurately, I was, but not in a way that food could assuage. "You know what I was doing?"

"How could I not?" he asked. "You've not been particularly subtle."

"I think I'll be bringing the Lighters down shortly," I said. "For good, I mean."

"By yourself?" he asked. "That's ambitious."

I shook my head. "I've already done my part," I said. "I have more than enough dirt on them to finish the job if I spread it around. Plenty of information on who they are and where to find them, and enough detail on what they've done that a lot of people would want to end them. I wouldn't have to lift a finger."

"I see," he said after a moment. "It might be better if you didn't do that."

I nodded. I'd been expecting him to say something like that. "Why are you protecting these people?" I asked. "I mean, you all but handed me the details I needed to chase them down."

There was a long pause. "What you did was one thing," he said at last. "You had reason, and it needed done. Frankly, someone needed to take them down a notch. But actually wiping them out? That's not as good. Their viewpoint needs to be preserved."

"Their *viewpoint* is a bunch of lunatics murdering anyone that looks slightly different from their idea of what a person ought to," I said sharply. "I'm not entirely sure what value you see in preserving that."

David looked at me for a second, then said, "We're losing."

I blinked. "Um. Against what?"

"In general," he said. "You know better than most how large the world is, Winter. And how small we are by comparison. We're small fish in a very, very big ocean."

"The Conclave are hardly small fish," I said dryly.

"You're not thinking on the right scale," David said. "This whole *planet* is small. Practically insignificant. Faerie is bigger than this, and any one of the Queens is a match for any of the Conclave, easily. Then there's Hell, your giants, the tengu. And that's just the places with a presence in this city. Nobody even *knows* how many things there are in Limbo that don't even have names. There are whole domains we've never even seen."

"And gods," I said.

He paused, and looked away from me. "Yeah," he said. "And that. You see what I'm saying, though? Humanity is outnumbered. Add them all up, and it's probably hundreds or thousands to one."

"I always feel uncomfortable when people get onto this topic," I said idly. "The whole 'us against them' thing. Because I'm kind of on the other side, aren't I? I'm at least mildly affiliated with every one of the groups you just named, and I'm not remotely human."

"And I don't have a problem with that," David said. "Give me some credit, Winter. I don't hate nonhumans. It's *not* a matter of us against them. You play the game, you help to keep things working. You're not running around murdering people for kicks. As far as I'm concerned, you're fine."

I stared at him for a moment, then sighed. "Okay," I said. "Whatever you're getting at right now, I'm not in a condition to catch it. What are the Lighters good for if not murdering everything that isn't exactly the right kind of human for their tastes?"

David pursed his lips and thought for a moment. "You're fine," he said at last. "But that doesn't mean everyone is. And we need people who can deal with the ones that aren't. I can live with being a small fish in a big ocean, but if we don't have some kind of protection, we'll be eaten."

"Frankly, I much prefer the Guards for the protection."

"It's nice that you'd say that," he said, smiling. That smile faded quickly. "But that brings us back to where I started. We're losing. You know how many Guards died in the first month after Loki's announcement?"

"No."

"Forty-one. Around a sixth of us, gone."

I whistled. "Damn."

He nodded. "Then there was the mess in Russia. Another in Korea, didn't get quite as bad, but we still lost people stopping it. Add in smaller scale crises, and Guards just getting unlucky, and we're up to sixty-seven dead. More that are out of commission while they recover."

"But you're recruiting more," I said. "That whole shift to the public approach, recruiting people from outside the clans."

"Yeah," David said. "But it'll take time to train them, and in the meantime we're losing more. And we'll never be really numerous. There aren't that many people with enough magic to work, and of those, a lot don't have things that help much in a fight. Then how many of those have the mindset that would make a person want to join the Guards?" He shrugged. "There's not many people with the potential, and it takes too long to train them."

Damn, Snowflake said. That's...pretty grim.

Yeah, I said. Then, out loud, "You're sure of all this?"

He nodded. "I've seen the models," he said. "If there's an error in them, it's one that I couldn't find. And even the most optimistic models don't have us being as prevalent as we'd need to be to keep things under control on our own."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Well," I said. "That's rough. That's why you guys want the Lighters around, then? So they can cover the little things and leave you to focus on the problems they can't handle?"

"That was the argument that got me to put up with them," he confirmed. "They're xenophobic lunatics, but they're numerous, fairly effective, and they aren't affiliated with any political group in

particular, which should keep them mostly out of the infighting. I'm hoping the philosophy can find a more...discriminating expression, but at the moment it's just too damn useful to let it die."

I nodded slowly. "All right, then," I said. "I understand a little better now, I think. I'll hold off on publishing those files."

"Thank you," David said. "Though I wouldn't mind a copy for our use. At the very least, it would help us know which of them need to be reined in."

"I'll have something sent over." I paused as a group of teenagers walked by, talking and laughing. Most of them had ice cream. "I'm kind of sorry it didn't work out with me being a part of the Guards," I said, after they'd gone past us. "It seems like you're trying to do a good thing there. It would have been interesting to be a part of it."

"Yeah," he said. "It's unfortunate. I misjudged you at first, Winter. I thought you were just a shallow punk who'd gotten lucky. But I was wrong. I think you could have done a lot if you'd been able to stay on with us."

"That's how it goes," I said, shrugging. "Sometimes it doesn't matter what any of us would like. Things are the way they are."

He nodded, and pushed himself to his feet. "I should be going," he said. "There's work to do."

"Same here," I sighed. "As always. Good luck."

"You too," he said. "Try not to get killed out there."

He turned, and walked away. I sat there for a while, and then got some ice cream before I left. Snowflake had a cup of the peanut butter flavor, made a spectacular mess, and enjoyed every moment of it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I showed up five hours early. Somewhat to my surprise, I was the first one there. It was pretty early, even by my standards, but I'd sort of been expecting someone to be there waiting for me. It was...bizarrely comforting when there wasn't.

I had, briefly, considered bringing an army, and just burying the place in bodies. Numbers were, in the end, a hell of an advantage. But there were too many reasons not to. I wasn't sure how Reese would react if I showed up with that kind of force, or whether this window of opportunity was even long enough to get an army through the portal. Even if they could get in, it sounded like this hideout was the kind of hostile environment that would rip a group of less experienced people to shreds, which meant that bringing them was pretty much just throwing lives away for nothing.

And then there was...another consideration. Jason, apparently, knew how to rip someone's magic out and use it for himself. That was a trick that I didn't have much of a way to deal with, and it meant that cannon fodder was not a great idea on this trip. It was, potentially, an extremely bad idea.

So I was leaving the thugs at home, this time around. It was going to be just me, Aiko, and Snowflake—plus, of course, Reese, since I didn't really see a way to leave him behind. It would almost have felt like old times, were there not quite so many things that could never be the way they had back then.

I knew that this was liable to be a long wait, so for once I'd actually brought something to do rather than just sit there. In this case, that something was dice. Snowflake still cheated, and I still didn't know how.

We'd been sitting at the assigned departure point for close to four hours, and Snowflake was several hundred imaginary dollars ahead, when a portal opened in the air next to us. Reese stepped through a moment later.

I was more than slightly jealous of that. The departure point, in this case, was a seemingly random patch of scrubland in the middle of Mexico. Getting there had entailed a portal, a bus ride, and a lengthy hike. Being able to just step through and be there as simply as that sounded incredibly pleasant by comparison.

"You ready?" I asked, looking him over. He did not look like he was ready for a massive, life-or-death invasion of an extremely fortified private world. He looked more like he was getting ready for a day hike. All he needed to complete the image was socks with sandals, rather than heavy boots.

He *was* carrying a pistol, though. And I'd learned a long time ago not to underestimate people on the basis of their appearance.

"I'm ready," he said. "You?"

I shrugged. "As I'm going to be," I said. "I don't really know what to expect."

He paused, then shrugged. "It'll be about what you'd expect," he said. "But worse."

"Delightful," I said dryly. "Nothing to do but get it over with, I guess."

Reese nodded, and then sat down with us to play dice. I was a little surprised by that, but I didn't want to actually turn him away.

As I learned over the next thirty minutes, he cheated, too. Not as well as Snowflake, who still had a sizable lead, but he did better than me. I was several thousand imaginary dollars in the hole by the time the next portal opened. This one smelled like fae magic, sharp and sweet and touched with darkness; presumably, Aiko had gotten one of her minions to open it. As far as I knew, she didn't know any portal destinations anywhere near here.

It *was* her, though. She stepped through the portal and hit me with a flying tackle that promptly turned into a forceful hug. Once she was satisfied with that, she turned to Snowflake and spent a while scratching the husky's ears. Finally, a solid five minutes after she showed up, she turned her attention to Reese and said, "Hi."

The space mage glanced at his wristwatch in a rather exaggerated way, then looked at Aiko. "Cutting it a bit close," he said, in a tone that conveyed disapproval more clearly than any words he could have said.

She shrugged carelessly. "I'm here on time, aren't I?" she asked. Then she looked at me. "You're wearing the armor," she commented.

I shrugged. "I wasn't sure whether there would be anything to make a body from where we're going," I said. "It seemed like a good idea to put a bit more thought into keeping this one intact." I was wearing my cloak of shadows, too, and carrying a fairly substantial set of physical kit. The weight of the armor, the feeling of the cloak moving with me, was...oddly comforting.

"Makes sense," she said. "But mostly I meant that you're wearing the armor here. In the desert. I just showed up and I'm already too hot."

"Funny thing about that," I said, grinning. "You know how I can make an area colder? Well, this armor's almost airtight."

Hang on, Snowflake said. *You have air conditioning in there?*

Pretty much, I confirmed.

The husky stared at me for a moment. *I hate you so much right now*, she said.

I smirked.

"If you're done, we are on a tight schedule here," Reese said dryly.

My smile faded, and I nodded.

I was already kitted out. But Snowflake wasn't wearing her armor yet—it really *was* hot out here, and Siberian huskies were not exactly built for the desert at the best of times. I spent the next several minutes helping her into the armor, while Aiko put on her own set. She was carrying a lot of weapons, including quite a few that I didn't recognize at all, odd-looking things that smelled like Midnight.

Reese, meanwhile, drew an elaborate diagram in the sand, frequently referencing that wristwatch, as well as a small leather-bound book. It started out simple, a couple of equilateral triangles and a circle, but he kept adding lines, and the figure rapidly grew intricate and complex, the precise nature of the geometry seeming to shift depending on what angle I looked at it from. There were a lot of formulae written out with it, describing what looked like a *hellaciously* complex system of equations. I could just about follow along with it to start with, but the diagram quickly moved beyond my comprehension.

And the best part? That was just the reference for the actual spell. The geometric figures were a skeleton for the magic to fill in, the formulae just a reference and definition for him to use as he established the portal. The actual spell would be far more difficult.

I no longer had any doubts about whether this hideout was secure. If the guy that *made* the thing, a certifiable expert on this kind of magic, using a backdoor that he built in to the system so he could access it if necessary, had to work this hard to get there? Yeah, my chances of pulling it off would have been nonexistent.

The rest of us were finished well before Reese, and just stood there watching him finish. Finally, less than ten minutes before the point in time we were aiming for, he stopped, standing at the dead center of the enormous figure drawn on the ground.

"Hurry up," he said at that point, not looking at us. "And don't disturb my circles."

I looked at the diagram. It was, at this point, one of the most elaborate I'd ever seen, sprawling across an enormous chunk of desert. There were so many things going on there that I wasn't sure how to get to where Reese was standing without messing something up. At best, the thing was a maze. At worst, even stepping between the lines could push a grain of sand out of position elsewhere, and I wasn't sure how much disturbance the diagram could take without something going wrong.

I looked at the sky, where the sun was just starting to drop towards the horizon. Then I looked at Aiko. "Can you get me a patch of darkness in the middle there?" I asked.

She shrugged and gestured slightly. I caught the scent of fox and spice and darkness, and a small patch of the desert in the middle of the diagram was suddenly, inexplicably dark.

"Thanks," I said. I took her hand in mine, grabbed Snowflake with my other hand, and stepped into the shadow of a nearby mesquite tree. It wasn't all that much of a shadow, but then, I didn't need a whole lot.

It was possible for a champion of the Sidhe Courts to bring people along on that not-quite-teleportation trick. I knew it was possible, because I'd been the one to ride along when Carraig did it once. I didn't quite know how it was done, but I was guessing it wouldn't be too hard. Most aspects of the champion gig so far seemed to be more a matter of instinct than formal training.

As it turned out, it was mostly just more difficult. If most of the time standing in a shadow felt like I was pushing against the surface of gelatin, trying to bring Aiko and Snowflake with me made it more like...wet sand, or half-set concrete. It didn't want to let me in, and I had to *push* to make it.

After a few moments, though, I managed it, and we stood in that empty, dark world again. A step and an effort of will carried us to the next shadow, and we stepped out through Aiko's darkness next to Reese.

That's really an awesome trick, Snowflake said. We should do that more often.

I just nodded, most of my attention on the magic around us. We were standing in the middle of a large, open circle at the center of the diagram, surrounded by it. I could smell the magic moving around, an impressive amount of it. He had to be tapping something, some external source of power, to empower that large of a magical construct for this long. Probably something localized, a ley line or something like one; that would explain why he'd been so insistent that we do this here.

I didn't ask. He was obviously deep in concentration, and we were all counting on him getting this right. You don't pester the bomb disposal technician with questions while they're elbow-deep in the explosive.

Minutes rolled past. Reese stood there, eyes closed, expression blank, breathing slow and regular. I thought the structure of the spell was finished now, ready to go. He just had it in a holding pattern until the timing lined up.

Finally, the assigned moment rolled around. Reese let out a breath, lips moving in a word I couldn't make out. I felt a surge of magic, as the diagram came to life around me, power running through it like blood through a living thing.

And then the entire circle we were standing in—the *entire* thing—went to something beyond black, and we were elsewhere.

The last time, I'd been impressed with how smooth Reese's portals were. I'd thought he was one of the best I'd ever seen at making them, so talented that the transition was almost seamless even for those who hadn't been inoculated.

This portal was not like that.

It felt, to me, something like riding in an elevator which had the cable snap suddenly. There was the same instantaneous sense of plummeting, going from stationary to freefall in an instant. There was no vision, but I still had the impression of seeing vivid colors without names blurring past me. There was no sound, but I got the sense of hearing wind roaring past me.

We landed what felt like a small eternity later, and we landed hard. I hit the ground with a painful crash, not quite hard enough to injure, but plenty hard enough to be unpleasant. If I had to breathe, it would have knocked the wind out of me. Aiko let out a sharp *oof* next to me as it did knock the wind out of her. Around ten feet away, Snowflake was dazed, semiconscious, and vomiting. Reese looked a little better off, but only a little.

I was the first to recover, at least enough to push myself to my feet and look around. A perk of not having much of a physical presence; physical harm just didn't really faze me.

At first glance, we were standing in a slice of paradise. It was a grassy plain, stretching out to the horizon in all directions. The sun was just warm enough to be pleasant for a human, and it smelled like summer and growing things.

On closer examination, though, it felt very...artificial. The grass was perfect, yes, but it was *too* perfect, too regular. It took me a few seconds to realize that it was the same patch of grass repeated endlessly, right down to duplicating individual blades of grass. Artificial turf had more personality. The ground was perfectly level, without any of the slight irregularities and bumps that natural ground should have. The air was perfectly, impossibly still. While the plain stretched out to the horizon, that horizon was too close, things just fading to a blur when they should have still been clearly visible.

On the whole, it was still beautiful. But it was a very fake, deceptive sort of beauty, the kind of thing that existed to be looked at rather than to be experienced. Spend any real time here, and the mask slipped.

Turning in place, I saw the only notable feature here. A tower—a bloody *tower*, how cliché could this guy get?—rose from the plain. It looked like featureless black stone, and it was impossibly tall, enough that I was guessing Jason had fiddled with the laws of physics in this domain to make it happen.

I felt an odd sense of foreboding as I looked at that tower, a feeling of menace. It was hard to explain; it felt almost like *déjà vu*, the same inexplicable conviction that I should know this situation, without any real idea of what it meant.

"Well," I said, once I was satisfied that there were no immediate threats. "We made it."

"Nice place," Aiko said, standing and walking over next to me. She still sounded short of breath, but it didn't seem it was anything serious.

"He'll be in the tower," Reese said, ignoring the small talk. "It's his stronghold."

I nodded. "No sense waiting," I said, taking a step in that direction. I didn't plan to go far—we still had to wait for Snowflake to recover, after all. But I wanted to be moving, if only to shake that feeling of menace.

"Wait," Reese said as I started to move. "Watch your—"

My foot hit the grass. At the same instant, a large blade, something like an oversized scythe, swung up out of the ground and hit me in the chest. It punched straight through the armor, through my body, and then through the armor again.

"Step," Reese finished, rather lamely. "Everything outside of the entrance area is trapped."

"Huh," I said, poking at the scythe. "That actually hurts a little."

"You were expecting it not to?" he asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"I'm mostly a spiritual entity at this point, apparently," I said. "Most of the time I don't even notice physical damage."

"Ah," Reese said. "Jason probably arranged for this domain to force more overlap between the spiritual and physical, to make you susceptible to things."

I blinked. "You can do that?"

He shrugged. "It's true everywhere on the Otherside, to some extent. But if he knew it would make you vulnerable, he might have done something to enhance the effect here. He has an enormous amount of control over this domain."

"Wonderful," I muttered, pulling the blade back out through my chest and dropping it on the ground. It only took me a moment to patch up the wound, fitting ice and darkness back into the hole. Repairing the armor would be more difficult. "So we just have to navigate the massive field of traps to the tower, get in, deal with all the traps there, fight anything Jason has to keep us out, and then deal with him. Piece of cake."

"Sounds like fun," Aiko said. I could practically hear her grinning.

"That's one word for it," I sighed. "Well, nothing to gain by waiting. Let's do it."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next several hours passed in a blur. I thought it was several hours, at least. It was hard to be sure. My grasp on time was looser than it often was, or maybe tighter is the word. More focused on the present, on my immediate surroundings. I had to be. Walking through a world that was built to be a deathtrap, there wasn't room to think about anything beyond that.

Then again, it was hard to say how relevant it would have been anyway. Time could be odd on the Otherside, could flow in ways that didn't quite line up with the world I came from; that was one of the first things anyone learned about the place. It was what was behind a lot of famous stories, Thomas the Rhymer and Oisin and any number of others.

Usually that wasn't a problem. As long as you stuck to the safer sections of the Otherside, you could generally rely on time being more or less the same. You might lose a few hours here and there, you might have one hell of a case of jet lag, but in the end things would be more or less what they should be.

Here? I wasn't so sure. This was Jason's little private world, and I had no idea how far his control over it might extend. I was hoping he couldn't bend it too far, particularly with Aiko there; she was a Faerie Queen, and there were reasons that so many of those stories involved people with that role. I was guessing he wouldn't want to bend it too far, since losing a hundred years in a day of hiding had the potential to hurt him as much as us. But in the end, I couldn't be completely sure. It was another thing to add to the list of ways this little trip might go really, *really* wrong.

That was all right. I could deal with it. I could live with this being risky.

But however much real time it might be taken, and whether or not that was even a concept that could be applied to this, it felt like it took hours to make our way to that dark tower. The field was larger than it looked, much larger. I was guessing it was a trick of folded space and distorted perception, and that Reese could explain it in great detail. It didn't really matter, though. For my purposes, it was enough to know that the field was larger than it should have been.

On top of that, it was slow going. This place was very possibly the single most heavily-trapped area I'd ever tried to assault. It felt like every step, every square foot of space, had some kind of threat waiting. Reese knew where a lot of the dangers were, but not all of them. We had to go slowly, take it carefully, or risk a catastrophic failure.

Of course, none of us was really that good at removing traps. Aiko was good at circumventing security measures—she'd have to be, with how much she'd done it—but not enough for any of us to count on. We could trigger a lot of them with magic, the pressure triggers and tripwires, but Jason had planned for that. Some of them were rigged in ways that we couldn't reliably trigger from a distance. It made things hard.

The only way we could have gotten through that literal and metaphorical minefield in complete safety was by taking a really, really long time. Enough patience, enough care, and we could probably manage it. But that would also entail giving Jason more time to realize we were here, more time to prepare or escape. That was a risk that we couldn't readily afford.

So we tried to strike a balance between speed and safety. The result was that it took hours to get across the field, and we had more than a handful of close calls, with everything from sharpened sticks and poisoned darts to land mines and pits of acid.

It was slow, and it was tiring. I was still functioning as smoothly as ever, physically; I didn't feel fatigue the way I used to. But I felt slow, like the edge on my reactions was dulled. It wasn't much, but considering where we were and what we were doing here, it was still too much. This was not a good time to be functioning at less than my best. And I could tell that the others, lacking that unnatural stamina, *were* fatigued. It was not a comforting thought.

Finally, after taking far longer than I would have guessed possible, we reached the destination.

It looked bigger up close. Not that it had looked small from a distance, but...well, tall buildings always had that effect on me. From a distance it was easy to write it off as a landmark, to call it a part of the skyline and leave it at that. Then I stood at the base, and looked up...and up...and up...and got an odd, dizzy sort of feeling, almost like vertigo.

And this was a tall building, easily the equal of most skyscrapers. It towered over the endless field, well over a thousand feet tall. For a steel-frame building built with modern principles of engineering, it would have been an impressive height. Done in stone, it seemed unreal, almost inconceivable. That impression certainly wasn't hurt by the realization that it cast no shadow; apparently, the definition of this domain hadn't been complete enough to really cover the laws of optics very well.

Up close, we could see another problem with it. Namely, it was absolutely featureless. The exterior of the building was utterly blank and smooth, lacking any obvious means of entrance.

"The door is somewhere around here," Reese said, coming to a halt just in front of the tower. "It's masked when the defenses are up, to help keep people out. We'll have to look for the entrance."

"Better idea," I said, stepping forward and calling Tyrfin. A quick flick of my wrist sent the sheath flying off, and a couple of swings carved out a rough rectangle into the wall. It felt oddly satisfying, letting out some aggression. I had a lot of pent-up frustration from the trip here, and that simple, straightforward solution was an easy way to let it out.

Having cut the outline into the wall, I sheathed the sword and kicked the chunk of stone. It didn't budge.

I paused, and scowled at it. I kicked it again, harder.

No response. It didn't even shake.

I snarled, and went to kick it a third time. As I did, I felt a sudden surge of energy running through me, darkness and cold and the sound of howling winds, the sense of everything working in perfect unison in that moment.

I hit the chunk of stone, and it flew most of a hundred feet across the tower. It hit the opposite wall and broke before falling to the floor.

I smiled grimly as I stepped through, ducking a little. Reese paused for a moment first, staring at the stone, and I could almost see him calculating how much force it would take to throw that chunk of the wall across the room that hard.

I knew the answer, and it was a lot. A piece of stone the size of a door, the better part of two feet thick? That was the kind of thing you needed a team of people or a forklift to get off the ground. Kicking it wasn't supposed to break anything but your toes. A werewolf would have been hard-pressed to lift it.

I tried not to think too hard about what it meant that I'd just done that. It wasn't hard. There were more immediate things to focus on.

Stepping in, I found myself in a large room, apparently some kind of foyer. From the inside, I could see the door, less than two feet away from the hole I'd cut in the wall. The floor was a mosaic, a geometric pattern in black and white, and the vaulted ceiling was rather impressive. Beyond that and a shallow staircase running around the perimeter of the room, there was nothing of note in the room, no one else present.

"Upstairs, I'm guessing?" I said. My voice sounded harsh and cold to my ears, with the sound of wolves and blizzards just beneath the surface. Judging by their reactions, it wasn't just me hearing it this time. A landmark moment, truly.

Reese recovered from the apparent shock after a moment. "Yeah," he said. "All the way at the top, I'm guessing."

I nodded. "Of course," I said. Then I started climbing the steps.

Climbing the spire was worse than getting to it. Unsurprisingly, I supposed. This was the location that actually mattered, the one that Jason wanted to keep people out of. All of the stuff outside the building was, ultimately, just the preliminary defense, weeding out the people who weren't really a concern. This was where it got serious.

And it got *very* serious. I'd assaulted enemy compounds before, more than a couple of times. This one used a lot of the same defenses as they had, and it used them well. There were magical wards, spells of force and fire and more abstract, less comprehensible things. There were mechanical traps, everything from blades in the walls to a freaking massive boulder that rolled down the stairs at us. There were constructs, whole hordes of constructs in dozens of shapes, each more creatively murderous than the last. At one point we found a chained demon—Selene's kind of demon, not Legion's, a vaguely canine thing that smoldered with a sickly green flame.

There were no people, or even anything that closely resembled people. That made sense from a tactical perspective, I supposed. This was clearly an extreme fallback, the kind of contingency plan you make with the hope that you'll never, ever have to use it. People weren't great for that; you couldn't really just set them up and then not think about them again. I was just glad that there weren't any here. This was hard enough as it was; adding in all the difficulties that brought with it would have just made things worse.

Oddly, though, it was easy. Despite being maybe the single most heavily-fortified location I'd ever attacked, it was easy. The defenses that would have stopped most invaders in their tracks just...didn't do much to us. Aiko could shatter the wards with dismissive ease, her power simply so much greater than theirs that there was no contest. Reese knew the mechanical traps better here than he had outside, and the ones he didn't remember didn't slow us down much.

And I...well. I dealt with my share of the defenses as well. The constructs weren't any kind of a threat. It didn't matter how numerous they were. I cut a swath through them, left dozens of them on the ground in pieces, and nothing they did even slowed me down. When we found the demon, I shattered its chain with Tyrfin, and then just stared at it when it seemed like it might want a fight anyway. In the end it slunk off with its tail between its legs, too scared of me to start any trouble.

In a way, it was pleasant. It was satisfying. It felt *good* to be this powerful, to be so much more than human.

And then I remembered the price we'd paid for this, and any joy in the moment faded.

So we made our way up through the tower, one step at a time. The things we passed didn't necessarily make much sense. There were laboratories, personal apartments, what looked like a barracks. There were levels that were empty of anything except some abstract statuary. I wondered whether Jason had just run out of ideas for rooms, but had to keep going because he wanted the tower to be so comically tall. It would explain a lot.

Every level had one constant, though. At the edge of the room, hugging the outer wall, there was a staircase. That long, shallow staircase just kept wrapping around, up and up and up.

So we climbed. And climbed. It took another long, interminable span of time. I was starting to worry about whether food would be an issue, for the others. I was starting to wonder whether I was dead and this was an unexpectedly bland, tedious sort of hell.

But finally, we went around the corner and the stairs stopped. No further to climb.

We were on the roof, a sheet of black stone, so high it felt like we were floating. Normally, I would have expected dangerous winds at this height, but there was no wind here, in this artificial world.

My first impression of the area was that it was...plain. It was a very simple space, for someone who had almost unlimited power to sculpt it to his will. The roof of the spire was stone, unmarked and featureless. There was some simple furniture—a few chairs, some small tables. There were a few more abstract sculptures, in the same style as the ones we'd passed earlier. Now that I looked at them more closely, I could see that they were simple, with visible mistakes. Amateur work.

And that was it. No garish displays of wealth, no abuses of the laws of physics for entertainment. I'd seen college apartments that weren't this plain.

If there were any doubt that this was the right place, though, it was settled when I saw the roof's occupant. Jason was sitting in one of the chairs, sipping at a glass of water and reading a book. He was wearing his usual cheap suit, black with white pinstripes, and a grey tie. He didn't look like anything special. An office worker, or a corporate manager. He didn't look like a terrifying mage who would stop at nothing in his quest for power.

"Hello," he said as we emerged onto the roof. He closed his book, setting it and the glass of water on the table next to him. "I wondered when you'd find me here. I was expecting it to take longer than this."

"Jason," Reese said, in a tone of barely-restrained anger. "You have a great deal to explain." He stomped forward, hands flexing at his sides.

"And I will explain," Jason said mildly. "I don't know what you're upset about, but I'm sure I can explain." He stood, walked over to Reese, rested one hand on the space mage's shoulder. "I'm sure this is all just a misunderstanding," he said.

I realized what was happening, started to shout a warning, too slow, too late. No one else had even realized what was happening.

I'd realized that Reese was a decent guy. I'd exploited that. I should have realized that I wasn't the only one who could capitalize on that particular weakness.

I wasn't sure what magic was on the knife, to let it get past all of Reese's defenses. But the blade went in smooth and clean, so fast you might not even see what was happening until it was too late.

Reese stared down at the knife in his guts. I could smell magic, feel him trying to bend space and get away.

Nothing happened. That was what Jason did, after all. He altered magic on a basic level, one that didn't have much in common with the obvious physical manifestations most mages used. He could make magic stronger, make it easy. Or he could shut it down entirely.

"I'm sorry, old friend," Jason said. "But I couldn't take the risk."

He twisted the knife, and pulled it out. Reese sagged as blood followed the blade out of him. Jason slammed the knife home again, then shoved the other man away.

Now the magic worked, but twisted, not quite as intended. Reese moved through space, out past the edge of the roof.

He fell. I didn't think he was going to be getting back up. Being stabbed twice with a magic knife and then falling off a skyscraper tended to do that to a person. There were things that could survive it, of course...but at the end of the day, for all his power, Reese was only human.

"I'm sorry," Jason said, as the rest of us were still trying to adjust to what had just happened. "Where was I?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"I think it was something about you being a megalomaniac and randomly murdering people who thought you were their friend," I said, watching the knife carefully. The armor should be able to stop it, and even if it got through it shouldn't be able to really hurt me, but...well, under the circumstances I thought that relying on that was probably not the best idea.

Jason sighed and sat down, returning the knife to its sheath. Now that I was watching more closely, I could see that he hadn't produced it from nowhere. Just a wrist sheath and a bit of sleight of hand.

"Don't be so dramatic," he said, picking up his glass of water and sipping at it. "It's not like I hunted him down for sport or something. But that was possibly the only chance I had to deal with him. I couldn't afford to let it slip by me."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay," I said. "If you want to be like that about it, how about a trade? I have questions, and you have answers. Somehow, I'm guessing there are things you'd like to know too. I think one to one is a fair exchange, don't you?"

"And why would I take the risk of explaining myself to you?" he asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Think of it like this," I said. "We want to kill you, you want to kill us. And there's not a lot that any of us can do, here, to get away. One way or another, one of us isn't leaving this roof alone. So really, adding in the explanation isn't changing anything. It's just going double or nothing."

Jason nodded. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "you really aren't much like I expected. You aren't what the rumormongers would paint you as. Much more reasonable, less psychotic. You made that offer quite cogently." He smiled, a thin, empty sort of smile. "You ask first. You are, after all, the guest here."

"All right," I said. "Why does the Light of Reason terrorist group have access to top-tier magical equipment and information?"

"They're being used," he said, quite shamelessly. "By quite a number of people, really. There are plenty of people who see potential there. It isn't my doing, if that's what you were wondering. But one person feeds them a secret, and another tosses a bribe their way, and before you know it the pawn has more power than anyone intended."

I nodded. He sounded sincere. Which meant nothing at all, but I thought he might actually be telling the truth this time. It fit. It fit together so neatly. I thought I was finally starting to get an idea of what was going on, of what the *real* shape of things was, and what Jason said fit with that shape.

"My turn," he said. "Why did you hunt me down here?"

"Because you killed me," I said. "Or as good as, anyway."

"That's it?"

I shrugged. "Oh, there are other reasons. I could go into why you did that, and whose plans are being served, but in the proximate sense? Yeah, the immediate reason is just that you killed me."

"I see," he said, with the mildly troubled frown of someone who doesn't see and never will.

"You don't really get people, do you?" I commented. "Not as anything other than tools to be used."

"That's all we are," Jason said calmly. "Everyone uses, and is used. I'm simply not in denial about it."

"I thought it was something like that," I said. "That would be why you don't understand, I think. You're not equipped to process that kind of reaction."

He nodded. "Very possibly. I believe that it's you next."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Why does Loki care about me?"

"Even gods are finite," he said matter-of-factly. "Incredibly powerful, certainly. Their capabilities are...vast. But finite. They have limits, boundaries. They are neither omnipotent nor omniscient. As such, they require agents. They require tools. And they require weapons."

"And I'm a weapon." It wasn't a question.

Jason answered it anyway. "Yes," he said. "You are. Why did the Fenris Wolf come to save you?"

"Because he likes me," I said, shrugging. "I mean, again, there's a lot more at work behind the scenes. There are other factors, other plans to take into account. But as far as I can tell, the direct reason behind him choosing to do that is just that he likes me, he wanted to help me, and that was the only way he had available to do so. Who taught Katie Schmidt how to summon and bind something from the void?"

Jason paused before answering, and frowned. "I am not entirely sure," he said. "There are multiple possibilities. But if I had to guess? Hunter."

"Hunter," I repeated. "You mean...*the* Hunter? The member of the original Conclave? The one whose existence they've tried to erase? That Hunter?"

"Yes."

"Of course," I sighed. Hunter. The man with a gift for space magic, and a tie to the notion of *place*. The one who'd explored the outer reaches of the Otherside, and found something there so bad that the Conclave had struck all mention of his existence from the records.

It occurred to me that the only mage I'd met who had a gift for manipulating space, in particular, was Reese. It occurred to me that Jason had just killed him. Somehow I didn't think that was a coincidence, or half as casual as Jason had presented it as being.

More pieces were fitting into place. The picture was almost finished, now. I'd misunderstood things so badly, but now the answers were so clear.

I'd have been happier if the answers weren't so unpleasant. But that was how it went.

"I don't think I have any other questions," Jason said after a moment, echoing my thoughts. "Not for you."

I sighed, the long, slow sigh of wind through bare branches. "No," I said. "I don't suppose I have any questions for you either."

"I suppose this is it, then," he said. "For what it's worth, I am sorry that things had to be like this. That your life had to be like this. But this is where we are."

"Yeah," I said. "It is."

He didn't so much as twitch, but I felt a weight press on me, impossibly heavy. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even think, couldn't marshal my power to fight the pressure. I managed to call Tyrfing, reached to undo the strap holding the old cursed sword in its scabbard, but it was hard. Traveling across the plain and up the tower hadn't been half as hard as moving my fingers those few inches. I started to draw the sword, and the weight redoubled itself, crushing me. My hands fell to my side again.

I couldn't even get upset about it. Oh, I was angry, but it felt...distant. The weight was dragging even that down, an oppressive fog that clouded everything.

It looked like Aiko was feeling similarly. She twitched a little, scents of fox and spice and shadow, cords of darkness winding through her fingers. But she didn't, couldn't really do anything. I could feel her fury, a quietly berserk anger that was scary even to me. But her posture was as blank and listless as mine.

Jason stood, silently. He set his glass of water on the table, and drew that knife again. And then he started walking in our direction.

And then I heard a voice. It felt...familiar, but odd. It was a voice that I'd only heard clearly a few times, though it was familiar in a way that almost nothing else could be, bone-deep. The wolf in

Snowflake's mind usually preferred to stay silent, in the background, something that you would only see if you knew how to look.

It's been good, that voice said now. I'm sorry.

And then she was running forward, a blur in black and white and blue, moving almost too fast to follow. If the crushing weight holding me and Aiko down affected Snowflake at all, it didn't show. She tensed, leaped at Jason, a perfect pounce that landed squarely in the middle of the man's torso. He staggered, and metal teeth closed on his shoulder instead of his neck, but they still bit deep, and for a moment I thought it might work after all.

Then Jason brought that knife around. It swept through the armor like it wasn't even there, and laid her throat open to the bone.

It felt like time stood still for a moment. I still couldn't move, couldn't shake off the burden weighing me down. But it felt like my senses had gone into overdrive to compensate. I could smell sweat and blood and metal. I saw the light glinting off the blade. Saw the first spurts of arterial blood, a moment's delay and then a spray, staining her white fur a brilliant red. Saw her eyes, one cold and blue and knowing, the other gone, burnt out long ago to pay for my mistakes.

I heard the clamor of metal on stone as she fell.

And then everything was gone, replaced by a vision, painfully clear, too intense to be real. My vision went black, the utter darkness of a cave without a flame, a night without stars, the sort of darkness that laughed at the notion of light. Drawn on it in silver light, shapes as large as worlds, was an abstract, geometric design. It was harsh, almost brutal, all odd angles and broken lines, nothing lining up right.

I heard Grandmother Midnight's voice, then. It was...not loud, precisely. But it was so huge, so pervasive, that it dominated my experience. To call it sound seemed woefully inadequate.

The Tower, she said, in that too-large voice. All things fall in time.

Then the vision faded. I was back on the spire with Jason, seemingly in the same instant I'd left. Snowflake hadn't even finished falling yet.

But everything was different.

Beneath our feet, the tower groaned like a thing in pain, a noise so deep that I didn't so much hear it as feel it in my chest. It shook, though the vast plains all around were perfectly still, with no hint of an earthquake. It started to crumble and fall, the motion made slow by the sheer, almost inconceivable scale of it.

And as it did, the weight that had been dragging me down vanished as though it had never been.

Aiko's reaction was instant, and violent. Ropes of darkness caught at Jason and dragged him down. He tried to fend them off with the knife, and where it met the shadows it cut them, but he was only human; too slow, too clumsy to defend himself that way. Aiko approached him at a pace she could never have managed when she was just a kitsune, drawing her sword as she went.

The blade fell once. Just once.

My own response was just as fast, but had a different focus. I ran to Snowflake, fell to my knees by her side.

Any notion I might have had that the wound was less serious than it looked died in a moment. It was deep, and wide, passing cleanly through both carotid arteries and the windpipe. It was the sort of wound that killed rapidly and surely.

There were things that could survive something like that. I could, now. Aiko probably could as well, being a Faerie Queen.

At the end of the day, for all that she was strong and fast and clever, Snowflake was just a dog. Get past all of the other things, and she was as fragile as any other.

I could do a lot of things. I had the power to lay waste to an army, to crush my enemies and drive them before me, to kill very nearly anything.

But I couldn't heal. My best friend was bleeding out right next to me, and I was as helpless to stop it as anyone else.

I took a different tack, reaching for her mind and catching it. I tried to bring her—them—into my mind and hold them there, the way I had with the wolf once before.

I couldn't. They couldn't make the transition, the jump from that body and mind to mine. It was too alien, too dissimilar to their natures.

I pulled harder, refusing to let them go. They weren't fading, weren't vanishing, but still weren't making that transition.

It hurt. It hurt as badly as anything I'd ever done. My vision was going grey. I could hear shouting, but it sounded like I was underwater, the sound distant and distorted. I could feel their pain as well, their agony at being torn in this way.

Stop, a voice said. It wasn't Snowflake's voice, wasn't familiar to me at all.

No, I replied, though I wasn't sure who it was intended for, the voice or Snowflake or myself. *I won't lose you*. I tightened my grip, pulled harder.

Stop, the voice said again. *This is how monsters are made*.

Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

I don't care.

All things end, the voice said. All things must make that final step. You cannot save them, not as they were. And if they must end, death is a kinder end than what you are doing.

I wanted to argue. Wanted to scream and cry. Wanted to protest.

Didn't, because I could feel that it was true.

I let go. Snowflake slipped away.

She let out a final sigh, her head resting in my lap. I felt her mind brush against mine a final time, wordless in the end as she'd been in the beginning, just a sense of love and acceptance and forgiveness and quiet, melancholy regret.

Then she was gone.

I stood, holding her body in one hand. With the other I fumbled blindly, found Aiko's hand in mine.

I stepped silently off the edge of the roof and lowered us to the ground with a web of air and darkness, as the tower fell behind us.

Epilogue

I insisted upon digging out Jason's body. Aiko clearly thought this was pointless, but she didn't argue. I wasn't in a state to be argued with.

It wasn't easy. There was an enormous amount of stone there, the whole tower having crumbled to the ground. I was guessing he was around the top of the heap—he had, after all, been at the very peak before it all fell apart. But that still left a considerable pile of rubble to dig through.

I dug. Slowly, silently, and alone, I dug. Most of the stones were easy enough to move, at least for me. A few thousand pounds was nothing; I could pick those pieces up and toss them aside almost without even trying. The largest ones, the parts that represented significant pieces of the tower's structure, were little more trouble. I cut them into manageable chunks with Tyrfin and threw those chunks aside.

It was easy work. Repetitive, mindless. I felt like I was in a daze, looking out at the world through a fog. I wasn't sure how much of that to attribute to Snowflake's death, and how much was because I'd finally started putting the pieces together, and I didn't like what I was seeing.

I didn't care. It was enough that I was still comfortably numb. Later I could go to pieces, and I probably would. For now I had to keep working, keep moving.

I was vaguely aware of Aiko's presence, far enough from the wreckage to be safe from the pieces I threw aside. She didn't step in to help. I was just as glad for that.

There were other things in the stone, here and there. Things that I'd seen on that long climb up, bits of furniture and weapons, which had by some quirk of chance and physics wound up higher in the pile than they had been before it fell. Then, at last, I caught a glimpse of a familiar sculpture and I knew that I was getting close.

I found Jason a layer down, surrounded by the pieces of the sculptures he'd made. If they'd had any meaning, it was lost now. There was nothing there but broken pieces, and once the picture's broken it can't be perfect again.

I should know. Seeing him there was like looking through a mirror.

He was dead. He was really most sincerely dead. Aiko had cut off his head—it was a minor miracle that head and body had landed as close together as they had, really. He hadn't fared well in the fall, either. Between the fall and the jostling from the rocks on the way down, the corpse was in...poor condition.

I hauled him out anyway, and dragged him a ways away from the fallen tower. By some chance or fate or whatever you could call it, I stumbled upon Reese's body as well, and stopped there. I stood there and stared at them for a while.

Aiko approached more closely at that point. She was carrying Snowflake's body. She still didn't say anything.

A lot of bodies, for something that had supposed to be an easy job.

I drew Tyrting and decapitated Reese, then dismembered both his corpse and Jason's with slow, mechanical strokes. It was better to be very careful with this sort of thing.

When that was done, I stood there for a minute staring down at them, then sheathed Tyrting. I was still moving with that slow, dull numbness, feeling almost like I was watching myself from the outside more than controlling my body. Maybe I was.

"Can you get us out of here?" I asked, the first thing I'd said since going to dig through the pile. My voice sounded distant, cold, empty.

"Yeah," Aiko said. Her voice was hushed. The kind of voice you use in graveyards and churches, with raving lunatics and people standing on ledges.

I nodded. I'd expected as much. Jason wouldn't have made this hideout without a way to leave. "Can you destroy this place?" I asked.

That question took her more by surprise. "What?" she asked.

"This world," I said. "Can you destroy it? Break it and send it back to the void?"

She considered that for a long moment. I just stood there as she did, unmoving, not even breathing. I didn't look at her, just stared unblinkingly down at the corpses.

"Yeah," she said at last. "I think I can. Most places I couldn't, but this one...yeah."

"Okay," I said, turning towards her. I extended one hand, and without asking, she handed me Snowflake's body.

Aiko didn't follow as I walked back up the pile of wreckage from the broken tower, to the very top. I was vaguely glad she didn't.

I stopped up there, setting Snowflake down. Then I stood there, looking out over the plain that extended to the horizon.

I wanted to say something, but I couldn't find the words. What the hell was I supposed to say? Should I apologize? Say that I would miss her? None of it would matter. Words never fixed anything, and she wasn't here to hear them anyway. This wasn't Snowflake. This was just an empty shell.

It felt strangely, sickly amusing. Alive, she had been vibrant, unique, extraordinary.

Dead, she was meat.

In the end, I stood there silently for a long time. Maybe minutes, maybe hours. I wasn't sure how to tell, wasn't sure it mattered.

Finally, I knelt and unclipped her collar. My fingers brushed against her fur as I did. It was stiff and spiky, the blood dried. The body was already cold.

I felt a quiet tingle of energy as I stood again, holding that braided leather collar in my hand. It was tempting to think that it was some echo of Snowflake, some remnant of her. I knew better. It was the magic I'd woven into that collar, into the spikes and stones and bits of tooth and bone.

I wanted to cry then, found I no longer had the eyes for it.

I turned and walked away, leaving her there. The bloodstained collar dangled from my fingers.

I got to the bottom, where Aiko was waiting for me. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice a hushed whisper. She'd been crying. "I'm so sorry."

I nodded. "Do it," I said.

She seemed about to say something else, turned away instead. I smelled magic, dark and abstract, something like and unlike the power of a portal.

At first the effects were subtle. A quiet waver here, a ripple of an unnamable color there. Then it grew gradually more extreme. Streaks of absolute blackness wrote themselves through the air before reality asserted itself again.

Then, out at the horizon, the plains started to vanish, replaced by the endless darkness and mad colors of the void.

"There," Aiko said, turning to face me. She sounded tired. I wasn't sure how long it had been since she started working the spell. "Now for the portal."

I nodded, staring out into the chaos. She finished a few moments later, the hole in the world unfolding next to us, but I didn't move, just stood there as the void rolled slowly closer.

Broken Mirror (Winter's Tale)

I considered just standing there and letting it consume me. Everything had gone so wrong, so very, very wrong. I'd done the best I could, tried my hardest. And yet still, in spite of everything I'd done, it had come to this.

In comparison to the pain of that, of knowing just how badly I'd fucked up, oblivion sounded...pleasant. Restful.

But I knew that Snowflake wouldn't want me to do that. And there were other people who cared about me, other responsibilities that I couldn't ignore.

I turned away from that broken tower, and stepped through the portal.

So died Snowflake. She was an unrepentant murderer, a killer, a monster. But she was my friend, a better friend than I deserved. She came into being because of my choice, a choice I made without understanding the consequences. She suffered for my sins. She died so that I could live, and all the power at my command could not keep her by my side.

I left here there, the ending of that dead, empty world as her funeral pyre.

Last one out, please turn out the lights.