

Empty Places

Emrys Vaughn

Emrys Vaughn

This book is available under a Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 license. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, and make derivative works based on it, but not for commercial purposes. For more information or to read the license terms please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and locations herein are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual locales, events, and persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. You thought I was going to put something serious here in the last book, didn't you? Ha! I mean, don't get me wrong, I thought about it, but ultimately it just didn't feel worth it, you know? I mean, I don't want to break the streak, and really, anyone still reading this isn't here for the emotional value.

Emrys Vaughn

This book is dedicated to whichever of the previous books' dedications was sincere rather than being a joke, sarcastic, or something I made up to fill space. Good luck with that one.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Chapter One

I was pacing. I'd been pacing for a while now.

I was alone. None of my minions wanted to interrupt me, not now. Not that most of them ever wanted to interrupt me, but doing so at the moment was even less likely. Aiko was on the Otherside, doing fae things again; we'd lost around a week in Jason's private hideout, and she wasn't entrenched enough yet to go missing for a week casually.

Both of those were...not normal, precisely, but comprehensible. I understood them. The other absence in the room was far more profound, harder to understand, and thus harder to come to terms with.

Losing Snowflake was harder than I would have thought possible. Not just because I'd lost my best friend, though I had, and that was hard enough on its own. But for years now, I'd been connected to her, a mental tie that my magic had been reinforcing for so long that it wasn't even a conscious thing for either of us. We'd been apart from time to time, of course, and unable to communicate, but even then that sense of *connection* was there. It was the equivalent of picking up the phone and getting a dial tone.

This, to continue the metaphor, was like if the phone had been unplugged from the network entirely. That sense of possibility, of being connected to something larger, was gone.

I'd never had that experience before; Snowflake was the only person I'd ever built that degree of a connection with, so it wasn't like I'd been in this position before. It felt a bit like I imagined losing a limb would. I kept reaching for that connection, for a bit of mental balance or another perspective on things, and getting...nothing.

It hurt. Every time, it was a reminder of just what I'd lost, and how impossible it was to get it back. And knowing that I *would* get over it, that eventually I'd get used to being alone in my head again, just made it worse.

Thus the fact that my minions were leaving me well alone. I was in a foul mood, to say the least, and since Jason was already dead, I couldn't even take it out on him. It left me inclined to lash out at anyone, whether they'd done anything to deserve it or not, just to let out that frustration.

Part of it, of course, was that they were busy. They were very busy. I had a plan, a goal, and for once I was being active rather than reacting after someone else had already started the mess.

I was going to kill Hunter. He was, I thought, responsible for a great deal of the misery I'd had to deal with in recent years. Probably more than anyone other than Loki. And he was...he had...I was going to kill him. What else could I do?

But that presented some problems. He was a mage so powerful that the Conclave was afraid of him, with thousands of years of experience. With the possible exception of Scáthach he was almost certainly the single most powerful, dangerous person I'd set myself against. To call taking him down an ambitious undertaking was...well, it was well beyond just an understatement.

I could worry about that later, though. For now I had to *find* him, and I didn't expect that to be any easier. You didn't live that long, with that many enemies, by being easy to find.

I had a lot of sources of information. I'd made myself the center of a web of information brokers, and I had a lot of contacts. But this wasn't the sort of question you could take to those people and expect to get an answer.

I had other sources. I was still owed answers from Loki, and I knew people in other places, some of whom had access to a scary amount of information. Some of them could probably tell me where to find him. Some of them could probably give me the power to beat him when I did.

There would be a price, if I did that. There was always a price. In the past, I'd always shied away from it. I hadn't been willing to pay the cost they would exact for that kind of power.

Now? With Snowflake dead, Aiko gone and trapped in a prison of her own making, my life in shambles and the world I knew a broken wreck? Things were different. A lot of things that used to be unthinkable were...well, I was thinking of them.

After we'd gotten back from killing Jason, and I'd recovered from the worst of the shock, I'd written out a list of people I could ask, sources I could consult. Then I'd gone over it, crossing off entries that were too unlikely to know, too difficult to contact, or just too dangerous to contact yet.

It took a few hours, and left me with less than a dozen entries. Those entries were still dangerous and expensive, on the whole, but that was the nature of the game. So once I was satisfied with the list, I gave it to Selene and told her to start arranging meetings.

I hadn't told her what I wanted to know, or why. It was safer for everyone involved that she not know. And besides, I wasn't in the mood to explain things. I hadn't even told her that Snowflake was dead, though I was sure that quite a few of my minions had noticed her absence. It was rather conspicuous, given that she'd very rarely been away from me for more than a couple of hours since before I was a jarl.

And now that part was done. I'd made the call, committed to this course of action. There was nothing I could do but wait for them to reply, and pace. I felt scared, and angry, and small.

It was funny, in a way. I couldn't even remember how many times, down the years, I'd wanted to know what was going on. How many times I'd wanted to understand. Now that I had an idea of what the answers to my questions had been, I would gladly have gone back to the way things were.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

But then, that was how it went. There was a reason they said ignorance was bliss. Knowing how things worked gave you no control over how things worked. I could explain in great detail how my life was a wreck, when each step down that road had occurred, and roughly why it was a wreck. But I couldn't tell it to fix itself, and knowing just meant that I didn't have a grey area to provide hope.

It was almost a relief when I got the call to say that the first meeting had been arranged, just to provide a break from thinking.

London had gotten worse. The last time I was there it was relatively peaceful, relatively stable. Now it was not, and strangely, the very thing which had kept it relatively safe through the worst part of the chaos was what was now tearing it down. The city of London was truly ancient, with thousands of years of history and tradition, a complex supernatural community, and numerous powerful residents.

When the world was in turmoil, that had been a good thing. It meant that the city was largely safe from external threats. Now, though, it was becoming a problem in itself. As things started (and it was only starting, there was no question of that) to settle down throughout the world, the city of London was turning on itself. The different factions, which had been united in the face of a greater threat from outside, were turning on each other, fighting for supremacy. That fight dragged other sides into it, gangs and cops and normal people all taking sides even if they didn't know why or what the fight was about. Violence and chaos bred violence and chaos, and within a week it had gotten to the point of riots.

I found that darkly amusing, a sort of tragicomic reflection of the world at large. It was a nasty little catch twenty-two; you couldn't avoid disaster without numerous powerful people, but numerous powerful people caused disaster.

There was no winning this game.

It was where the Conclave wanted to meet with me, though, and I wasn't really in a position to argue. So London it was. It was, I supposed, not really that bad. Worse than it was, sure, but not necessarily worse than any other major city right now.

It was a bit of a surprise, though, and between being jumped by a small mob of pixies and the generalized disorder, getting around was harder than it seemed like it should have been. As a result, rather than half an hour early, I was barely on time arriving at the meeting, which had been arranged in the private room at a very, very expensive bar. They probably didn't call themselves a bar—the term "gentlemen's club" came to mind—but while I was wealthy these days, I didn't have the mentality of someone born into a high social class. To me, it was a bar.

The building was large, in a neighborhood where large buildings were not the norm. It was nice, in an old, indulgent sort of way; it looked like it had been there for a few hundred years, watching the

city grow and change around it. There was nothing to suggest what kind of building it was, but then, this was the sort of place where if you had to ask, you didn't belong there.

I almost asked Snowflake what she thought of the place, before remembering that I wouldn't get an answer.

Snarling quietly, I walked up to the front door and went inside, finding myself in a small foyer. It was an interesting mix of past and present. The doorman was wearing a full tuxedo that probably cost more than some cars, and the decor had the same old, stately appearance as the building itself. But it had obviously been remodeled recently, complete with an electronic lock on the interior door and a sheet of bullet-resistant glass between the doorman and the foyer.

"May I help you, sir?" he said, his voice coming through a speaker mounted next to the window.

"I'm here for an appointment," I said. "Jonathan Keyes." I held up the false identification for that name, which the Guards had arranged for me back before things had fallen apart. I didn't think it was a coincidence that they'd told me to use that identity.

"Right away, sir," he said, pressing a button. A buzzer sounded, and the lock disengaged. I pulled the door open and went inside.

A man who looked very nearly identical to the doorman met me before I'd taken two steps, leading me silently into the building. The main room was very nicely furnished, with paintings on the walls; somehow, I was pretty sure they were expensive. It was almost deserted, though, just a couple of people sitting around reading. No one was talking, and while they tried to act casual, the tension in that room was palpable. They were scared.

I wasn't sure whether that was because they were normal people and scared because the world was falling apart around them, or because they were clan mages here with the Conclave and they were scared of me. Either was plausible.

My guide led me down to the basement, down a narrow hallway, and to an unmarked door, then walked away. I went in alone.

A man in a plain white robe was sitting in an armchair next to a fireplace, sipping a glass of brandy. There was no one else there, and only one other armchair, currently empty.

"Prophet," I said cautiously, closing the door behind myself. "Where are the others?"

"They won't be coming," he said, not looking away from the fire.

I frowned. "That's not what I wanted."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"You asked to meet with the Conclave," he said. "I'm the representative of the Conclave who was available to meet with you."

"It's like that, then," I said.

He nodded. "It is," he said. "Take a seat."

I wasn't thrilled to be sitting down under the circumstances, but it wasn't worth arguing, so I took the other chair.

I wasn't sure I'd ever been this close to Prophet before. Up close, he looked...tired. Worn and drawn, like he'd been stretched too thin for too long.

"What's the crisis this time?" I asked.

"Crises," he said absently. "Keeper and Watcher are recovering a dangerous artifact that was stolen from the archives. Guard, Guide, and Caller are coordinating a military action against rakshasas in India, and Arbiter is busy with a dispute between two clans and the Daylight Court."

I winced. "Things are getting worse, aren't they?" I asked.

He shrugged and took another sip of brandy. "Things were always bad," he said. "The difference is that now you know about these things."

I sighed. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Enough of that," Prophet said. "Why did you ask for this meeting? Your employee was evasive."

"It's not something to talk about on the phone," I said. "Or with underlings. I'm looking for Hunter."

"For who?" he asked. He sounded genuinely curious. It was a wonderful act; if I hadn't known better I would really have thought he didn't know who I was talking about.

"Hunter," I said again. "The Conclave member. From the original Conclave. You know, the one you tried to erase?"

Prophet was silent for a moment. "You were wise not to speak too broadly on this," he said. "I would suggest you continue that course. Now, I'm only even acknowledging this because we owe you after Russia. That man doesn't exist. Don't ask again." He stood up and started walking towards the door.

I debated letting him go for almost a second. Then I said, "I know what he found."

Prophet paused. "What?"

"You wiped Hunter from the records because he went too far," I said. "He liked to travel the Otherside, but he went too far. He went to the edge of the Otherside, and he found something, something so bad that you kill anyone who tries to do the same thing just in case they might find it too. Right?"

"Go on," Prophet said, turning to face me again.

"I know what he found there," I said quietly. "He found the void, didn't he? He found the chaos that lies outside our world. And he learned how to bring things out of it."

"You're remarkably well-informed," he said.

"Not well enough," I said. "This is mostly conjecture, based on a few scraps of information that I pieced together. There's a lot that I don't know still. But I'm starting to put the pieces together."

"Why do you want to find him?" Prophet asked idly. "You must be aware of the danger involved in any interaction with those four."

"Yeah," I said. "But I owe him. He's the one who's behind a lot of what's happened to me, I think. He's the reason my dog is dead. I'm not inclined to let him get away with that." I paused, grasping after the words for what I wanted to say next. "And...I'm just starting to put the pieces together," I said. "There's a lot I still don't understand. And I want to understand. I can't actually fix my life, you know? It's gone too far, had some things happen that I can't put right again. And if it's going to be like this, I at least want to know why."

He nodded slowly. "We can't help you with this," he said. "We can't be seen to be involved in this, much less to be taking sides. It would be a disaster. And besides, we don't know where he is. We haven't had any contact with any of the original Conclave members in hundreds of years."

I sighed. "Okay," I said. "I knew it was a long shot. Thanks for taking the time to meet with me."

"Good luck," Prophet said. "I advise you to ask the fae. When Hunter found the edges of the Otherside, they were the ones who were most immediately affected. Some of the elder fae remember that, and there's a chance that some of them still track him."

"Thanks," I said. "I may do that."

"Good luck," he said again, and left.

Chapter Two

"Well," Aiko said, once I'd finished telling her what happened. "That's not terribly helpful."

"Not surprising," I said. "I mean, the Conclave really can't afford to have anything to do with Hunter at this point. I can see why they wouldn't want to have any appearance of being involved with that."

"How so?"

"Assume I'm right," I said. "Hunter went too far to the edge of reality, and he realized that there was something outside of this world. He realized that the void exists, and he figured out how to pull things from there into here."

"That all sounds reasonable."

"It's the best explanation I've got," I agreed. "So how do you think the gods would react to that? They apparently take that kind of thing really, *really* seriously. They do not like people opening those doors, at all. And they aren't shy about showing it, either." I shook my head. "The Conclave might have chosen to wipe records of the other three," I said. "I'm not sure. But I'd wager they weren't the ones that made the call to erase Hunter, and they don't want to seem like they're trying to go back on that."

"Huh," she said. "That's...probably not inaccurate. I hadn't thought of it in quite those terms before."

"Me either, but it makes sense." I glowered at nothing in particular and took a drink of tea. It was really, incredibly good tea, sharp and strong and bracing. It was, in fact, very probably the best tea I'd ever had. It hadn't quite occurred to me that the fae would be as improbably good at tea as they were at things like wine, though it probably should have.

There were a lot of things to complain about with this gig, but I had to admit, the creature comforts were pretty nice. Lounging with Aiko on a black silk couch that felt lighter than a cloud, sipping that tea and nibbling on delicate chocolate pastries more perfectly prepared than anything a mortal chef ever made...it was a position I'd have killed to be in, for a lot of my life.

In hindsight, I hadn't known how good I had it back then. But then, wasn't that always the case? You didn't know what you had until it was gone.

"Do you know what he meant when he said I should ask the fae?" I asked, trying to break that bleak pattern of thought.

"Nope," Aiko said cheerfully, stuffing another pastry into her mouth. "This is the first I've heard of a connection between Hunter and the fae."

"You know, for how powerful you are in their hierarchy, they don't seem to be telling you much," I said. I wasn't sure quite what tone to take with that statement, and ended up going with noncommittal by default.

"It's not really a power thing," she said, shrugging. "It's more of a role thing. Maiden, mother, crone, remember? Old history, Court secrets...that's not really my job. It's not what I'm supposed to be dealing with, so I don't need to know."

"What is your job, then?" I asked. "I haven't gotten entirely clear on that."

Aiko frowned. "It has a lot to do with beginnings," she said slowly. "It's...planting seeds, encouraging things to grow. I have more involvement with the mortal world than the other two, I think. It's hard to put into words, but I think the idea is that I'm supposed to spread the ideas that make the Midnight Court function. It's not really *doing* anything with the influence, or capitalizing on it. That's the others' job."

"Just as well," I said. "Inspiring others to mischief and maliciousness you can do. Planning? Maybe not so much."

"It works out nicely," she agreed. "That's not what you mean, though, is it?"

"I think," I said slowly, "that it fits a little too well."

"You think someone planned it," she corrected me. "That someone arranged it."

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, come on. Things this huge, this significant, they don't just *happen*. And it fits together so well. You winding up with this power, me as your champion, the whole thing working out this way. That's not coincidence." I shook my head. "The question isn't so much whether this was arranged. It's who arranged it, and why. And for how long, actually."

"What do you mean?"

"When did you first seriously think we might end up together?" I asked, knowing what the answer was.

"When we were escaping from Ryujin's palace," she said instantly, just like I'd expected. "You played along with the plan, and it worked. It was fun."

"Yeah," I said. "And hey, guess who was the reason that happened? That's right, it was Loki. What a coincidence."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Oh," she said. "Good point. But...does it really matter? I love you. That feeling is real, whether it was a part of some plan or not. If the feeling is genuine, is it important whether somebody else wanted it to happen?"

"No," I said. "I guess not. I'm just curious how much of this was intended from the start."

The conversation lapsed for a bit after that. I was thinking of how I felt like I was a pawn in some vast game I was just now beginning to see, and nobody could be bothered to tell me the rules or the stakes. Aiko seemed to mostly be busy making a fool of herself with some sort of cream puff.

"So what now?" she asked, after a minute or so, with a bit of cream still around her mouth. "You think you'll keep looking for Hunter?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's...what else can I do?"

"You could just let it go."

I shook my head slowly. "No," I said. "I couldn't. I won't have a moment's peace until this is done, one way or the other. And besides, I just...I can't not follow up on it."

"Yeah," she said. "I guess I can understand that. So what next? Are you going to ask the other Queens?"

"No," I said. "If your side wanted me to know, they'd have told you. And I somehow doubt the Daylight side of things would be too thrilled with me asking them for answers, all things considered. No, I think I'm going to have to look elsewhere. There are other fae that might know."

She was quiet for a long moment. "Those are dangerous people to ask," she said at last.

"Gosh, me taking risks," I said dryly. "What a surprise."

She laughed, and grabbed at me, and for a time such matters were forgotten. And if even that left me feeling cold and hollow, it was still better than dwelling on things further.

Meeting with Prophet had been a dangerous proposition. He was, in all probability, the most powerful human being in the world. The only people I could think of offhand who might compete weren't really *human* in any meaningful sense; Conn, Lucius, these were people that had left humanity behind a long time ago.

In any case, Prophet was on an entirely different level than I was, in several senses. He was personally powerful enough that any fight between us would probably end with me as a stain on the floor. Odds were good that he had a way to get around my ability to make new bodies for myself, too. On top of that, he was the most influential member of a magical conspiracy that had an enormous

amount of control over the world, and if he really wanted to, he could assemble an army that could turn a city to glass.

In short, he was the kind of guy you did not lightly cross. I didn't think he had anything in particular against me, but even so, being in the same room with him was an unsettling prospect. It was like being in a room with someone who had a loaded gun. Sure, they probably weren't going to shoot you, but it was hard not to be acutely aware that they *could*.

That said, the next meeting I managed to set up was worse. Much, much worse.

I met him on the Otherside, in a backwater domain loosely associated with Faerie. It was a place I'd used as a staging area for portals in the past, but not much beyond that.

He showed up exactly on time, half an hour after I did. He looked about the same as I'd always seen him, a male Sidhe with blunt, almost ugly features. He was wearing the same clothing, too, plain breeches held up with a rope belt, and the skin of a wolf for a cloak.

I noticed that the wolf's skin wasn't as fresh as I remembered. It didn't move of its own accord, didn't leave streaks of blood on his skin where it passed. I wasn't sure what that meant.

"Blaise," I said, nodding to him respectfully and just a bit warily. I didn't know much about him, but what I did know was enough to make me take him very seriously. He was a Twilight Prince, influential enough that he had input on decisions that affected all of the fae. He was Sidhe, but he disdained Court politics, which very few people could get away with. He was scary powerful, and ancient. They called him the Son of Wolves, and I didn't know why.

And he'd taken an interest in me, way back when, at the same party where Loki had first openly messed with my life. Somehow I didn't think the timing there was a coincidence.

"Winter," he said, in a pleasant, even voice.

"I'm glad you could take the time to meet with me on such short notice," I said.

"I've been expecting this call for some time," he said. His voice was dry.

"Of course you have," I muttered. "Okay then, I won't waste time. I'm guessing you know why I asked to talk to you."

"You want answers," he said. "To some very important and very fundamental questions, some of which you don't yet know you have."

"Yeah," I said. "That's a fair way to summarize it, I guess. So do you have information I need? And if so, what will it cost me?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Do you remember the first time we spoke?" he asked. "I asked you three questions, then. Do you remember what they were?"

"I do," I said. "You asked why I was there. Whether I was happy. And whether I wanted power."

"Correct," Blaise said. "I said, at the time, that I looked forward to seeing how your answers changed in the future. I think that time has come. So tell me, Winter. Why are you here?"

"Because it's where I was meant to be," I said dully. "Because there's a plan for me, isn't there? There was always a plan for me. And this is the next thing that needs to happen for that plan."

"Are you happy?"

"No," I said. "I'm not. The game is rigged, isn't it? I try and I try, but I can't get anywhere. I do my best, but it's never good enough. I know I did something wrong, but when I look back at it, I don't know what I should have done differently." I swallowed hard, more out of habit than anything. I didn't need to breathe, and I couldn't cry if I wanted to. "I never meant it to be like this," I said. "I...I didn't mean for any of this to happen, but somehow I'm so far down this road that I can't go back."

He nodded. "And tell me, do you desire power?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Damn me, I do."

"Things have changed, it would seem," Blaise said. His voice was calm and dispassionate, an observer with no particular care for what he saw.

"Everything has changed," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Come. I have answers for you. You will not like them, I think, but I have them." He started walking off through the sparse trees, not looking back.

I followed. I wasn't sure what else to do.

Chapter Three

"I don't understand," I said, hurrying after Blaise. "What do you even want from me? Why did you do this?"

He was silent for a moment, long enough that I wasn't sure he was going to answer. "In chess," he said at last, "a skilled player doesn't set out to achieve a single goal. He doesn't move a piece with the expectation of a specific accomplishment. The game is too complex for that, you see? Focusing too strongly on a single possibility is a trap. The better choice is to develop the piece in a way such that no matter what course the game takes, you have the advantage. The same principle applies here."

"You aren't going to give me a straight answer, are you?"

I could barely see Blaise's face in profile, but I thought I could see him smile. "Answering that question clearly would require me to explain a number of things," he said. "Most of which it isn't my place to explain."

I sighed. "Of course not," I said. "Okay, then. What *did* you want to say?"

"As I understand it, you're looking for the man called Hunter," he said. "In which case it behooves all of us for you to understand something of his history. Who he is, what he's done."

"All right," I said. "Go ahead."

"The man now called Hunter was born in what is now northern China," he said. "I do not know what name he was born under; it is very possible that no one does. Certainly he has been called Hunter, in one language or another, for far longer than he used that name. Assigning an age to someone who has traveled so extensively in areas where the flow of time is...inconsistent is pointless, but what can be said with confidence is that he was born slightly less than two thousand years ago, during the collapse of the Han dynasty in the area."

Chinese history wasn't my strongest suit. But even I knew about that. "That was a bad time," I said.

"Yes," Blaise agreed. He'd stopped walking, and we were now standing still in a small grove of trees. I smelled magic, and realized that we were standing in the center of a ring of mushrooms, one which was acting as the anchor of a warding spell. I didn't think that was a coincidence. "It was a very bad time. With the collapse of imperial authority, the region was the site of a prolonged civil war between warlords seeking to claim power. For those, like him, who lived in the contested area, it was a period of extreme violence."

"He grew up in a warzone," I said.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Blaise nodded. "It's during that time that he started using the name Hunter," he said. "Though he was already an adult by that point, and seems to have already been actively practicing magic for several years. He began killing bandits, deserters, and other threats to the area in which he lived. His power is considerable, and even without formal training, he was difficult to overcome without access to comparable magic. As such, it became easier for people to simply seek easier targets, and leave that village alone."

"Wait," I said. "He just set himself up as some kind of vigilante? And nobody stopped him?"

"No one was in a position to do so," he said. "The political structure, as I said, was in disarray at the time. A number of mage clans were already well established, but they didn't yet have the degree of influence they do now—in fact, at the time a number of the largest were at war with each other. The gods hadn't yet issued their decree against overt demonstration of the supernatural in the mortal world. In short, there was no one with both the motivation and the ability to stop him."

I frowned. It was...hard to conceptualize things being like that. Though I supposed that made sense. This all happened so long ago it might as well have been in another world. "Okay," I said. "Go on."

"It was around that time that he first accessed the Otherside. I have suspicions as to who showed him how to do this...but in the end, that's all they are. But that does mark the major turning point in his life, and also, regrettably, is why I am explaining this to you. He stumbled into Faerie, having no notion of what the location was, what the rules of the domain were, or how to survive there. He might have been simply another of the many, many such people to die in that way. However, before that happened, I found him."

"Wait," I said. "Just wait one second. You—you *personally*—are the reason that bastard's still around?"

"Yes," he said simply.

"Okay then," I said. "Well, that's one that'll haunt you, huh?"

Blaise didn't respond to that, but then, I didn't really expect him to. "Hunter is a very passionate man," he said instead. "Every now and then a human comes along with a passion, and the charisma to draw other people into that dream, without them even knowing why they follow. The sort of person who can walk up to an army specifically sent to stop him, and tell them to kill him if they liked, and end up still alive with an army following him. Hunter is that sort of man."

I groaned. "Just what I needed," I muttered. "The rest of it wasn't enough. Oh no. He had to be a bloody Napoleon too."

Blaise smiled thinly. "In any case," he said. "The man was unusual, and had a talent for the manipulation of space. I was curious and had no pressing obligations at the time, so I took him as a

protégé of sorts, and showed him things. He was an apt student. But there were aspects of his personality which I found troubling, and within a year I had ceased to have any interaction with him."

"And then the Conclave happened," I guessed.

He nodded. "They were not a political entity at the time," he said. "Unlike most of the clans at the time, they weren't united by a shared geographic origin, political ambition, or religious dogma. The original Conclave was, instead, united by a shared desire to study how the world functions. They were researchers, essentially, and they were among the most brilliant minds in human history."

"Do you mean in terms of studying magic?" I asked. "Or were they just geniuses in general? The prehistoric equivalent of Leonardo and Einstein?"

"Some of both," Blaise said. "And a few people who weren't as gifted, but kept the rest working together. At first, it had seemed as though it was working. They made great strides in numerous areas of magical theory. Walker streamlined the design of direct Otherside portals and popularized their use; Maker introduced principles of design that are still in use."

"But it couldn't last," I said. I wasn't guessing this time. I had an idea of how this story ended, after all.

Blaise was quiet again, for a long time. "No," he said at last. "It couldn't. The collapse started with Healer. She had been experimenting with life and death, attempting to transcend the boundary between the two states. Some of the Conclave were of the opinion that this was an area which they shouldn't be investigating, that it was going too far. When her research ended in disaster—her experiment escaped, Healer herself apparently dead—they took it as a sign that their initial objection had been correct. The others saw this reluctance as a violation of the initial goals of the group. It seemed that this split would drive them apart entirely."

"And then along came Hunter," I said. "The charismatic visionary who could breathe new life into the organization and bring them back together."

"Precisely," Blaise said. "He was a natural addition to the group. A genuinely brilliant man, and interested in many of the same things. His research into the structure of Otherside domains and the nature of spatial dimensions was not unrelated to the work that Walker and Namer were doing. Some of them were concerned that what he was doing was, in its own way, as much an exploration of topics better left alone as Healer's, but at least for the moment, it seemed that he was a worthy addition."

"But then he went too far," I said. "Which can't have been an accident. You don't reach the outer limits of the Otherside by accident. He was looking for something, wasn't he?"

"In truth I don't know what drove him to that," Blaise said. "I expect there were numerous factors at play. What's certain is that he found the plain at the edge of the void, which is something that

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

very few people have ever managed on their own. He found the void, and he managed some degree of understanding of it."

"Okay," I said. "All of that makes sense. But what did he do to piss off the fae? From what I've heard he has some connection to you, and I think I heard something about him causing the Sidhe Courts to split up."

"He summoned something from the void into Faerie." Blaise's void was very flat and harsh. "It was put down quickly, but it was still a transgression. The factions among the Sidhe had already existed at that time—they were divided on a great many things. You might think of it as having been something like political parties; there wasn't a single thing that defined either side, but the two had been in competition for so long that they had accumulated an enormous number of differences. Hunter's actions were merely the final straw."

"What were the stances?" I asked, more out of idle curiosity than anything. I didn't think that it would really be important, but exactly what the distinction was between the Daylight and Midnight Courts was something that I'd wondered for ages.

"The faction which became the Unseelie Court was in favor of eradicating humanity," he said, without any particular emotion. "As punishment for that offense, and to prevent similar actions from being taken in the future. The Seelie Court was not."

I blinked. That was...rather chilling, really. If the vote had gone slightly differently, the whole world could have been killed by faeries for the crime of one man, when none of them even knew who he was. They could do it, too. Hell, if the Courts agreed and put their full forces behind the war effort, they could probably wipe out humanity *now*. Two thousand years ago, with the population so much smaller, and weapons so much less advanced? It wouldn't even have been a fight.

"Following that event, the Courts gave the Conclave an ultimatum, backed by divine authority," Blaise said. "They would do no further research in that field, would prevent anyone else from doing similar research. Or their entire species would be wiped out of existence, without mercy or exception. That ultimatum was what caused them to become a regulatory group, eventually leading to the current political structure among the clans."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "Okay, that's...that's pretty huge. It's going to take me a while to process all of that."

Blaise smiled and said nothing.

"It does leave the big question open, though," I said. "Where is he now?"

"I don't know," Blaise said calmly. "And if I did, the information wouldn't help you. Hunter has a facility for travel which few people can match, and a list of enemies which includes some of the most personally powerful beings in existence. He doesn't stay in one place for long."

"How am I supposed to find him, then?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," he said, with an enigmatic smile. "He'll find you."

Blaise vanished before I could start cursing.

Chapter Four

The funny thing, in the aftermath of that distinctly ominous conversation, was how much things hadn't changed. There was still work to do. There were financial matters to settle out with Tindr, diplomatic messages that I needed to respond to, treaty negotiations with some rakshasa lord in Manhattan who wanted an ally. I wasn't sure about that last one, but apparently he was politically opposed to the faction of rakshasas I'd fought in the past, and the offer was probably legitimate. The treaty was still a complex issue, though, and the negotiations were not a trivial task.

In short, there were things to do. Even with my best friend dead, my life in pieces and the world falling apart around me, the day-to-day tasks of my normal life still had to be taken care of.

I supposed that was both the greatest kindness and most ironic cruelty life had to offer. It went on.

The next two days, then, passed with relative normalcy. I even had to pass judgment on a few people, since I'd been putting it off for a while now. There were fewer people requesting me to settle their problems as a legal authority than there had been—with the supernatural out in the open it was much easier to take that kind of thing to a regular court. But there were still things that were too hard to explain, and there were people that didn't want to settle their issues in the courts, and so I still had to keep up on it to some extent.

It wasn't particularly difficult or dramatic work, though. In a way I wished it was. More challenging work would have demanded my attention, forced me to focus on what I was doing. It would have kept me from dwelling on how badly I'd screwed up, or how very far in over my head I was. It was hard to drive those thoughts out when I had nothing much to replace them with.

It was, as a result, almost a relief when Selene knocked on the office door and walked in with Kimiko beside her. "Someone to see you, jarl," she said, rather unnecessarily, and then turned and left.

"Kimiko," I said, setting aside a report Luna had compiled on the budget shortcomings of Keeper facilities in Europe. "What's up?"

The kitsune looked at me and smiled. "It's been a while," she said. "I like the new look, by the way. Very...cool."

I eyed her for a moment. She was smirking, and cracking bad puns, but it felt somehow...hollow. More like she was trying to keep up her normal facade of the happy-go-lucky kitsune with a cheesy sense of humor than like she was genuinely amused. She had a pretty good mask, but I'd spent a lot of time around Aiko. I was intimately familiar with that particular act.

I supposed that even someone like Kimiko might have gotten worn down recently. Life had a way of doing that to a person, and the past few months had been worse than most for that.

But everyone had their own way of dealing with it. So rather than point it out, I just said, "That was a bad one, even for you. You here for yourself, or for Kikuchi?"

"Kikuchi, I'm afraid," she said. "And it's not good news."

I sighed. "Of course it isn't," I said. "Go ahead."

"It's a bit of a long story," she said. "But with what the story is, I think you'll appreciate brevity, so here's the short version. The Daylight Court knows you're in charge of this city, and they've decided to make that an issue. They're coming to take you out, in force."

The room was silent for around three or four seconds. I was once again reflecting on just how badly I'd screwed up. I wasn't sure what was occupying her thoughts.

"How do you know about this?" I asked at last.

"They approached us asking for us to pitch in, and we'd get the city after you were out." After a brief but extremely tense pause, she added, "We said no."

I started to let out my breath, and then realized that I wasn't really holding it. "Okay," I said. "That's some relief. Though...I'm guessing I already know the answer to this, but I have to ask. Is there any chance you'd help me out on this?"

"We'd like to," she said frankly. "And that's straight from the bossman. We like you, we like our arrangement. We've worked together to mutual benefit. But this is different from helping you take out a threat, or remove a destabilizing influence. This is a conflict in the war between the Sidhe Courts, and that's not a fight that we can afford to take sides in."

I nodded. "Okay," I said. "That's about what I was expecting."

"For what it's worth, we do hope that you'll win," Kimiko said. "We hope that we can continue our current arrangement. But we will not and cannot take a stance in official Court affairs."

"No, I completely understand," I said. "Thanks for telling me."

"Not a problem at all," she said. "I won't take any more of your time." She started to leave, then paused. "Um," she said, sounding horribly uncomfortable. "While I'm here, though...how's my cousin?"

I was silent for a long moment before answering that. "Aiko's alive," I said at last, choosing my words carefully. "She's...uninjured, to my knowledge. She's feeling a bit stressed about the new job, but it's in line with her talents, and it seems she'll be successful enough."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Ah," Kimiko said. "So it's like that, is it?"

I sighed. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah, it is."

"Thanks," she said, and then walked out the door.

I wasn't sure what to do about that revelation, how to react or plan. I couldn't take another minute of sitting in that office struggling with the problem, though, so I ended up taking to the streets, going for a walk and trying to force my thoughts into a coherent order.

It was hard, harder than it should have been. It felt like I was thinking through fog, with everything tumbling down around me. I couldn't focus, couldn't stop thinking about my own failures and shortcomings. Snowflake, I thought, could have snapped me out of that...but that wasn't a possibility, and that was a part of why I was such a mess in the first place.

So I went for a walk, because activity was always what I had used to soothe my thoughts and cope with the frustration of not knowing what to do.

The streets were dark, and cold, and empty. It wasn't midnight, but around three in the morning, the time that feels more like midnight than midnight does. The night owls and barflies and office workers staying late had drifted to their beds, the early-morning commuters hadn't yet risen from theirs. It left the streets empty of all but maintenance workers and delivery trucks and outcasts rejected from every other hour of the day. The wind howled a low, lonely drone through scrawny trees and between the buildings. A scrawny homeless man shivered and shifted in his sleep, trying to find a warmer place beneath a threadbare wool blanket from the surplus store.

The hour of the wolf, I'd heard it called. The long, lonely hour of the night, when doubt preys on the mind and it seems the dawn will never come.

It seemed appropriate.

I walked away from the mansion and towards the city center, slowly, my only accompaniment a wavering, uncertain shadow and the *tap-tap-tap* of my footsteps on the asphalt. A delivery truck passed me, carrying goods to the supermarkets for the city to consume.

I wasn't worried about an attack. Not yet. The Daylight Court had that name for a *reason*, even if they hadn't when they first split off from the Midnight Court. They would not attack in the night, not without a very good reason. It gave me a few hours to work out a plan.

Not many. Not enough.

I needed to do something, that much seemed obvious, undeniable. But I had no notion of what to do.

I couldn't simply stand and fight. Even with all the power I'd gained, that wasn't a viable option. They knew what I was capable of; they would come with enough force to overwhelm me. In all probability there would be a champion of the Courts with them, either Aodh or my newly appointed counterpart, whoever that might be.

I couldn't ask Aiko for help. Or, rather, I could, but it would achieve nothing. The Courts existed in balance; an action by one was met with reaction from the other, by necessity. If Aiko sent troops to support me, the Daylight Court would send a comparable force. If she came herself, it seemed very likely that Aoife would come to balance her power. The net effect would be no help to me, and potentially far more collateral damage.

I could gather together my allies. I could call in every debt I was owed, every favor I could beg, borrow, or steal. I could bring in every shady character that owed me a solid, every thug whose weapons could be rented for the day, every friend that would come to help bail me out. Between them, they could tip the balance. But some of them would die. And Hunter was out there, coming my way, an implacable and threatening *force* that made the Daylight Court's attack seem like a pleasant diversion by comparison. I couldn't afford to throw away any resource that I might need against him.

Or I could run.

My feet, without my conscious guidance, had carried me along a familiar route. I didn't notice at first, but then I became aware of a nagging sense of familiarity, and then I realized where I was.

There wasn't much to show it. The scars the fire had left on the earth were mostly gone now, and what was left was buried under a thin coat of snow. If you didn't know better, you might not guess that a structure had ever stood on this spot.

But I knew. I remembered that tired old cabin, built long before I had been born. I remembered long evenings spent reading in front of the fireplace. I remembered cooking for Aiko, and then laughing at her expression and ordering takeout instead. I remembered playing board games with Kyra. I remembered Snowflake, just a puppy then, catching her first mouse. She dropped it on the floor at my feet and flopped down next to it, looking up at me with bright blue eyes and a silly grin.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, lost in a reverie. I was jolted out of it when I felt a brush against my mind, familiar without being quite recognizable—not unlike seeing the face of an old friend who used to be close, but whom you haven't seen for years.

I saw him a moment later, tan coat fading to grey at the muzzle, ears perked up eagerly. The coyote remembered me too, it would seem. I'd shared his mind, a lifetime ago in a different world. I'd given him food and scratched his ears. We'd been friends, in our way.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Now he was grey around the muzzle, and he walked with a limp, a momentary hitch in his stride that suggested arthritis or something like it. One ear was halfway gone, torn off raggedly in a fight with some competitor.

He remembered me, though, and walked over to me with every suggestion of being glad to see me. He sat down a short distance away and looked at me, head cocked inquisitively to one side.

"Sorry, buddy," I mumbled, knowing that he couldn't understand the words. "No food tonight."

He whined softly, as though to say that was okay, and then leaned a little closer. I scratched gently at his ears, the fur coarse under my frozen fingers.

A few moments passed, and then he stood and trotted off, going to find his dinner elsewhere. He shot me one last glance over his shoulder, and then kept going.

I sent one last mental feeling, an impression of best wishes and valediction. It felt very final, somehow.

Then I turned and walked away.

I knew where I was going now, though my feet were still moving on autopilot. I felt more like I was observing my actions than controlling them, like I was a stranger in my own body. I could feel a thought, a feeling, brewing somewhere in my mind. I couldn't quite put a word to it yet, though, couldn't get a grasp on it; it was still too unformed for that.

Time passed without thinking, one footstep following the next without an active decision.

The shop I'd worked at with Val, and then briefly without him. I'd done so much here. I'd made things, learned things. The shop had gotten me through a very dark place in my life, after I'd killed Catherine. Now it was closed down, the windows boarded up; a notice in the window said the building was condemned. There were weeds growing in the parking lot, graffiti on the walls. It seemed like no one had been there for a long time now.

The abandoned garage where I was given Tyrfing, and accepted without knowing what it meant. It was gone, nothing left but the scars of the fire.

I wasn't sure when Val had left town. We hadn't spoken for years, I thought. I supposed that I never really forgave him for giving me Tyrfing, for not telling me what I was doing when I took the cursed sword.

A small house in a bad neighborhood, which had once been woven through with magic to keep prying eyes away. It had been my lab for a time, and then it had been the anchor for a mansion housed in another world. It was gone, had been gone for a long time now, since the first time I ever saw a

creature summoned forth from the void. The debris had been cleared since then, but no new building had been put in to replace it, and the vacant lot stood out like a gap where a tooth used to be.

It was funny how much I missed Katie, when I looked at that. I knew that she needed to die, by the end. She and Mike had gone too far to save. And yet...she meant well. She had good intentions. I knew that she was trying to do the right thing. But she said "help me" and I said "I'm sorry" and in the end, that was what mattered, wasn't it?

Mohammed's house, in a nicer neighborhood near the college. The windows were broken, the door sagging drunkenly from one hinge. It smelled like booze and piss and soot. Looters, it would seem.

Kyra's house, further west, towards the edge of the city. It had been damaged in the wildfire, in the chaos after Loki's broadcast. It had never been a nice house, but now it was far worse, parts chewed away by flames before the tengu got it put out. The wind swirled through the building, carrying with it the light rain that had begun to fall. I could smell rot from inside the husk of the house, water damage and mildew and decay.

It seemed we weren't as close as we'd once been. I wasn't sure when I'd spoken to Kyra last, either. I hadn't even told her about Snowflake yet. It wasn't like things between me and Mohammed—there was no final argument, no unforgivable offense. We'd just...drifted apart, over the years.

Pryce's, seeming unchanged. The unmarked building still had plenty of cars parked outside, plenty of business.

He'd never really rescinded my ban. I'd been there since then, a time or two, for meetings. But only for business, for important meetings and discussions. I wasn't a welcome visitor there, and I knew it. I didn't go in.

Hours had gone by, now. The sky was starting to grow pale in the east, the first suggestions of the coming dawn. If I were still human, still *alive*, I'd have been getting hungry, sleepy, tired. I wasn't, and I kept walking, visiting smaller places now, less significant.

Here, the hotel room where I'd told Olivia I'd set her free, and then I'd stabbed her and watched her bleed her life out onto the floor. I walked past the receptionist like I belonged there and went straight to the room—I still remembered which one it had been. They'd cleaned, or probably remodeled. There wasn't so much as a stain on the carpet.

Here, the restaurant Aiko and I had gone to on our first real date, a Mexican place. We'd both played pranks on each other, me with habaneros and her with hallucinogens. Now the building was dark and empty, a sign announcing that it was available for lease.

Here, the park where I'd talked with Erin before we'd agreed that Catherine needed to die, way back when. I made the call and she did the deed with a sedative and a knife. We killed her to keep a secret which, now, everyone knew anyway.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

The funny thing was that I never really meant to be here. In Colorado Springs. I'd only come to this city because Conn suggested it as a place I could go to school, and I had no idea what I should do with my life. I'd stayed afterwards because I had the shop, and some friends, and I still didn't know what to do. Living here had just become a matter of habit.

Life was funny that way. Sometimes the most important choices were things that you didn't realize were choices at all. Sometimes things just...happened.

And then, inevitably, I wound up where I'd known I would.

The wreckage had mostly been cleared long before the world as we knew it fell apart. But the crater wasn't so easy to deal with, and in the end they'd left it more or less alone, with a plaque at the edge commemorating the people who'd been killed in the blast.

It was a large plaque. Something like twenty thousand names, even written in a small font, took up a lot of space. There was a blank space at the end, too, for anyone else who might be identified. There had been thousands more who couldn't be identified, or who nobody had known.

Past that plaque was nothing but the crater. A gash in the world, a hundred yards across and just as deep, carved out of the earth and burned to black glass. The result of a god's power being unleashed, for just a moment, on a world which hadn't been built to withstand such an assault.

My fault. This had happened because of my mistakes. Close to thirty thousand deaths on my hands.

I stood and looked out over the crater for a long while.

I never really meant to be the jarl of the city. It wasn't a deliberate choice. It had been something I agreed to out of necessity, and then kept doing because there was never a good time to quit. If someone had asked, the day I took the job, whether I wanted to leave it, I wouldn't have hesitated on my way out the door.

Since then, things had gotten complicated.

What would happen if I did just cut and run, I wondered? What would the fallout of that choice be?

The Daylight Court would almost certainly lose interest in the place. It was important to them only because my presence made it a playing piece in the eternal war between the Courts; lacking that, it was just another mortal city.

My organization, though, would fall apart. I'd cobbled them together from jöttnar and ghouls, demons and werewolves and mages and plain old human beings. They got along, but I knew damned well that they were all my minions, personally. Without me to hold them together, the arrangement

would fall apart. Some of them would follow me to wherever I went next, most likely; others would continue about their lives, go their own way. There wasn't anyone else who could hold them together and keep them here to protect the city's fragile peace.

None of the other groups in the city could handle it, either. The Guards were spread too thin as it was. Kikuchi's interests were elsewhere, in the mountain and the Otherside; he couldn't maintain a strong presence in the city proper as well. None of the factions of independents was strong enough, and the werewolves lacked any kind of organization beyond mine. With Katrin's death I'd ripped the heart out of the vampires, and the ones that were left had neither the power nor the organization to rule the city.

If I left, this city would be as badly off as any other right now. Worse, maybe. With a large population, a relatively intact infrastructure, and no major groups claiming it, it would be too tempting of a target to pass on. The last time that had happened, before I took power, it had almost torn the city to pieces, and that was when things were much better to start with.

And then there was another consideration, too.

This city had some ugly memories. There was no denying that. Bad things had happened here. I'd made mistakes, I'd lost friends. And even the good things, in a lot of cases, were gone now.

But it was still home. I'd lived here for the entirety of my adult life. Even when I'd been staying in other countries, or other dimensions, Colorado Springs had been the center of my activity. I had too many memories, too much history, here to walk away now.

This was my city.

I took a deep breath and let it out, slow and quiet. And then, as the sun was just beginning to crest the horizon, I turned and started walking back to the mansion.

I had work to do.

Chapter Five

I had to admit, I was fairly impressed looking over the group of people that I'd assembled for this fight. As I'd often noted, it's one thing to know that a group is scary and badass, but it's another thing entirely to *see* it. This was just the first time I'd been on the good side of that feeling.

I'd known that I was assembling a pretty serious organization, and that I had an even more impressive network of contacts and favors that were owed to me. I never really saw them all at once, though, never called in most of those favors. Between that and the fact that my mind had taken a bit to catch up to reality, I still thought of myself as the underdog, the upstart.

Now, with an army that could put most of the ones I'd fought to shame, it was hard not to adjust that view.

The core of it was my own minions, of course. The housecarls were acting as a combination of shock troops and front line—tough, heavily armed thugs that could take a beating, and a handful of elite troops to step in when necessary. The ghouls, led by Jibril, made up most of the rest of the front line, since they were just so damn resilient that not much would kill them.

That was the core. But there were a *lot* of other groups with some representation there.

The first, and most numerous, were the fae. Aiko had sent a small but significant contingent of them, and while they were small by the standards of Court battles, they were pretty damn numerous compared to the scale I was used to working on. There were trolls and ogres to provide bulk, rusalki and pixies for less overt tasks, even a few sylphs to provide aerial support. The leader of that group was an armored Sidhe officer in gleaming violet armor who introduced himself as Lackland and smiled in a slightly odd manner, petting the hilt of a crystalline rapier.

Then there were the independents. I'd been in this town for a long time, and before I'd been a jarl I'd been one of the crowd of unaffiliated small fish that made up the supernatural underclass. I'd stayed on good terms after that, and then when things fell apart, I'd made a concerted effort to get on their good side. Some of them had outright signed on with me, but there were plenty more that that wanted their independence more than stability and a steady paycheck, some of whom were willing to help in a pinch. They were the auxiliaries, not as trained or experienced as some, but with some bizarre abilities that were hard to prepare for. In a lot of ways, they were my wild card.

The Inquisition was...well, it wasn't there. Not really. Most of them were dead now. But the ones who were left were there. Brick was gone—the Watchers were spread too thinly for him to still be in the city as my liaison—but the rest were all with me now, even Mac. What they lacked in numbers they made up for in power, experience, and sheer insanity.

Similarly, David and his Guards weren't terribly numerous. But they were frighteningly powerful, well equipped, and had a decent idea of what they were doing.

I'd been a bit surprised how easy it was to get them to pitch in on my side, really. I'd been concerned that they would be unwilling to take sides on this. But apparently I'd built up more goodwill with them than I'd realized, and David was spinning this attack as a threat to the stability of the city in general rather than to me specifically.

Did they know who they were helping? Who they'd fought with, briefly? Probably, I was guessing. David knew, and given that Razor specialized in improving her own attention to detail it was a sucker's bet that she'd caught on. Crimson had been there when I recruited the creature she summoned up from Limbo, and that creature was with me now, which was a bit of a giveaway. With that many informed, I was guessing the rest had been told or guessed.

But they were here now, and that was what mattered. Crimson had two minions with her already, one a little shapeless blob of light that I couldn't put a name to, the other a small brownie from Faerie. The rest of them were holding guns, or magic, or both.

The next group was almost even more unexpected. Jackal and her crew of outcasts, the half-breeds and changelings and things that didn't quite fit into neat categories, had come when I called. I recognized a few of them. There was Jackal, holding a crude knife as ugly as she was, who nodded and rasped, "Good luck." Blackcap, with her delicate beauty and quiet voice, smiled at me and showed needle-sharp teeth. And, as far from the rest as she could get while still being a part of the same group, Ash Sanguinaria was holding her patchwork stuffed cat and waiting.

I stopped when I saw her. "What are you doing here?" I asked

She smiled slightly and stroked the head of the stuffed animal, which twitched slightly. The rajju wasn't being shy, it seemed. "I am doing what I can," she said.

"You know I can't protect you here," I said. "And neither can he. Not with things on this scale."

"I know," she sighed. "We all take risks, Winter. I know what I'm risking here, and I choose to do it anyway."

"How did you even know to come here?"

"I hear things," she said simply. "I heard that you were in a position where you required assistance, and I recalled that you were acquainted with Jackal, so she seemed to be a reasonable way avenue by which to reach you."

"Ah," I said. "That makes sense." I paused, then said, "Thank you."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Aw, just get going," the raiju said, in a voice that had just a bit of crackling static under the surface. "You don't have time to waste."

That seemed like a reasonable assumption, and I had nothing left to say anyway. So I went.

The next group I had to check in on were the humans. I had quite a few of them with me, minions of mine or Pellegrini's thugs or independent mercenaries I knew. All of them were armed, heavily, with a mixture of automatic weapons and sniper rifles, some armored vehicles with mounted machine guns, some grenades and demolitions charges. They were the best people I had for taking enemies down at range.

And finally, there were the people that didn't fit neatly into any other category. The thing Crimson had brought from Limbo, lurking on a nearby rooftop feeding her pet lizard-thing. The humanoid wolf I'd seen in the Wild Hunt, a few times now. A couple of werewolves that were part of my usual gang of thugs (though not Kyra or Anna; this was too brutal, too nasty, to bring them into). Selene, and around half a dozen other demons from Hell that were there to back me up for one reason or another. There was even a kappa there, and a trio of kitsune who I didn't know—Kikuchi might not be there officially, but apparently he was willing to pull some strings.

All told, I had close to three hundred people there, ready to fight for me and what I represented. It was a staggering number. To say that this was a larger engagement than I'd ever really been in charge of before was a bit of an understatement. Then again, knowing that so many people were counting on me—that they really *believed* we could do this—was a sobering realization. It was a lot of pressure, and I wasn't at all confident that I could live up to the expectation.

I had to try, though. And that meant that I had to do everything I could to win this thing.

In some ways, the hardest part was organizing the whole mess. With so many different groups that I was trying to weld into a coherent whole, at least for a little while, coordination and organization was challenging to say the least.

I wasn't sure how Tindr and Selene had managed to split that army out and coordinate all the individual groups. I wasn't sure how they'd managed to get every squad a couple of radios to keep them in communication with the command group. I could only assume that it had taken a minor miracle to get iron weapons and armor to everyone that could use it.

But somehow they'd managed it, and now everyone was parceled out around the city. We had no idea where the Daylight forces would start their assault, which meant that we had to be ready to respond anywhere in the city. So there were individual groups spaced out through the whole city, all connected by radio communications and ready to act in unison. Frishberg was using her influence to keep the police out of things, and while we couldn't manage a legal state of emergency, word of mouth was enough to get most of the people off the streets for a while.

In short, we had things ready. There was nothing left to do but wait.

The Daylight Court, unsurprisingly, attacked at noon. They used permanent Ways rather than direct portals; the first indication of the attack was when people started appearing out of nowhere. It was well-coordinated, with eight different groups showing up within ten seconds of each other all around the city.

Within seconds, we started getting reports from around the city, as various teams reported on the enemy's number, location, armament, and behavior. I mostly ignored that; I could see them myself. I was about as diffused as I'd ever been, spread through dozens of animals, snowdrifts, and patches of shadow. One or another of them had an angle on every one of the enemy units. A large, freestanding mirror in the throne room of the mansion displayed the images I was seeing, something like a streaming video from a bunch of security cameras.

Once I was satisfied that I'd seen as much as I was going to, I brought myself back together and assembled a crude body out of ice in the throne room. "Hold fire," I said, as soon as I had a working set of pseudo-lungs.

Kyi nodded sharply and spoke into the radio. I wasn't giving the orders myself, not directly; too hard to keep track of a radio when I was hopping between bodies, and I didn't know the details of the troop arrangements as precisely as Kyi did. "Hold fire," she said. "Repeat, hold fire."

I waited for around ten seconds, then said, "Snipers ready."

"Sniper teams three, six, seven, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, eighteen, and nineteen," she said instantly. "Ready to fire on my signal. Repeat, ready to fire."

I waited a few more beats, and then said, "Fire."

The fae are powerful. There's no argument about that. Nobody in their right mind would cross them lightly. They're numerous, individually powerful, in many cases incredibly experienced. Individually, the fae are dangerous. As a group, they're far worse. You need a hell of an impressive attack to even faze them.

Fourteen trained marksmen using high-powered rifles firing steel-jacketed armor piercing rounds was enough to make an impression.

"They're dropping," a cool, calm voice said over the radio, speaking loudly to be heard over the gunshots. "And they see us, right. Sniper team eleven withdrawing. Wait, what's that? Oh shi—"

The voice cut off, interrupted by the sounds of fire. That was in turn followed by static, and then silence.

And as quickly as that, the battle was joined.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I wanted to fight. I wanted very much to go out and fight myself. And I could have, too. My side had some very skilled fighters on it, but there was no real question that I was the most personally dangerous one we had. I could have tipped the scales of any of the individual conflicts.

But that wasn't my job here. I was the guy in charge, command and control. I was more valuable calling the shots and coordinating our efforts than just going out and cutting people down. Not to mention that there was a very good chance this was just the opening salvo, the Daylight Court feeling us out. They would have worse to come, and we couldn't afford to waste resources on this.

So I sent people out to fight and die for me, and all I could do was watch it happen. I couldn't do much, but I could at least bear witness to what was happening.

The snipers had provided a very strong opening, as high explosive armor-piercing rounds ripped into the enemy ranks. But as the fate of team eleven had proven, they could only get off a couple of shots each before they had to move or risk a devastating counterattack. There were plenty of Daylight forces still standing.

The first group to engage them directly was on the western side of the city, just north of the territory claimed by Kikuchi. Dozens of Daylight trolls and faerie hounds were there, led by a Sidhe knight on a silver horse. They started setting fire to buildings within a few seconds of showing up.

That was a bad sign. I hadn't been sure how they would treat the residents of the city, whether they'd consider them to be civilians or the fact that I claimed to be their jarl was enough to make them fair game in the war between the Courts. If they opened with casual arson, that was a bit suggestive that this wasn't going to be a clean fight without collateral damage.

They didn't make it far before one of my squads was on them. That one was composed mostly of jötnar, bellowing giants with steel weapons and armor, backed by a smaller number of humans with guns.

The first sign of their presence was when the flames went out, smothered by the cold brought by a dozen jötnar. The second was a hail of automatic gunfire that killed the horse and half a dozen of the hounds.

The Sidhe leapt easily off the dying horse and landed on his feet, nimble as a cat. "Good," he said, smiling and drawing a silver sword from his belt. "I was wondering whether you would put up a fight at all."

Kjaran's response was, predictably, swift, brutal, and silent. He bound his sword with the Sidhe's, and brought the steel-wrapped edge of his shield around into the faerie's head. The Sidhe staggered to the side, his expression one of pain and shock, and didn't recover before Kjaran ran him through.

From there the fight devolved into chaos, but it was obvious who had the edge. The fae were disorganized and surprised, and they were fighting a disciplined group of fighters as strong as they were and armed with steel.

The fight was short, and bloody. Not one of the giants fell.

In the north, the snipers had a more dramatic effect. That group of Daylight soldiers had had the poor luck to step out of a Way in an open park that was directly between two sniper teams, and between them they'd made mincemeat out of the fae. Even an ogre fell when half a dozen armor piercing rounds hit it in less than ten seconds.

They didn't just stand there and take it, of course. But it took them a few seconds to figure out that they were under attack. They weren't accustomed to guns, or explosives; those weapons didn't generally *work* in Faerie. Once they did catch on, they picked one of the teams and ran at them, moving faster than gnomes had any right to. Those legs were short, but they were bloody *fast*.

Unfortunately for them, reacting quickly isn't the same thing as reacting well. I was guessing they were panicky, caught by surprise and with their ogre already dead. It was, perhaps, forgivable.

That didn't change the fact that they ran straight into a group of Pellegrini's troubleshooters. A pair of fragmentation grenades, loaded with iron shrapnel, was enough to finish that group off.

In the east, out at the very edge of the city, the coverage got a bit thinner. It was far from the mansion, which was the center of my organization in more than just a metaphorical sense. Not only that, but there just wasn't much *out* there. It was the part of town that was all open plains from there to Kansas, with no real geographic features or major buildings.

There were no snipers to take on that Daylight assault team. Between the generally thin coverage in that area and the lack of good hiding places, it had seemed like a poor location to assign snipers to.

As such, they got more time to rampage than most of them. There were trolls in that group as well, dryads that looked like humanoid trees, even a few salamanders. They were capable of some pretty impressive damage.

They said that the Daylight Court was...not *good*, precisely, but more benevolent than the Midnight Court.

That might be true, but somehow I didn't think it was much consolation to the civilians that group caught.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Within a few minutes, though, Jackal's crew had caught up to them.

Unlike most of the people I'd recruited for this, they didn't fight as a unit. They weren't coordinated at all. There were nine of them, and once they showed up there were nine individual fights going on. It was hectic and chaotic, and even as a passive observer, I could barely keep up with what was happening.

There was Jackal herself, so fast she was just a blur as she tackled them with her knife. Blackcap's demeanor was completely changed. The only time we'd spoken, I remembered her being shy and withdrawn, speaking with a stutter if at all. Now she was singing a sweet, haunting melody as she cracked skulls and tore trolls limb from limb with her bare hands.

And there was Ash, with a knife I'd given her a long time ago in one hand and some subtle magic wrapped around the other. She mostly just stood still, expression sad, as the raiju shredded and electrocuted things all around her.

The fight lasted for around a minute, and when it passed the ground was covered in blood and sap and ashes. Not all of the dead were from the Daylight Court. There were three of Jackal's crew that I didn't recognize who weren't moving.

But they won.

Not far southeast of the mansion, a more mixed group had turned things into a running battle through the streets with a group of mounted fae that looked suspiciously familiar. It took a moment for me to realize that while they weren't the Wild Hunt, they looked too similar to that group for it to be a coincidence. It wouldn't surprise me if I'd seen some of them there before.

Without the power of the Hunt, though, they were struggling to catch their prey. Fae horses and hounds were far more than their mortal counterparts, but they were chasing cars through twisty streets that they didn't know very well.

And this quarry was one hell of an awkward one to chase. Half a dozen cars, weaving through the streets like only someone who'd lived in this city for years could, trading places and changing directions...even watching from the outside, following what was happening was not an easy thing to do. Then they were throwing iron caltrops out behind them, taking potshots whenever they went in a straight line for more than a few moments.

Some of the cars were carrying more...unusual payloads, too. The independent crowd in the city had needed to get creative to survive this long without the backing of a major power, and it showed. The odd magics were just the beginning. There were nets, clouds of iron filings and high-power fans, some sort of grease slick...it seemed like every twist and turn brought a new and dangerous obstacle.

Of course, it wasn't entirely one-sided. These were experienced hunters, after all. A precisely placed arrow took out a tire on a sharp corner, sending one of the cars sliding into another. Both of them crashed hard, and anyone that might have survived the impact didn't survive the following hunters.

Then the whole group went down a narrow alley that I didn't recognize through the eyes of a raven overhead. The cars had only a very slight lead by then, less than fifty feet.

It was enough to collapse the walls in between them, though. It wouldn't stop the hunters—a pile of rubble wasn't nearly enough of an obstacle to really stop them. But it would slow them down.

Then the illusion masking the walls of the alley faded, and a small army pounced on them from the sides. The bulk of this group was composed of ghouls, but there were a few werewolves, and of course the three kitsune who had been maintaining the illusion.

Caught by surprise, surrounded, and with their momentum killed, the fae never had a chance. They were dragged down in a matter of seconds.

One of the kitsune looked straight up at the raven I was riding and smiled. I could see a mouthful of bloody meat through her teeth before she swallowed.

The Guards, unsurprisingly, had settled in downtown. It made sense. It was the area of town they were most acquainted with, and also the one where collateral damage could be the most devastating. I wasn't surprised that they weren't taking risks with it.

Of course, they also had some very different standards for what the appropriate response to this sort of thing was. The Guards were still very much concerned with public perception, and they still had that pesky rule about not killing people unless they really, absolutely had to.

That limited the people I could send to help them rather dramatically, since most of my gang was...not great at restraint. So they had some people on the rooftops with binoculars to keep them informed, and I'd provided them with cars for mobility, but they were largely on their own.

In fact, that was a good way to think of it in general. Obviously a lot of the people I had working with me today weren't really my people, but the Guards were more obviously doing their own thing than the rest of us. They were listening in on our main radio frequency, but they had their own communication as well. David was listening to instructions from me and my lieutenants, but there was no doubt that he was the one calling the shots.

Luckily, he was good at what he did. It had been a while since I saw them, and the last time I hadn't been all that impressed, but apparently in between he'd managed to make the new Guards into an actual, coordinated team.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

And it showed. They knew their roles, and they carried them out smoothly enough that it was obvious they'd practiced it a mind-numbing amount. David was the mobile fighter, flying around and knocking people down, tripping them up. Crimson was hanging back and throwing minions in to keep them busy—not strong creatures, nothing as scary as she was capable of calling up from the Otherside, but lots of little things, demons and faeries and nameless *things*. Individually, they couldn't take any of the fae, but there were freaking swarms of them, more than enough to keep the enemy busy.

That left Razor and Chainmail as skirmishers, closing in and disabling the Daylight forces with nets, lengths of chain, and Tasers. Even when the fae could find them to attack, they couldn't do much. Razor was too aware of her surroundings to be caught by surprise, and it was hard to hit something when you were mentally incapable of really recognizing its presence. That left Spark as artillery to scorch anyone who seemed to be making too much progress, which he was more than happy to do.

It was, I had to admit, impressive. I still thought their nonlethal approach was...naive, I supposed, was the word for it. I had a hard time thinking that it could really work. But I couldn't deny that they were good at it, and they were making it work for them.

I didn't spend too much time watching that fight. They were good at what they did, and I knew it. There were other things that needed my attention more. And besides, with the chaos and the sheer scale of that engagement, it was hard for me to find a vantage point to watch from.

Watching all that, I was starting to feel a lot more hopeful than I had been.

Oh, they weren't all wins. The Daylight Court got some solid victories of its own. Here, an entire contingent of ghouls was wiped out by a group of ogres, and we had to scramble to assemble a unit of auxiliaries and unaffiliated people to go bring them down. There, a Sidhe noble cut a bloody swathe through my Midnight troops until a concerted hail of magic and automatic weapons finally brought her down.

On the whole, though, we were holding our own. It wasn't a one-sided fight, but that applied to them, too. And all things considered, a more-or-less even fight seemed like a win to me. It was a hell of a lot better than I'd really been expecting.

Which made it unsurprising—almost satisfying, even—when we heard something else over the radio.

"What the hell is that?" Vigdis said, the first thing she'd said since the fighting started other than wordless happy noises when she didn't realize there was a radio picking up the sound. Then, "Oh, wow. Oh shit. Run!"

I paused when I heard that.

Emrys Vaughn

I had never known Vigdis to voluntarily run from a fight.

"Well," Kyi said dryly. "It would appear that's your cue, jarl."

Chapter Six

Vigdis had been fairly close to the mansion, clearing out some stragglers from the hunting group. That was both a good thing and a bad thing. On the bright side, it meant that we could get to the site of whatever was going on pretty quickly. On the other hand, it also meant that whatever it was, it was uncomfortably close to the center of my power.

In some ways that didn't matter. This was the modern era of decentralized communication and distributed networks, after all. The mansion was heavily enough warded to act as a fortress, and it was where people were used to thinking of me being, but losing it wouldn't really cripple us in any practical way. The place was pretty much just a symbol.

But one of the things I'd been realizing lately was that symbols *mattered*. A symbol had meaning, had *significance*. Taking that mansion would be seen as a major victory for the Daylight Court, and so it would *be* a major victory for the Daylight Court. The perception of the event was all that really mattered.

We weren't sure what was happening, exactly—Vigdis had been ominously silent since that last communication.

But with how ominous it sounded, I wasn't taking any chances with it. The armored truck we took over to Vigdis's last known location was loaded with some of my best thugs, the people I'd been keeping back specifically in case a crisis arose that needed my best. I had Kyi, Haki, Jibril, Lackland, Jack, and a couple of independent mages who I knew were pretty skilled. Selene was staying back at the mansion to coordinate the ongoing battle, but other than that most of my top minions were here.

I would have preferred to scout things out a bit, try to get a better idea of what we were dealing with. But that ended up being logistically impossible. Vigdis and Kris were both occupied elsewhere, and I didn't want to wait for Kyi to sneak in and report back. I could have looked it over through a bird or something, but I was still getting the hang of doing that without my body collapsing into slush, and that would be inconvenient with how much equipment I was bringing this time.

So we were charging in blind. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and not one that I was accustomed to. I was usually obsessive about gathering information before charging in; as a rule, I at least knew more or less how far over my head I was. Knowing pretty much literally nothing about what was going on was a novel and unpleasant feeling.

The atmosphere in the back of the truck was tense, people making their last-minute preparations on the way other. Since we were already pretty well prepared, this mostly just consisted of checking and rechecking things that we knew perfectly well didn't need checked again. I was right there with them; I'd always been fidgety before a big fight.

It was funny how some things didn't change.

I'd been concerned that we'd have a hard time finding the issue, since we hadn't exactly had a precise location for where Vigdis was when things went bad.

That turned out not to be a problem, which was something of a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it meant that we didn't have to wander around the streets for an hour chasing shadows, which was nice. The *reason* it wasn't a problem, though, was a bit less pleasant.

I stared when we saw them. Kyi said something under her breath in Norse; I was guessing it wasn't a particularly polite thing to say. Even Lackland seemed impressed, to the extent that I could reliably identify an expression on a Sidhe face.

The ogres were by far the most noticeable of the bunch, and the main reason we could notice them so readily from down the street. There were two of them, and they were easily the largest ogres I'd ever laid eyes on, close to fifteen feet tall and so layered with muscle that they looked almost squat. Either of them could easily bench press a truck, I was guessing.

Despite their impressive size, though, they were the ones I was least scared of in this group. There were half a dozen humanoid figures, looking almost like children next to the ogres, whose equipment strongly suggested that they were high-ranking Sidhe. It was hard to be sure, especially at a distance, but the way they moved was too graceful to be human, and even if they weren't nobility, the Sidhe were nothing to take lightly.

And then, finally, there was a single figure in heavier armor, carrying a knife in one hand and a submachine gun in the other.

That one didn't look like much. It was a bit short even compared to the Sidhe, let alone the ogres. It looked more human, too, the way it stood and moved less graceful than the Sidhe, the equipment more in line with what the mortal world used.

But the light reflected too brightly off that armor, the air around the figure seeming to catch it and throw it back purer than it was. As if that wasn't enough, I felt an inexplicable tension looking at it, sudden anger boiling up inside me and making me draw my lips back in a snarl.

So. It looked like I'd get to meet Aoife's champion after all. I had to admit, I was a bit curious who she'd been waiting on all this time.

"Stop here," I said, about a block away from them. The driver, a man I'd hired specifically because he had professional experience driving armored cars, obeyed silently, coasting to a halt.

"That's a pretty impressive group," Kyi said, looking at the Daylight forces. Her one eye was calm and cold.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Yeah," I said. "Kyi, rooftops. Get a view overlooking them. If you get a clear shot take it, but don't leave yourself exposed. The rest of you, spread out here and get ready to hit them hard and fast when they run past. Jack, you'll be keeping them contained; Jibril and Lackland, keep them off the mages. The rest of you are artillery. I'll go in and alone and try to lead them back here for the ambush. Questions?"

"No, jarl," Kyi said, inclining her head in something that wasn't quite a bow. The rest just shook their heads.

"Good," I said, opening the door. "I'll give it thirty seconds for you to get in positions and Chris to get the car out of here, then I'm going in. Move."

It felt like a very long thirty seconds, waiting to start that fight.

It didn't seem like they'd noticed us yet. They were standing in the street, ambling around aimlessly. Occasionally one of the ogres grabbed something, which might mean anything from picking up a bicycle to ripping a streetlight out of the ground, and toss it at a building. The rest didn't bother.

I stood silently and watched them, thinking. It felt strangely quiet, with everyone else gone. Peaceful, in a way. It was the calm before the storm, but it was still calm.

I called Tyrfing with an absent thought, but for the first time in a long time, I didn't just draw the sword and go to work. I just held it for a moment, looking at it. The scabbard, with its delicate designs of cold and death, was beautiful, in a way.

I stared at it for a moment, then undid the catch and pulled the blade out. The steel was mirror-bright, and I spent a few seconds looking at it, looking at my reflection. The snarling wolf's visage of the helmet I wore was easy to see, the image marred only by the runes written on the blade.

I still remembered when I first got the sword. It was hard to believe that had been only five years earlier. It felt like a lifetime had passed since that day.

That first time, a single Sidhe noble had been an overwhelming enemy. I'd fought him, and I'd lost, badly.

It was funny, looking back. At the time, you didn't notice things. Things didn't happen all at once; it was gradual, one step at a time. It was like looking at a gradation of color. One side might be white, and the other side might be black, but it darkened so slowly that you could never quite put your finger on where it changed. But then you looked back, and you realized that you'd changed to the point that you didn't even recognize the person you used to be anymore.

Thirty seconds were up. It was time.

I walked forward, slowly, the steel of my boots clinking against the asphalt. "Hey," I said, once I was close enough to be heard. My voice sounded like wind and wolves and breaking ice, and nothing like a human being. "You're in my territory."

One of the Sidhe—I wasn't sure which one—said, "This is your territory no longer." I could practically hear the sneer in his voice.

"I figured you'd say something like that," I said, continuing forward. I was pretty close to them now, less than a hundred feet between us. "But I had to say it. Give you your warning, your one chance to leave in peace."

"This could only ever end one way," the man I'd pegged as Aoife's champion said. And it was a man; the voice was very clearly male, and it sounded familiar. I couldn't put a name to it, but I was sure I knew the speaker.

No surprise there. I'd have been more surprised if I *hadn't* known the person she chose. That was how the game worked, wasn't it? Nothing just *happened*, it was all connected somehow.

"Yeah," I said, sighing. "That's how it goes, isn't it?"

Then I threw Tyrfinn at one of the ogres.

Throwing your sword isn't a great move, in any fight. Swords aren't made to be thrown, aren't weighted for it. Even if you hit the target, chances are it won't hit in a way that can cut effectively, and most people can't throw a sword fast enough to do much even if it hits properly.

That's most people, and most swords.

Somebody as strong as I was, throwing Tyrfinn? That was a whole different story.

The cursed sword hit the ogre around the shoulder, and it hit *hard*, the incredibly sharp edge of the blade slicing through the ogre's tough skin like it was nothing. It kept going for a ways, lodging itself in the thing's shoulder joint.

The ogre reeled back, expression turning to one of shock and pain. Blood started to spray from the wound, sparking with an eerie pale green flame as it came into contact with the steel.

I felt like things were moving in slow motion as I reached into my cloak. I could see the expression on the ogre's face changing, the people just beginning to react. They'd known that the fight was starting, that it was inevitable, but they hadn't expected it to go quite like this.

I pulled a grenade out of my cloak with each hand, flicked the pins out with a bit of air magic, and threw them both forward, then turned and ran.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

The explosion came sooner than I had expected, and threw me to the ground. It did some structural damage as well, shattering the body I'd built for myself. It took a few seconds for me to get the compressed snow and ice to fuse back together, though at least the armor kept me together to that point.

The fae were...not so lucky. Two high quality grenades loaded with iron shrapnel were pretty significant weapons, as such things went.

It used to be that being that close to major explosions would have left my ears ringing. Now I didn't really *have* ears; my ability to detect sounds was completely unrelated to my physical body. And as such, I could clearly hear the screaming in the wake of the grenades.

I pushed myself to my feet and turned around to look at the scene.

One of the ogres was down, having apparently had the bad luck to be standing directly over one of the grenades. It was...the term "mincemeat" seemed to apply. Between the force of the explosion, the shrapnel, and the iron, there wasn't much left of it. It wasn't moving.

The other ogre was still up, still alive, but it was badly wounded, one leg mostly destroyed. Most of the Sidhe were still standing, but they were also mostly injured, blood and fire leaking from various wounds. At least one of them was struggling to stay standing. Aoife's champion was seemingly unfazed.

Well, not as much as I'd hoped for from my opening salvo, but not terrible.

I turned and started running back the way I'd come, at top speed. Top speed was, for me, a pretty impressive speed.

At that point, the Daylight forces had two real options. They could let me go, in which case it would look like they'd lost the first round, and they'd have to worry about me just wearing them down with hit and run tactics. Or they could chase me.

As I'd expected, they chose the second, and started running after me.

I was vaguely aware of magic behind me, and then a few seconds later a streak of light shot by just over my shoulder and carved a chunk out of a house. A bullet bounced off my armor a few seconds later, and then the ogre threw a chunk of concrete and clipped me. It knocked me to the ground, but didn't do any real damage, and I bounced right up and kept running.

It delayed me a bit, though, and then I had to start moving more evasively, keeping them from drawing a bead on me. It slowed me down, just a bit, and they started closing the gap.

They were just about on top of me when we reached the ambush I'd arranged.

The opening assault there was even more brutal than the grenades. A blast of fire came from the alley on one side of the street; an odd magic that just *dissolved* what it touched speared out from the other. The Sidhe retaliated with magic of their own, turning the street into a chaotic mess, and then the ogre caught me with a solid blow and sent me tumbling down the road.

When I pushed myself back to my feet, stumbling a bit as I had to get my leg back into functional condition once again, I was greeted by a madhouse.

Three of the Daylight Sidhe were down in flames, another simply missing a head where the erasure magic had wiped it away. One more had Kyi's arrow sticking out of her throat, and two more arrows had taken out the ogre's eyes with incredible precision. Lackland and Jibril were each dueling with another of the Sidhe, both fights looking more or less evenly matched.

I started towards the fight, stumbled again, and had to take a moment to repair my body further; that ogre had done more damage than I'd initially realized. In that moment, Aoife's champion put a burst from his submachine gun into Jibril's torso, then brought the knife down with the incredible strength of a Sidhe champion, splitting the ghoul's skull in half.

Ghouls were tough. They were preternaturally tough, in fact; they could take one hell of a beating and, eventually, recover from it. There wasn't a lot that could really kill one.

Cutting Jibril's head in half was enough to do the job.

I wasn't entirely sure what happened next. One moment, I was twenty feet away from the fight. The next, I was standing right in the middle of it, Tyrfinng thrust clean through one of the Sidhe, my teeth bared in a furious snarl.

I ripped the sword back out and the Sidhe fell, blood pouring from the wound. I didn't care, barely even noticed. I was already stepping forward, moving on to the next. This one raised her sword to block, but it didn't matter; my swing was strong enough to knock the blade out of the way and just keep going, cutting her literally in half from her shoulder to the opposite hip. One of the Daylight Sidhe hit me from behind, and managed to stab me through the armor, but he was only cutting snow, and it wasn't enough structural damage to even slow me down. I spun, and smashed my free hand into the side of his head, and his skull caved in easily under the blow.

That was enough to clear a bit of a space around me, enough to see. The mages were in full retreat now, running down the street; Jack was trying to cover them, keep the Sidhe from following, but he was obviously struggling. He had a gift for kinetic barriers, and that was enough to keep them at bay and keep the mages alive, but they were still following, and the Sidhe were too fast to lose them easily.

Lackland was down, unconscious or dead. Kyi was lying in the street not far away, having apparently fallen from the rooftops; one leg was visibly and badly broken, and her face was covered in blood. She wasn't moving.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

That was all I saw before the ogre reached for me. It was blind, and clumsy, but apparently able to operate reasonably well by hearing or scent or something, because it had more or less the right target.

I dodged its hand and then jumped onto its arm, running up it. I wouldn't have guessed I could actually do that. It was less than a foot wide, and slick, and moving, and my all rights I should have slipped right off. But I was still operating more on fury than logic, and I was in no mood to listen to reason.

It worked. I sprinted up its arm and jumped straight for its head, Tyrfin leading. I cut completely through its neck, and we hit the ground at more or less the same time.

I landed in a crouch and then stood, sword still in hand. I wasn't even breathing hard. Then again, I wasn't breathing at all.

It was quiet now, again. The last of the Sidhe were chasing after the mages, but here, now, it was quiet.

"Just you and me," Aoife's champion said, echoing my thoughts.

"Was the only way this could end," I agreed. "So you going to tell me who you are now?"

"What?" he said. Then, a second later, "Oh, right. The helmet. Forgot." He reached up and took it off, and I got a look at his face.

I was right. I knew him.

"You?" I said, a bit incredulously.

"Yeah," Ryan said, a bit self-consciously. "Me."

I just stared. "Wow," I said. "Of all the...you know, I was genuinely not expecting this. Of all the people that could have taken the deal, I don't think I'd ever have thought of you." I shook my head, and when I spoke again my voice was bitter. "Why?" I said. "After everything I went through to save you from a deal with the fae...why the hell did you do this?"

"Unna," he said simply.

"Right," I said. "Your wife. The selkie. I thought you said she was unaffiliated."

"She is. But Aoife had something on her. Leverage. It was either this, or she used it."

I sighed. "You know that she probably doesn't care about you, right?" I said, feeling very tired. "This whole thing was a setup to get you to agree to this. It was never real."

"I've considered that," Ryan said quietly. "It's possible. I don't think what she feels is an act. At first, maybe, but not now. But yes, it's possible." He shrugged. "Does it matter? What I feel is real, either way."

"Yeah," I said. "That's true." I paused. "It can't end well," I said. "You and her. I mean, it never had great odds. But this choice, doing this...it can't end well."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't know that you're in a place to throw stones on that topic."

I had to chuckle at that. "Good point."

We stood in silence for a moment, then he said, "I didn't know I'd be going up against you, sir. I don't know that it would have changed anything. It's not like I had a lot of options anyway. But I...well, I didn't know."

"That's how it goes," I said. "Back down?"

He shook his head. "Can't," he said. "Forfeit this one?"

I grunted. "Can't," I said.

"That's how it goes," he said. "Sorry."

"Don't be," I sighed. "This one isn't your fault. You ready? If I've got to kill Kyra's friend, I don't want it to be by surprise."

He grinned, though it was brief. "Ditto," he said, putting his helmet back on.

"Let's do this, then," I said, calling Tyrfing once again. I raised the sword in a quick salute, and then I charged.

Chapter Seven

I might have expected Ryan to take it slow to start with, when the fight started for real. Neither of us really wanted this fight, after all. This was a thing we did because things had developed in a way that made it necessary, not because either of us wanted it to happen. Between that and the fact that he knew damned well how capable I was in a fight, I might reasonably have expected him to hesitate.

If so, I would have been wrong. He attacked before I'd moved more than a few inches, and he wasn't shy about it. He dumped the full magazine from the submachine gun at me in a couple seconds, then threw the gun itself at my head. He was right behind it, bringing that knife up in a short, tight jab at my guts.

I was slow to dodge. It didn't particularly matter. Most of the bullets ricocheted harmlessly off my armor; the few that slipped through the cracks didn't really do anything meaningful. Nine millimeter rounds just weren't enough to do much to me. The gun was barely even a distraction, and I reacted quickly enough to block the knife.

Tyrfing didn't cut through it. Not terribly surprising. The champions of the Courts seemed, as a rule, to have high-quality weapons; I hadn't been able to cut through Carraig's either. I'd probably have gotten one myself, but I had Tyrfing, and that was enough sword for anyone.

Ryan didn't seem too bothered by his failure to kill me in the first few seconds of the fight, though. He just stepped in and slammed his shoulder into my chest instead.

I was probably as strong as he was, but I wasn't braced against it, and my body wasn't terribly heavy. I flew backwards, hit the ground, and rolled along the pavement for a ways.

It was nothing like watching Pier and Carraig fight. I was very aware of that. Ryan and I had, in principle, the same powers available to us. Possibly more, given that Ryan was a werewolf, and I was...me.

But we didn't have the experience, the instinctive grasp on what we could do. Compared to them we were like children playing with tools that we didn't understand. We weren't using the power of our respective roles to anything remotely resembling their full potential.

What we *were* using was enough for me to push myself to my feet and, in one fluid motion, into a leap that carried me well over him and back to where I'd been, more or less. I landed on my feet and turned to face him, on even footing once again.

"I'm sorry it had to go like this," I said to no one in particular. "I'd like to think that if I'd done something differently, been better, this wouldn't have happened. But I guess not. You were probably always doomed to take that bargain, or something just as bad."

He didn't say anything, just charged at me, knife first. I circled around, forcing him to turn and sacrifice most of his momentum. It left me in position to slash at him.

I had to shuffle my feet a bit to avoid stepping on Kyi's face, though, and I hadn't planned on that. It was a tiny delay in my footwork, barely even enough to throw me off my stride. In most fights it wouldn't have mattered at all.

Against Ryan, it was nearly disastrous. It slowed my slash just enough that he could block it with his spare hand, and his knife ducked around to hit me in the back, just under the ribs. On a human, it would have been solidly in the kidney, a fairly decisive stroke. He probably thought he'd won, just like that.

Given that I didn't even *have* kidneys anymore, that thought was incorrect. I didn't even hesitate as I grabbed his knife hand and turned to face him, the force of the movement turning it into a clumsy throw. He came off his feet entirely, and slammed down hard onto the ground. He just barely pulled away before I took his head off, and I did cut fairly deeply into his left shoulder.

As we both backed away from each other, I thought that we'd come away fairly even from the first round. We'd both wounded each other—I could smell him bleeding, and while I wasn't crippled, he'd done some structural damage in my back that I couldn't take the time to fix right now. He still had his knife, and obviously I couldn't really be disarmed in any meaningful way.

I thought about taking advantage of that brief lull to say something else, but I didn't. What else was there to say? We both knew where we stood. Talking wouldn't change a thing.

I saw something else, though, in that moment. I saw Kyi looking at me, not half as dead as she looked. Her one good eye was bright against the bloody mask of her face, and I met that eye for just a moment before she closed it again, pretending to be dead.

It would take incredible discipline to keep up that act, with the obvious and serious injuries she'd taken. It was hard not to show a reaction to that kind of pain. But then, that was Kyi.

In that moment, I knew how this fight would end. I could see the whole thing in my head, and I was guessing she could too. It was a cruel, vicious, underhanded trick, and it would work. Of course it would.

I didn't want to drag it out any longer. So I circled into position. And when Ryan thrust at me next, I left my sword slightly out of position on the parry. It wasn't a huge flaw, just a few degrees too far to the side, my hand turned slightly wrong. Against a knife fighter of his skill, though, it was too much.

That trench knife caught me in the side of the head, and slammed straight through the armor. My body collapsed to the ground in a heap of snow and armor.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Ryan stared down at it for a moment, knife in hand.

He never turned around. He never saw Kyi draw a single straight line in her own blood, lips moving in a single syllable as she drew the rune. He never saw the ice that formed in the wake of her hand as she did.

He never saw me extend a crude shell of a body from that ice slick and lunge forward. Tyrfing stabbed in under his helmet, at the base of the spine. The blade went in and up, into his brain.

It was as close to a painless, instant death as anything could really be. I owed Ryan that much, at least.

He collapsed to the ground, blood already pooling around him. Tyrfing drank it up, leaving the blade as bright as it was before the battle. Tyrfing was clean. Tyrfing was always clean.

I was the one that was stained.

I dropped the sword to the ground and walked away.

Chapter Eight

Dealing with the aftermath of the Daylight attack was hard, on numerous levels.

The first, and most obvious, was just the damage that had been done. It wasn't as bad as it might easily have been, in some ways. The collateral damage hadn't been nearly as extensive as I'd feared, the property damage nearly nonexistent. Most of my allies had suffered relatively few casualties. In fact, in an unusual turn of events for me, it was my own organization that had taken the worst hits.

But those hits had been...serious, to say the least. In the hours after that final fight the casualty reports rolled in, as we tallied up just how bad it had been. Over the course of those hours my reaction went from shock, to dread, to a sort of cold numbness.

Jibril, of course, was one of them. I'd seen him die myself, and any remote hope I'd had that he might survive after all was dashed when his death was confirmed afterwards. That, on its own, was potentially disastrous. He'd been the leader of the ghoul faction I was allied with, and the one most inclined to helping me. With him dead, it seemed likely that they would split up and go their own way, and even if they stayed together I wasn't particularly confident that they would stay with me. On the whole, it seemed there was a good chance I'd just lost the ghouls who made up a significant proportion of my minions.

Vigdis was dead. Apparently, after telling her team to run, she'd gone charging in to keep the enemies busy. She'd managed to bring down another of those huge ogres, and held off the Sidhe long enough for the rest of them to get away. On the whole, Vigdis the Howling had died like a hero, and I thought she'd probably be well satisfied with how she went out. But still, she was dead and gone, and in the end how she got there didn't change much.

Haki, too, was gone. He'd been part of a group with some newbies, mostly small fish and new housecarls. While I'd been fighting with Ryan, they'd run into a more mischievous group of fae, and the new guys hadn't had the experience or discipline to deal with trickster fae. They'd fled or died, and left him standing alone between the Daylight forces and a large group of the wounded. Haki Who-Fights-Alone had lived up to his name, but even someone of his skill couldn't take that whole group alone, and he'd died.

Kyi was alive, but...in bad shape, to put it lightly. She'd been badly injured, and then the bit of blood magic she'd used to conjure up that ice took a lot out of her. She was still in a coma, with no way to guess when or if she might wake up. Even if she did, she would most likely be crippled, the damage to her legs so severe that she might never walk properly again.

Jack died covering for the other mages as they escaped. I couldn't really feel too strongly about that one; he'd been an employee, not a friend. I'd hired him because he was skilled at violence, and in

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

the end he wasn't quite skilled enough; there wasn't a lot more to say about it. Still, he'd been an exceedingly *useful* employee, and his loss was a serious one.

Those were the most personal losses for me, and probably the most important individual losses on an organizational level. But there were more, many more. Quite a few of the housecarls that I didn't really know had died, as had ghouls, mercenaries, one of the werewolves, some of the independents, some of Jackal's crew...the list went on. About the only major group that *hadn't* taken losses was the Guards, and they were more tense allies than really my people.

That many casualties was...well, it was serious. Very serious. It was the kind of thing that made me consider the future. The Daylight Court would, I thought, not try to attack the city again, at least not soon. As many of people as had died, they'd still given worse than they got, and not even the Courts could afford to casually throw that many lives away. Not to mention that Aoife would need to find a new patsy to use as her champion if she wanted to set me against a near-equal.

Even if they didn't attack, though, this might turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. I wasn't sure that I could hold the city with how many of my people had died. At a minimum, I would need to make some adjustments, which I was really not looking forward to doing.

First, though, there was a conversation that I wanted to have even less, but which I couldn't put off any longer.

Walking into Wolf felt...odd. It was small, for one thing. Somewhere along the way I'd gotten accustomed to the grandiose structures I dealt with now, the castles and the mansions and the insane structures that could only exist on the Otherside. The city was less impressive, but even there I had the mansion, and of course skyscrapers were impressive in their own right. By comparison, the small houses and unassuming stores of a small town were...less than impressive.

The next thing I noticed was how quiet, how *peaceful* it was. I could hear birdsong. The sun was warm, with the stretched feeling of afternoon edging slowly into evening. The infrastructure of the town seemed wholly intact. People walked along the streets and they weren't in a rush, they didn't carry themselves with an edge of fear.

No surprise. This town was too small to attract the same degree of trouble as the larger cities. Not only that, it was Edward Frodsham's personal territory, and he wasn't the sort of werewolf you pissed off lightly. On the whole this was probably one of the safest, most stable communities in the country right now.

It used to be that Wolf made me feel comfortable, at home. Even before the world fell apart it had been a refuge, a peaceful place that largely stood outside the march of time. I remembered being comforted by the way that it was insulated from the outside world.

Now, I mostly just felt out of place. I was an intrusion of that world into a place it wasn't welcome. I didn't belong here, anymore. I was too broken. I felt unwelcome, like I was a disruption in that peaceful atmosphere and the sooner I left the sooner it could go back to being the way it was.

It was, I reflected, hard to get away from the ugliness of the world when you carried it inside you.

Kyra was, last I heard, back in school, finishing her engineering degree. She wouldn't be at school right now, though. Most schools were out right now, things too unstable to really continue the usual curriculum and schedule, and as a werewolf she would both want and need to be with her pack in troubled times. Not only that, but I'd called ahead, and this was where she'd told me to meet her.

She'd asked why I needed to talk to her, over the phone. I hadn't answered, which was really all the answer she needed. Oh, she couldn't guess the details from that, but she would know it was bad news.

I found her not far from the forest, leaning against a building. Of course; she knew where my connection point was, where I'd be coming from.

She looked good. Physically, of course, she'd always been in good shape, but there had always been an ugliness to her, a hint of darkness hidden under the surface. Her scars were not so well concealed as some. Now...she looked relaxed, comfortable. Waiting, she was looking at something on her phone. Through the eyes of a dog walking past, I heard her laugh, and it sounded genuine and wholehearted, without an edge of anger or bleak despair.

She looked good. She looked happy. I wasn't sure what it said about me that I wasn't entirely glad for that. Oh, I was glad that she was happy, of course I was, but...it was hard not to feel a bit inadequate when everything I'd tried to do to help her hadn't been as good for her as just being without me.

I pulled myself back together, pulled on the jeans and t-shirt I'd brought, and walked out of the forest to greet her. I tried to rehearse what I was going to say on the way. It felt like I didn't have nearly as much time as I should have before I was walking up to her.

"Hey," I said. I started to swallow, remembered that it was just a useless habit; it wasn't like a dry throat was a thing that could happen to me anymore.

Kyra looked up from the phone and grinned. The expression was a touch forced; she was glad to see me, I thought, but she was worried after I'd been so vague on the phone earlier. "Hey," she said. "Where's Snowflake? Did she not come with you?"

I paused, and she could probably guess what I was about to say from that pause alone, but it needed said. "She's dead," I said, the words coming out a bit harsher than I'd intended.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Kyra froze, then put the phone in her pocket, the fake smile fading. "Oh," she said. "Oh, Winter, I...I'm sorry."

"It was just a few days ago," I said, feeling numb again. I knew that I should be sad as I said this, that I *was* sad, but I just felt...empty. Hollow. "I meant to tell you sooner, but things have been...busy. And I'm still trying to adjust."

"Yeah," she said. "That's...yeah. What happened?"

"I picked a fight out of my weight class," I said. "Or, well, I guess it picked me. The guy that killed me."

"Aiko said you weren't dead, that it was a fake."

I forced a smile, one that probably looked even faker than hers. "Not quite," I said. "I'm...alive, but I'm not what I was. This, this body? It's not really real." I held up my hand and let the mask of flesh fade from it, revealing ice and darkness underneath.

"Jesus," she said. "How are you taking it?"

"It's taking some adjustment," I said. "And then Snowflake dying...hit me pretty hard. Like I said, I think it still hasn't really sunk in."

"I'm almost scared to ask now," Kyra said. "But...Aiko?"

"She has her own things going on," I said. "She...made her choices. She made a deal. Signed on with the fae, for good. In a roundabout way that's what I'm here to talk to you about."

Kyra looked almost stunned. "What do you mean?"

I took a deep breath, out of habit rather than any sort of necessity, and then spoke. "It's about Ryan," I said. "He made his choices, too. He signed up with the fae, on the opposite side as Aiko. I'm officially her minion, so he was on the opposite side from me, too. They sent him to take me out, and I...I killed him."

Kyra was silent for a long, long moment. "Okay," she said at last, in a tone that strongly suggested she was struggling to keep her emotions from showing in her voice. "This is a lot to take in, you know?"

I snorted. "Yeah," I said. "Trust me, I'm well aware of that."

She managed a smile, though it was a *badly* faked one this time. "Good point," she said. "Look, I'm going to be honest with you. You've been a good friend. You stuck with me through some pretty dark times, and I've tried to do the same for you. But this...all of this at once...I don't know how to deal

with this. I don't want to do something I'll regret. So I think I should go and let this sink in for a while, okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I understand. And I'm sorry. About Ryan, and...well, everything, I guess."

"Don't beat yourself up about it," she said. "I'm sure you didn't want to do it. Sometimes that's how it goes, I know that. It's just...I think I need to be alone right now. And I should tell Edward about this."

"I understand," I said again.

"Good," she said. "I'll go do that, then. I'll be in touch if you need someone to talk to."

"Thanks. That means a lot."

"No problem," she said. "Until later, then."

"Goodbye," I said, and then I watched Kyra walk away.

Chapter Nine

After the battle, I had to come up with more people to fill out the ranks of my organization. Well, I didn't *have* to, I supposed. I could just quit the whole thing. But all my reasons for not doing that before still applied. I was not going to give up on this city, but I quite simply needed more people to hold it than I had right now.

Some I could get from the same places as usual. Most of the ghouls were leaving after Jibril's death, but some liked their arrangement with me enough to stay on, and most of them had friends to invite now that there were openings. Similarly, there were plenty of jötnar who were happy to sign up. More than before, even, since at this point I was more than just a jarl where they had a real chance of getting ahead without the competition they'd see in more established courts. I was all of that, with a reputation for *winning* on top.

That wasn't enough, though. Not really. It would take time for them to get here, and even then they wouldn't be enough. Ghouls and giants were great thugs, there was no denying that, but they didn't have the *versatility* that I needed. Hell, I was pretty sure the only reason I'd done as well as I had to this point was that I had a broad variety of people working for me. Between them, one of them could usually come up with a skill that was relevant to the problem at hand. I'd be a fool to give that up.

So in addition to the usual answers, I was also looking for new minions in less...obvious places.

I started with Pryce's. Well, not exactly—I wasn't comfortable going there myself, not when I'd never quite been given permission to come back—but I started by sending some people there. I had more than a couple of minions who went there regularly enough to be familiar faces, and they had some idea of what kind of people to look for. They didn't pressure people to join up, but they made it clear that I was hiring, and I had a good enough impression that a few of them were interested.

That got me a couple of the more violent or desperate mages, and a few people who were less easily classified. The independent community was, after all, defined largely by not fitting into the neat categories. And so I had one guy that could see perfectly in the dark ever since an incident with a sentient shadow, a girl that was born with a preternatural resistance to heat...that sort of thing. They were niche talents, but useful in the event that we needed them.

Still, that left me needing more bodies, if I was going to have any chance of holding off another attack comparable to the last one. I started out by asking some of the people who'd come to help with the Daylight attack whether they were interested in staying on more permanently. It made sense, given that I knew they were willing to fight on my behalf, and they were already in the area.

The process went both better and worse than I would have guessed.

The kitsune were the first group I talked to, largely because they actually approached me rather than the other way around.

All three of the ones who'd come to the battle showed up to the meeting, as a group. There were two females and one male, and now that I got a closer look and I wasn't quite so distracted, they were all fairly distinctive in their appearance. One of the females had more tattoos than Kyi, which was a pretty impressive statement, but one I felt fairly confident in making. She had a tattoo on one cheek, both arms from wrist to shoulder, legs from ankle to knee at least, and from her chest up onto her throat. The images were intense, with vibrant colors; mostly they depicted animals, mostly with gory or sexual themes.

The other female, whom I recognized as the one that had smiled up at me while eating someone, was more subtle, but in her own way just as memorable. She was very slender, had very large, dark eyes, and she had a tendency to smile a lot, in a way that drew emphasis to her teeth and tongue. With black hair in a complex bun, blood-red lips and nails, and a loose white gown that faded to black at the hem and sleeves, she presented an image that was simultaneously innocent and just stained enough to be worrisome. Somehow I didn't think that was an accident.

The male would have had a hard time standing out next to that, and honestly, he kind of didn't. That combination of *colors*, though, would stand out pretty much anywhere. Between hot pink hair and scarves in what looked like every bright color he'd been able to find, I wasn't sure when I'd last seen someone quite so eye-searing.

"You were quite helpful in the fight," I commented as they came in. I was sitting on my throne, more for image than anything, and for the same reason I had a few thugs with me.

The female without tattoos dipped in a quick curtsy that was smooth enough that I was sure she'd practiced it, probably a great deal. The other two did not. "We were happy to help," she said, still smiling. "And it was...entertaining. My name is Kyoni, this is Suiko, and the fellow with the scarves is Kiyanna."

"Winter, though I'm sure you knew that. I didn't get to see much of you during the attack, but what I did see was fairly impressive. Were you the ones maintaining the illusion of that wall?"

"Ah," Kyoni said. "Yes, that was us."

"That's a pretty large illusion," I said. "I don't think I've seen a kitsune maintain one on that scale before."

"We've worked together quite a bit," she said. "It tends to be easier when you've practiced."

"And I did most of the work," Suiko cut in. Her voice was a bit deeper and huskier than Kyoni's. "That kind of thing is more my style than theirs."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Suiko did most of the heavy lifting," Kyoni admitted. "Kiyanna and I added details to improve verisimilitude. Like I said, practice makes it easier to coordinate."

"However you accomplished it, it was impressive," I said. "That's a useful talent. The sort of talent that I could appreciate having access to on a regular basis."

"Well, you're direct," Kyoni said, chuckling a little.

"I'm in a bit of a rush," I said.

"Understood," she said. "Well, I'd say that we're tentatively interested, depending on the details."

"Let's start with your conditions," I said. "What do you want out of this deal?"

"Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, baby," Kiyanna said. "What else?"

Kyoni rolled her eyes, but didn't disagree. "Our interests are primarily hedonistic," she said. "We'd need room and board, freedom to pursue our own interests, a moderate stipend."

"Okay," I said. "That seems reasonable, but I do have a few requirements. First off, if you're doing something illegal, don't get caught, and definitely don't get us mixed up in it. No killing people in my territory unless you have my permission or you have good reason to think that I'd agree and you can't ask for some reason. I don't have a whole lot of rules for what you can do on your own time, but there are a handful of things I won't tolerate, and if you cross any of those lines we'll have problems."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Kyoni said with a smile. "From what I've heard of you, I don't think you'll have a problem with anything we're doing."

"Why do you want to sign up for me, anyway?" I asked. "If you're primarily hedonistic in your goals, I'm not sure why you'd need to. I don't buy that you really *need* the stipend, not with your skills. It seems like you're pretty much giving up a certain amount of freedom and committing to help out with some dangerous situations, and not getting much in return."

"That fight was *awesome*, though," Kiyanna said. "I mean, *damn*. Easily the best brawl I've had in weeks."

"And you do seem to find some very *interesting* people," Suiko said, winking. She looked at one of the giants playing thug and smiled in a way that was...*seductive* was an understatement. He swallowed visibly, and she smiled wider.

Kyoni sighed, sounding just a touch exasperated. "What my friends are trying to say," she said, "is that we think the opportunities we'd have by working with you are more than enough to compensate for any opportunity cost we'd be paying."

"One day," I groaned, "one day I will learn not to ask questions that I don't want to know the answer to. All right, fine. You're in."

"Sounds good," Kiyanna said. "Oh, you want a scarf?" Without waiting for me to answer, he tossed me a length of grey silk, with my coat of arms embroidered on it. "Made that one special for you," he said, then sauntered out the door.

After the kitsune, I had another group that had come to the battle as a unit. I was a bit more nervous about this one, though, even though they'd been specifically invited rather than just showing up. I understood kitsune pretty well, on the whole. I had an idea of their culture, and a decent understanding of their abilities. With how much time I'd spent around Aiko, I figured I had a fairly solid handle on kitsune, at least as much as anyone could.

The same could not be said of the next group.

They were less uniform in appearance than the kitsune had been, on numerous levels. The first one in the door looked like a human man, very pale and pretty enough to make a model envious. After that came something that looked vaguely like a cross between a wolf and a lizard, built on a generally canine frame but with a lizard's muscular tail and covered in emerald scales. The third was smaller, closer to a child's size and shape, with long claws and black wings stretching out from its back. The last one in was back to looking more or less human, but very different from the first; it was built more like a bodybuilder than a model, with blunt features and teeth that made me think of a shark.

What I found more meaningful, though, was the difference in their scents. With the kitsune, their magic had all smelled more or less the same, the fox and spice sent that I associated with kitsune; there were small variations, but they were all fairly similar. The same could not be said of this group. The first humanoid one smelled like incense and lavender, the wolf-thing more like musk and cold blood. The winged creature had a more traditional scent, something vaguely sulfurous, and then the last one smelled like smoke, cut with something earthy.

On the surface, the four of them seemed to have nothing much in common. But I knew that they shared at least one feature, and it was an important one. They all came from the same place.

"Glad you guys could make it," Selene said. "This is Winter, he's the guy I told you about. Winter, this is Rafael. He works in the same department I did, pretty much."

"But of course I do it far better," the one that looked like a model said.

Selene rolled her eyes. "Samuel is more of a hunter," she said. "He's the sort that runs people down."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Charmed, I'm sure," the lizard-wolf thing said. His voice was a bit rough, the words mangled by oversized teeth that resembled a snake's fangs more than anything, but understandable.

"Abigail tends to more of the sneaking," Selene continued. "She likes to dive on people from above, or drop things on them."

"Well, it's rather easy," the one with wings said matter-of-factly. "Not as entertaining as Samuel's approach, maybe, but it makes up for it in efficiency."

"And then there's Lusin," she finished. "He works as a guard, keeps people out of restricted areas."

"Usually not hard," the other humanoid entity said. "Somehow people don't want to bother me." He smiled at his own joke, though none of the others did.

"Delightful," I said, eyeing the four demons cautiously. Theoretically these were all weaker demons, beings that weren't a huge threat to me. Even with that and Selene's assurance that these guys weren't bad to deal with, though, I figured I'd err on the side of caution. Demons were, from what I'd seen, not something to take lightly. "I notice you used the present tense there."

"It'd be a bit dumb of us to quit when we don't know whether you'll give us a job, wouldn't it?" Samuel said.

I chuckled. "Fair point. I'm assuming Selene has told you what I'd be expecting, generally?"

"Kill the things you tell us to, don't kill the other things," Rafael said lightly. "Seems easy enough."

Abigail swatted him on the head with one wing. "Don't play dumb, you cad," she said sharply. "Yeah, Selene went over how things work here pretty thoroughly. Think we'd be fine with the same basic deal you're working with her, with a couple of specific allowances."

"What allowances, exactly?"

"Well, I need special furniture, for example," Abigail said.

Rafael snorted. "Yeah, I'll bet you do," he said, somehow making the phrase obscene.

She swatted him again. "I mean because of the wings, you ass," she said. "These things make normal chairs suck so much. And I know Samuel needs a specific diet."

"Very specific," he added. "Live prey is best, but red meat with certain supplements can do."

"Okay," I said. "That kind of thing I can do. If you're willing to work with my rules, I think I can use you."

"Sounds good," Lusin said. "Think we can probably all make arrangements to move here within a couple days, yeah?"

"Shouldn't be a problem for me," Abigail confirmed.

"Of course not," Rafael said with a snicker. "You're always ready to go."

"Would you stop that?" she asked, shoving him lightly as they walked out. She was smiling, though, and I don't think anyone present thought she was really upset.

"I'm not entirely sure whether I just hired a gang of psychopathic monsters or a comedy group," I said after they were gone.

"Both," Selene said. "And yes, they're like that all the time."

I sighed. "Naturally."

After that things got a bit more hectic, since I was dealing with people that weren't in coordinated groups. More specifically, I was dealing with the fae.

It was also different in that they weren't working for me as the jarl of the city. No, these were members of Aiko's Court who were joining my entourage in my role as her champion. Apparently all the people in that role got a gang, I just hadn't had the chance to build mine up yet.

This being the Midnight Court, I didn't get the nice faeries. Oh, no. I got some redcaps and some trolls, a few rusalki and a kobold, even a banshee. The most innocuous were a handful of faerie hounds, and even they looked like the kind of hound that would take great pleasure in ripping your face off.

It was, I supposed, just as well. It wasn't like I was in the market for sweetness and light.

It did take time, though. I had to vet each of them individually, and then they had to swear their oaths of service. Those were awfully complicated oaths, too, with lots of elaborate wording and escape clauses for both parties; the written contract the hounds used rather than a spoken oath were close to twenty pages long.

All told, by the time it was all done, it had been several hours. I wanted very much to rest; I might not need sleep, might not get fatigued physically, but that didn't mean that I didn't need to rest. I was exhausted on numerous levels, by the time I finally left the mansion.

But I had a genuine army now, instead of just a handful of thugs. I might not like them all, might not be entirely happy with the nature of the people I'd just hired, but I could say that much about them. With this crew on my side, I figured I had a solid chance at fighting off pretty much anyone that tried to attack this city.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Still. It would be good to have a chance to rest.

Chapter Ten

Aiko met me at the castle in Transylvania this time. She'd had more than her fill of Faerie lately, and things weren't so urgent there that she had to be present all the time. Her job was really fairly hands-off most of the time, as I understood it; it was just in the transitional period as she settled in that she had to ride herd on her new minions so much.

She was there before me this time. I knew that, because when I walked in the front door I was greeted by a bucket full of some pale pink slime slick enough to make an icy floor look like dry asphalt by comparison. I wasn't sure quite what it was, though some kind of faerie gunk seemed like a solid guess.

I hit the ground, but it was more of a comfort than anything, really. Aiko pulling harmless pranks was a way of saying that things were okay, that everything was normal and life would go on in spite of how badly wrong things had gone recently. Knowing that she'd probably done it specifically to create that impression didn't do much to change that. I was smiling as I fell.

The smile faded quickly as I stood and carefully stepped out of the puddle of slime. Things were still too grim for it to last long. But still, I appreciated the break, however brief it was.

I found her in the kitchen, with an enormous spread of food. It wasn't hard to guess that she hadn't made it; Aiko was arguably a better cook than me, but that wasn't saying much, and she was still pretty bad. Besides, this was a fae banquet; I'd seen enough of them at this point to recognize one when I saw it.

"The job might suck," Aiko said as I walked into the kitchen, throwing a pastry at my head. "But the perks are nice."

I caught the pastry and popped it in my mouth. It was, unsurprisingly, excellent; chocolate and something that tasted vaguely like raspberries, but probably wasn't. "It's good to be the queen," I said, wondering vaguely what happened to the food I ate at this point. It wasn't like I had a functioning digestive system, after all.

"Damn straight. How'd the fight go?"

"We won," I said. "People died. Jibril, Vigdis, Haki, maybe Kyi. Ryan. I think those are the only ones you know."

She winced. "Oof. That's...damn. Sorry I couldn't be there."

"People die in fights," I said, sitting down and picking up a piece of meat. It was cut into paper-thin slices, and it smelled vaguely peppery. I toyed with one of the slices as I spoke. "It's amazing they lasted as long as they did, really."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Still," she said. "That's rough."

I shrugged. "It is what it is. How did your side of things go?"

"I kept them busy, at least until Aoife showed up. She made me look pretty bad by comparison."

"She's had probably a few thousand years to get the hang of the job," I said dryly. "It's probably not a huge surprise that she's better at it than you are."

"True," Aiko said. She shrugged. "I at least kept her busy, though. Might have made your fight a bit easier, I don't know."

A few minutes passed in silence after that as we ate. Well, as she ate and I picked at the food. It was excellent food, of course, but I just...wasn't interested. I was ravenous, as always, but I knew it wouldn't do anything to help that. Eating for the sake of eating, when it would leave me as hungry as before, felt somehow empty. It was pointless.

"So what will you do next?" Aiko said, as she finished another pastry and leaned back in her chair with a satisfied expression. "About Colorado Springs, I mean. Sounds like you lost a lot of people. You think you'll be able to hold things together?"

"I've been doing some recruitment," I said. "Including some cousins of yours, actually. Maybe you know them? Three kitsune that work as a group, introduced themselves as Kyoni, Kiyanna, and Suiko."

Aiko paused for a moment. "Ah," she said, in a slightly displeased tone. "Those three."

"Should I be concerned?"

She paused again before speaking, and I got the impression that she was trying to come up with the right words to use. "Let me put it this way," she said. "They're the kind of kitsune that give the rest of us a bad name."

I considered some of the things I'd seen Aiko do.

I winced. "Oh," I said. "They're *that* bad?"

"You know how there are stories of kitsune possessing people and making them do crazy things?" she said. "Kyoni does that. A lot. Not to mention all the normal crazy things they do. Even when I was in my rebellious phase, I thought that crew went too far."

"Wow," I said. "That's pretty impressive." I paused. "They're talented, though," I said. "I mean, I saw them working in the fight. They know what they're doing. And possession is serious magic, so if Kyoni can do that, she's probably got some skills."

"Yeah," Aiko said.

"Okay," I said. "You know these people, and you know about what my situation is. Do you think I should keep them as employees?"

She frowned, and spent several moments thinking about it. "I'd have to say yes," she said at last. "They're not pleasant people, at least not by my standards. But they like being in a position of power, and they know that they've got a better chance of getting away with things if they have somebody important backing them up. So I don't think they'd turn on you, and they really are good at what they do."

I sighed. "Good enough, then. Can't say I'm thrilled by it, but beggars can't be choosers and all that." I snorted. "Besides, they should fit in fine with that crowd."

"Who else did you hire?"

"Some more ghouls and giants," I said. "Some odd people from the local scene. A few demons Selene knows. Oh, and a bunch of your minions that are working for me now."

Aiko whistled. "Damn. That's a pretty solid gang. At least in the sense of nobody smart wanting to mess with it."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'm feeling pretty confident about their chances if there's another attack. Which probably just means the next one will be much worse than I'm planning for, but that's how it goes." I shrugged. "Anyway, do you need to be getting back?"

"Nah, I don't have any Court business that I need to take care of right now. Think I looked badass enough earlier that my minions won't make trouble for a while, anyway. Besides, I'm in the mood for a bit of celebration."

I started to ask what Aiko meant by that. Before I could, she grabbed me by the hand and tugged me away from the table, smiling slyly.

I didn't argue. I'd already been thinking that I needed a break, from my own head as much as my circumstances. This was...as good a way as any to get away from that cycle of negativity.

Later, lying in bed, Aiko said, "I think I know what you need to do."

It took me a few seconds to respond. I'd assumed that she was asleep. I was...not sleeping, exactly, *sleep* wasn't a thing that I was even really capable of now, but close to it. "What do you mean?" I managed eventually, turning to face her.

"I think I know what you need to do," she said again.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I eyed her suspiciously. "This is going to be one of your plans, isn't it?"

"When have my plans ever gotten you into trouble?"

"Do you want an itemized list?" I asked. "Or should I just say 'all of them' and leave it at that?"

She sniffed. "Okay, fine. But they *do* usually work, and it's not like you've been having great luck coming up with a plan for dealing with Hunter."

"Good point," I admitted. "What's the plan, then?"

She told me the plan. Afterwards, I spent several seconds just staring at her. It was pitch black in the bedroom, but that really didn't matter; we could both see just fine in the dark.

"Wow," I said at last. "That's...impressive. You know, I'm not sure the new title is good for you. Your plans have always tended towards the insane, but this is an entirely different level of risky. There are so many ways this could go wrong, I can't even count them all."

"But you're going to do it anyway," she said. "Aren't you?"

I sighed. "I guess I'll try," I said. "It's not like I have any better ideas. And your plans are...well. They might be insane, and risky, and insane, and prone to backfire, and insane, but they do have a tendency to work. Even if I'd rather they not."

Aiko grinned like a lunatic. "Awesome!" she said. "Guess I'd better get going, then. Need to make sure things can do without me back there for a while."

"Why?"

"Because it'll take you a while to get things set up for this," she said. "And I don't want to miss it when you're ready to spring the trap." She got out of bed and sauntered off, whistling. After a few moments, I felt a portal open, and she was gone.

Chapter Eleven

Like most of Aiko's plans, this one started with an observation that was quite straightforward and logical, and then took it in a direction and to a degree that most people would never think to.

In this case, the first thing to note was that I couldn't hunt down Hunter. That was just a given. Even aside from having been told as much by some very reliable sources, it just made sense. He'd stuck around as one of the most wanted people in the world for a couple *thousand* years. You didn't manage that without being one hell of a hard target.

If I couldn't hunt him down, then, the logical next step to take was the other major tactic a hunter might use. If I couldn't find him, I had to lure him to me.

On its own, that wasn't exactly a brilliant and innovative thought. But in this case, that tactic wasn't an easy one to use. I didn't know what Hunter wanted, not really. I didn't know what might draw him out. There was the option of using myself as bait, something I'd done on other occasions, but in this case that seemed like a distinctly bad plan.

And that brought things to the point where sanity left off, and Aiko took over. What she'd proposed was, I thought, likely to work. If nothing else, it was likely to catch Hunter by surprise. The plan was so convoluted, so risky, and just so *nuts* that I thought it was legitimately possible that nobody had tried it in the past thousand years.

She hadn't been wrong about one thing, though. It wasn't something that I could do without a bit more preparation. And this wasn't the kind of preparation I could do by just going home and getting weapons, either. This was the kind of plan that required some very specific things, and it required assistance of the sort that I couldn't find among my minions.

So, naturally, the next step found me going where people always went when they wanted to make a crazy, dangerous, and highly dubious plan work. I went to the Clearinghouse.

The domain seemed about the same as the last and only time I'd been there. The trading floor of the Clearinghouse was a cavernous space, literally and metaphorically, an enclosed area the size of a stadium. The interior was filled with numerous levels of catwalks, bridges, and arches of all kinds, along with columns, partial walls, and ladders. Between them all, there weren't many places where you could see more than around fifty feet in any direction, despite the large size of the area.

It was, in short, not unlike a maze in three dimensions. And, of course, if you happened to slip off the edge of the walkways, you could expect no help at all on your way down.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I didn't know my way around the Clearinghouse, not really. Aiko did, but she wasn't with me this time. Bringing someone with her kind of power and political importance on this trip would, in a number of ways, have defeated the purpose. Not to mention that she still had plenty of enemies who liked to hang out here, and while we could likely handle them now, it was still something to keep in mind.

So I was alone, in the Clearinghouse, having very little familiarity with the locale or the rules of the place. It was almost funny, the extent to which that didn't scare me.

Not knowing what I was doing did, however, mean that I had to ask around. Normally I would hate that, see it as a potentially catastrophic expression of weakness. Now it was...well, still a potentially catastrophic expression of weakness, but one which could potentially also be useful. In a way, it was less bug than feature for what I wanted to accomplish here.

And, for the next several hours, that's what I did. I talked to various vendors, and to people who were just walking by. The variety was really quite impressive. The Clearinghouse was quite possibly the most cosmopolitan domain of the Otherside, and it showed in the crowd that the black market attracted. I recognized some of them as coming from a wide variety of sources, everything from various kinds of fae to yokai, demons, and djinn. There were plenty more that I didn't recognize at all, including some that I wasn't entirely sure were people at all. In a place like this, telling the difference tended to be a difficult task.

I kept my inquiries vague, at first. I was looking to hire a magician, preferably a human mage or something close enough to one to make the distinction a largely insignificant one. I needed one who could keep his, her, or its mouth shut. One who was fairly experienced.

Those inquiries were...not *innocent*, precisely, but by the standards of the Clearinghouse, close enough. This was, after all, not a place you went to buy legitimate things. Wanting to hire someone who wouldn't talk about the nature of their employment was hardly unusual, and while most of the people I spoke with weren't interested in helping a stranger, enough were that I got directions fairly easily.

Once I was in the right section, two levels down and a few hundred feet away from where I'd started, I began asking more specific questions. I was looking for someone who wasn't a part of the established clans. Someone who wasn't afraid of the Conclave, or of the Watchers specifically. Someone who was good with Otherside portals.

These inquiries were, as such things went, still relatively innocuous. But things were now reaching the point where a canny observer, with access to a few of the things I'd said, might be able to start putting together an idea of what I was looking for.

And that, in short, was why most people would never have considered this plan. Even at the Clearinghouse, there were things you didn't advertise lightly. This place had few, if any, rules, and they wouldn't actually *stop* me. That didn't, however, mean that there weren't consequences for asking.

Word would get out—word *always* got out, that was practically a law of nature—and even casual inquiries on this topic were liable to get you in the kind of trouble where death was a best-case scenario.

I was being circumspect, and my position right now was such that I was relatively safe anyway. But I didn't kid myself that this wasn't a risk. It was almost guaranteed that various important people would find out about this.

That was, in fact, the whole point.

Finally, after a few hours of asking around, I got a name, someone that was generally agreed to be a good person to approach for what I wanted. Jeremy wasn't the kind of name that you generally associated with a dangerously powerful mage that skirted the boundaries of the Conclave's rules, but people seemed fairly confident in the recommendation, so I figured I'd follow up on it. Another lengthy hike, complete with getting turned around twice and finally just jumping thirty feet from one narrow bridge to another, was enough to find him.

At a glance, Jeremy didn't look much more impressive than his name sounded. If I were to see him on the street, I'd probably be more inclined to think of a middle-aged professor than a dangerous criminal. He was skinny in a way that looked more like someone who just forgot to eat than someone who really cared about appearances, wearing a bland grey suit.

When I walked up, he had his feet up on the table and he was reading a book. It wasn't even a particularly ominous book. It was a perfectly normal paperback, a spy novel, I thought. He didn't put it down when I walked up.

"Jeremy?" I said, stopping a few feet away.

"Yup," he said, putting a bookmark in his novel and setting it aside. He didn't take his feet off the table. "What can I do you for?"

"I hear you do good work," I said. "The kind of work that I might be looking for."

"You might have heard right," he said. "And you are?"

"Call me Winter," I said.

He snorted. "That's a bit on the nose, isn't it? Considering your situation." He gestured vaguely at me.

"I'm well aware," I said dryly. "Though I'm a bit surprised you noticed."

"Please," he said, rather contemptuously. "It's a nice enough mask, but come on. Would I be worth hiring if I couldn't see through that?" He snorted again and took his feet off the table, sitting up. "Anyway, what are you looking for?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"I need someone for a short-term position," I said. "Someone who's both able and willing to do some things that the Watchers would likely take offense to."

"I've been known to do some things that they don't particularly like," he acknowledged in a remarkably casual tone. "I'd have to know more specifics, though."

"That's fair," I said, reaching into my cloak. "Give me a few seconds first. I'd rather this conversation not become public knowledge."

Jeremy put his feet up again and watched as I pulled out a pouch of salt and began pouring it out in a circle around the table. It hummed with a quiet energy, almost undetectable unless you knew what to look for. Once I had the circle completed, I touched it and sent a quick jolt of power into the salt, triggering the stored spell. Instantly, the quiet hum of activity from the Clearinghouse shut off.

"You know that just makes you look more suspicious, right?" Jeremy said.

"Yeah," I said. "That's kind of the point, actually. I need to make sure that the people watching get exactly the right impression."

"Expensive toy you just used on making an impression," he noted. "That must have run you...what, eight grand?"

"Five," I said. "I know a guy."

He whistled. "Nice. Still expensive, though."

"It's worth it."

Jeremy shrugged. "It's your money," he said. "So what's so important you need to use that heavy of magic to keep out eavesdroppers?"

"It's all about making the right impression," I said. "That goes for what I'd be hiring you for, as well. I'm not actually interested in breaking the Watchers' rules. I just want you to make inquiries and preparations to make it look like you are."

"You mind if I ask why?"

"I think it will attract the attention of someone important," I said. "Someone I can't necessarily find by normal means."

"Interesting," he said. "Which rule?"

"I want you to convince him that you're planning to summon something from the void."

I hadn't been entirely sure whether Jeremy would know what that meant. His reaction suggested, rather strongly, that he did. He went dead still for a moment, staring at me, then visibly forced himself to relax. He adjusted his glasses, a gesture that looked so reflexive I wasn't sure he was even aware he'd done it, and then grinned.

"Well," he said. "You don't think small, do you?"

"This situation is a bit past the point where cautious action will get me anywhere, I think."

He nodded. "Fair enough. Of course, it would entail some serious risks for me. It's one thing to do some marginal things under the laws. It's another to break them entirely, and especially to flaunt doing it the way you want me to. And that rule in particular tends to get worse things than the Watchers hunting you."

"Would you believe me if I said that I was in a position to make those problems go away? With the Conclave, and the...other things."

"Probably not," he admitted easily. "Are you?"

I shrugged. "I think so," I said. "But it can be hard to tell, and they do take this very seriously. Are you open to considering it anyway, or should I look elsewhere?"

"I'm thinking about it," Jeremy said. "But it'll take some serious payment to make the risk worth it."

"You mentioned cash," I said. "I can pay a quarter of a million American, up front, in cash. I'll also give you access to my network to spend it if you'd like. I'll talk to my contacts and see what I can do about making sure that you don't come under fire for this, and if necessary I'll foot the bill for a new identity for you."

Jeremy pursed his lips. "That's almost enough to be tempting," he said. "I'll also need you to cover any expenses, of course."

"Shouldn't be a problem, within reason. Call it another quarter of a million to pay for that. I've also got access to some extremely valuable information you can use for bribes, for the things that don't take human currency."

"You make one hell of a convincing argument, Winter," he said. "It's not every day someone offers me half a million to not do things." He grinned again. "What the hell, why not."

"Excellent," I said, also smiling. "Let me go over the details with you."

Chapter Twelve

The next few days passed in a blur.

To start with, it was a haze of frenetic activity. After I finished making arrangements with Jeremy, I had to make the preparations to actually make it happen. I ended up having to go to Alexander to buy the things I needed—or, rather, I could have probably found something similar elsewhere, but all things considered I figured it was worth going for the best.

It was expensive. Extremely so, in fact, and most of it wasn't the sort of payment that you could make in cash. It would be several full days of work to pay it all off, and it wasn't the kind of work that I could delegate to minions, either. He assured me that the items would do what they were supposed to do, though, and if so it would be worth it and then some.

After that, though, things got...boring, for lack of a better word. I had everything ready, and now I just had to wait for the target to take the bait. That meant spending days on end shadowing Jeremy, watching for Hunter to appear.

That wasn't an exaggeration, either. I had no way of guessing when he would come, and when he did, my window of opportunity was likely to be very small. That meant that I had to be present and ready, all the time.

Aiko was there for as much of it as she could. But in the end, she was...maybe not quite *mortal*, but still subject to many of the conditions of mortality. She had to take breaks. She needed to eat, to sleep. She got bored and needed a distraction—she'd never been a terribly patient soul, and that hadn't changed with her new role.

None of those things were true of me, and so I didn't take any kind of break. The hours rolled by, and then the days rolled by, and I was still shadowing Jeremy.

It gave me a lot of time to think. To ponder. That was, in this case, not a good thing. It felt like every topic I thought about was an ugly one, and every time I couldn't handle it and I switched to something else, it was just as bad.

I thought I understood the situation. I'd been so blind, but now I saw clearly. The puzzle was almost complete now, the pieces falling steadily into place. But the picture they revealed was an ugly one. On so many levels. Everything that had gone wrong, every small cut and deep gash, each twist of the knife...it had all been a part of a plan. I'd never had a chance at succeeding. I felt so stupid, now, for even having tried.

There were only a few things still missing from my comprehension, though they were important ones. I didn't know *why* Loki and Coyote and Hunter had done these things. I didn't know why I was

significant enough to them for them to have bothered with me. I didn't know how this game had started, and I didn't know how things would end.

Somehow I didn't think I'd like the answers to those questions, when I did learn them. It seemed a safe enough bet.

Then there were the individual details, most of which weren't good. Things back in Colorado Springs were going poorly. There wasn't a crisis, or a major attack, but the usual frictions and troubles went on, and there were the new additions to the ranks to integrate. I couldn't afford to leave, so the situation was left to slowly fester, small problems growing and growing.

Aiko, even when she was there, was distant. She was distracted, unfocused; sometimes it seemed she was only barely paying attention to the conversation, most of her focus occupied by something I couldn't perceive. She still had her mischievous, playful attitude, but there was an edge of ruthless malice to it now. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like the Midnight Court was leaking into her more with each passing day.

Kyra hadn't made any attempt to get in contact with me again. I didn't think she was going to. I wasn't sure I could blame her.

All around, it felt like things were falling apart.

So I sat, and I watched, and I brooded. Days passed in a blur, enlivened only by the constant tension of not knowing whether the plan would work at all.

And then, finally, after a hundred and thirty hours of that hellish stakeout, the quarry appeared.

At first I didn't think it was anything particularly special. Jeremy had been meeting with all sorts of people over the past few days, in all sorts of places. Someone stepping out of the shadows of a small rented room where he'd just finished meeting with one person and was now eating lunch before heading to the next appointment was an unusual way for such a meeting to start, but not as much so as I would have guessed.

The first indication I had that things were different this time was when I realized that I could smell the new arrival. Aiko and I were close to a hundred feet away and two stories down, watching through a concealed camera, and I could still smell his magic. The base was human disinfectant, but there was another tone to it, something strange and unpleasant and wholly unfamiliar. I couldn't even put a description to it, beyond to say that it smelled *wrong*.

"Hello," he said, with a smooth, practiced smile. "I think we have some business to discuss."

"It's possible," Jeremy said. The mage sounded tired, even through the camera. It had been a long few days for him, too. "You are?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Call me Hunter," the new arrival said.

I stared for a second, mostly just because...I was actually *looking* at the man who'd caused me so much grief.

He looked...normal. That was the first thing I saw, and the most surprising one. Blaise had said he was born in China, but appearance meant little to people on that level, and he'd chosen a different look for this job. He was pale, with dark hair and eyes and features best described as forgettable. The suit made more of an impression than the person wearing it; it looked like it probably cost more than most cars, and I thought that was probably accurate.

It only took a moment to notice something else, though, that wasn't normal at all. He carried himself with a sort of confidence, a *presence*. He walked like he expected the world to get out of his way. It was hard to define, but I'd seen that kind of presence a few times before. Conn had it, and Lucius, and a very few other people who were similarly terrifying.

Combined with the scent of his magic, that was enough to settle any doubts I'd had. This was the guy.

In the same instant as reaching that conclusion, I reached for the weapon I'd bought from Alexander.

It, too, didn't look like much. In a fit of whimsy, he'd made it a black box with a big red button, which was helpfully covered by a heavy plastic cover to prevent unfortunate accidents. It looked like a comedic prop more than a serious weapon. But Alexander had assured me that the stored spells it was linked to were enough to kill damn near anything.

In theory, the other linked device that Jeremy was carrying in addition to the magical explosives would protect him from the blast. Alexander had been very confident of that as well, and I'd never known the old man to be wrong about that sort of thing. But we were working with some very powerful and very unpredictable interactions, here, and it was impossible to be totally sure what would happen there.

If it wasn't enough to protect him, I thought with dark amusement, at least I wouldn't have to pay the other half of Jeremy's fee.

I flipped the cover up and reached for the button, feeling like I was moving in slow motion. Aiko was staring at the screen, absolutely focused on the scene unfolding there. Her mouth was open slightly, and she was holding her breath. The tension as I reached for that button was palpable.

Something caught my finger around a quarter of an inch from it. I strained against it, but I might as well have been trying to push over a building.

"Stop," Fenris said, fading into sight with his hand already closed around my finger. His grip was utterly implacable—not actually damaging me, but the notion of trying to move that hand wasn't even worth considering.

I stared at him. "What?" I said. "Why?"

"Because you do not understand," he said. His voice was...sad, and bleak, and hungry.

Aiko darted for the button, moving so fast I could barely see her. Fenris put one hand out and stopped her cold. It looked like a casual push, almost gentle, but he sent her flying across the room and into the wall. It didn't look like a serious impact, and she got up immediately, but it was still impressive.

I glared at him and pulled my hand away. I was confident he could have stopped me—this was *Fenris*, after all—but he let me take my hand back without a fight.

He was still between me and that button, though, and I didn't for a moment think that I could get past him. I could try to do something clever and press the button in another way, but I doubted I had anything that he couldn't stop.

"If I don't understand," I said in a low growl, "then *explain*."

A brief expression of pain crossed his face. "I can't," he said, almost stammering. "I can't let you do that, Winter, you understand? It's...I...you can't."

"I thought you guys wanted him dead," Aiko said. "Isn't that the whole reason this is a thing?"

"I can't explain," Fenris said. "Not yet, you wouldn't understand. You aren't ready yet, you need to see more. Please trust me. I'll explain, just...not now."

I stared at him. I felt like I should be screaming or growling or breaking things, but I wasn't. I was still, and when I spoke my voice was very quiet, and very calm, and very, very cold. "What the hell, Fenris?" I said. "I thought I could trust you, of all people. I thought we were *friends*."

Once again, the Fenris Wolf looked like he was in pain. Not just pain, but agony. "We are, Winter," he said. "I'm your friend. And I'm saying this to you as a friend. Please, just let this one go. I know this is hard, but just...stop looking for Hunter. Let it go. I promise I'll explain someday."

For a moment I thought he'd say something else. Then he was gone, and he took that big red button with him. I'd seen other deities pull that vanishing trick before, though never Fenris that I could recall. I still didn't know how it worked, not quite.

When I looked at the screen again, the room was empty. Jeremy was gone. So was Hunter. I could at least guess how they'd left, given that Hunter was the most gifted mage alive when it came to manipulations of space and position.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

We stood there and stared for probably close to a minute. I was still trying to calm myself down; the past few seconds had raised a storm of conflicting emotions in me like few I'd ever experienced. At a glance, Aiko was doing more or less the same.

"Well," she said at last, in a distinctly subdued tone. "*Fuck.*"

I just nodded.

Chapter Thirteen

That evening found us back in Transylvania, eating dinner. We'd brought it in from a restaurant in Singapore that both of us were fond of. It went without saying that neither of us felt like eating our own cooking, and the last of the frozen meals Alexis had left had been gone for months.

There was another person I'd drifted apart from. Though in that case I wasn't sure whether I could really blame myself. My cousin and I had never really had a chance. I couldn't be what she needed me to be, and once she realized that it had been inevitable that a distance would grow between us.

It had been a while since I spent any appreciable amount of time here, in the castle. Oh, I'd visited now and again, but for some time now I hadn't had the time to really just take a break and go home for a while. I still didn't, really, but it was hard to get worked up about all the crises demanding my attention just now.

It felt a bit odd. The castle was still familiar; I still knew it intimately. But the sense of comforting familiarity, the feeling that this was *home*, was gone. It felt almost hollow, devoid of significance. When I looked at places and objects that used to be meaningful all I had was a bitter awareness of what I'd lost and couldn't get back.

I went downstairs to check on the lab, and found bones strewn across the floor. After a moment I realized they were the disassembled pieces of the hound skeleton Legion had occupied since becoming my familiar; another moment was enough to see that they were arranged to spell GOODBYE. The skull was serving as the period, empty sockets turned towards the door. When I touched the bones they felt inert, lacking the power and the *presence* they'd held before.

Which, I supposed, made sense. I'd never expected Legion to stick around forever; when we first made the arrangement, I'd have been shocked to hear that it would even last this long. And besides, his work was done here. Its, really. Legion had only ever had a gender because I imposed one on it, and if the spirit wasn't my familiar anymore I certainly didn't have that right anymore.

I spent a minute or so looking at the bones, and at the rest of the lab. Then I went back upstairs to eat.

Aiko and I hadn't really talked about what happened earlier. I didn't know what to say. Not even a little bit. I'd been thinking that I understood things, but this development with Fenris was something that my new vision of the world hadn't encompassed. I could only think of a few ways to make it make sense in the context of what I now knew, and none of them were good.

In a way, I felt disgusted at myself. I'd thought Fenris was a friend, and in a way I supposed that was still true. But I'd allowed it to blind me to the fact that he was still *Fenris*. In the end he was still a

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

god, still a part of the vast, complex game that I was just beginning to conceive of. Expecting him to behave in a straightforward, understandable way had been foolish.

It was a pleasant meal. It felt a bit strange, just the two of us eating in a hall that could seat twenty without any crowding, but it wasn't that far off from what we'd gotten used to while living here. We both knew it was the calm before the storm, but we silently agreed not to talk about that.

Instead, after we'd finished our respective meals, we sat and talked about small things. Fond memories, old jokes, trivial matters. It was a rather empty conversation, lacking any real substance or information, but then that wasn't really the point. This wasn't talking to convey information. It was just talking to talk, to fill the silence.

As I'd more than half expected, the conversation was interrupted by the sound of a knock at the door. It was a heavy knock, loud enough to hear even well inside the castle, four knocks spaced out with one second between each of them.

I glanced at Aiko, who gestured slightly. The front door flew open with a crash loud enough that I suspected the impact had been enough to damage the door, or possibly the wall.

"Overdoing it a bit?" I asked.

She sniffed. "I meant to do that," she said.

I snorted. "Sure you did."

Any humor, though, died quickly, leaving us sitting there staring at the door.

Hunter walked through less than a minute later.

He looked exactly the same as he had earlier on the camera, a pale man of indeterminate age in a very expensive suit. "Good evening," he said, nodding to each of us. He had no discernable accent, his voice as nondescript as his appearance. "Is it all right if I sit down?"

"Go ahead," I said. "There's plenty of food if you want some."

"That's a generous offer," he said. "I believe I'll take you up on it, actually. It's been some time since I ate."

A few minutes passed in near-total silence as he collected a bowl of noodles and a cup of tea and sat down with them a ways down the table from us. He took a cautious spoonful of the noodles and sipped the tea, then nodded. "This is quite good," he said. "Thank you."

"It's nothing," I said. Then, after a few moments, "This really isn't how I would have expected this to go. I was expecting something much less...civilized."

Hunter smiled wryly. "What, just because you tried to kill me?"

"In fairness," I said, just as wryly, "I hardly think that was the opening move in this whole mess."

He nodded, conceding the point. "All of that's just business, though," he said. "On a personal level I see no reason we shouldn't be...maybe not friends, that might be asking too much, but at least not enemies."

I nodded. "That's fair," I said. "One question before I get my hopes up too much, though. Are you actually planning to explain anything, or are you just going to spout more cryptic bullshit?"

"I can't promise I'll explain everything," he said. "As much as I hate to admit it, there are still plenty of aspects and details of the situation which I don't understand myself. I'll explain what I can, though, and I think we're a ways past being cryptic about it." He smiled suddenly. "Honestly, I've been meaning to have a frank conversation with you about all this for some time now. It just kept slipping my mind."

"It slipped your mind," Aiko said, somewhat dubiously. "That seems like a pretty damn significant thing to just forget. And this is *me* saying that."

Hunter shrugged. "I've found that time seems different once you've seen enough of it go by. When you're young a year, or a decade, seems an impossibly long time. From my perspective, though, they're much less considerable. It's easy for me to put something off for a year without even quite realizing it."

"Okay," I said. "Um, not to interrupt or anything, but I think there are more useful topics we could be talking about. Starting with...what do you actually *want*?"

Hunter laughed at that. "Oh," he said. "Oh, man. You don't go for the easy questions, do you? Well, there are a few ways I could answer that one, depending on what scale we're considering. On the grandest level, I'd say that what I'd like to see is a world where we can set the rules to be what we want, and where we can be in control of our own destinies."

"When you say we, do you mean humanity?"

"That's where I started, yes," he said. "And I'd be lying if I said that it wasn't still the primary focus for me. But I realized that, really, we're all in the same boat here. Humans and werewolves, yokai, even the fae, we're all in the same position. Dancing to the whim of the beings that have set themselves up as the gods of our universe."

I stared at him. "Wow," I said. "I mean, I guess I knew it was something like that, but I assumed that I had to be misinterpreting something. You're seriously trying to overthrow the gods?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"It sounds so dramatic when you put it like that," he said, grinning. He didn't actually disagree, though.

I shook my head. "*Why?*"

"I'd think that you, of all people, would know that," Hunter said. His voice was very cold all of a sudden. "Look at your own life, Winter. Look at how you've been used and abused, how they've used you as a plaything with no care for your wishes or your welfare. These things do that all the time. They ruin our lives on a whim, for no better reason than because it amuses them. They see us as toys, for them to play with and break at will, without even telling us what they're doing or why."

"Are they wrong?" I asked quietly. "I mean, I know I don't really grasp what they are, on a basic level. But from what I can tell they really *are* that much more than we are."

"They may have created us," Hunter said. "On the basic level of establishing the world in which we developed, even if they weren't directly responsible for our existence. But that doesn't give them the right to treat us in this way. You have your responsibilities when you create something sentient, and they aren't remotely close to fulfilling those responsibilities. No, these 'gods' aren't in the right. And call me naive, but I've never been one to bow down to people in the wrong just because they're powerful."

"You can spin an idealistic story," Aiko said to him. "But I've seen something of what you actually *do*, and I'm not at all convinced that matches what you're saying."

"You have to understand, we're overpowered," he said. "I don't like some of the things you're referring to, I'm not proud of having done them. But sometimes you have to do things you don't like when you're up against a superior force."

"That's a slippery slope," I commented. "With that kind of attitude it's easy to cross lines without even realizing it."

Hunter grimaced. "Trust me," he said. "I'm well aware of that. But there's not a lot I can do to change that, and it's still true."

I grunted. "I'm not so sure," I said. "That sounds an awful lot like you're trying to convince yourself as much as me."

He spread his hands. "Go ahead and ask, then," he said. "Whatever's been bothering you, ask. It's cards on the table time, Winter."

"Why the void?" I asked. "Why were you obsessed with finding it?"

"I had a theory," Hunter said. "One which I've since become convinced is, more or less, correct. The void outside this world was both my best way to prove that theory and a way to use it. You know what my specialty is in, correct?"

"Space, I'm told."

He nodded. "Spatial dimensions, yes. And time, which is really the same thing, but that's a whole other conversation that you frankly don't have the grounding in physics or dimensional network theory to understand. In any case, space is a simple and reasonably accurate way to sum up my focus, and I think that focus is largely why I've been so much more successful than anyone else to attempt this fight."

"Because that kind of magic is powerful?"

"No. Because it's *fundamental*. If you think about it, most magic is effectively working within the rules of the system they created. A sorcerer might produce fire, but they decide what 'fire' is and whether it affects them. But space and time are so fundamental, such basic facts of the reality they've created, that they don't have that degree of control over them. Manipulating space can *change* the rules, you see?"

"And the void is even more fundamental than space," I said. It wasn't a question. I'd heard as much before, even if it hadn't been phrased quite that way.

"Much more," Hunter said, nodding. "It's something which exists on a deeper level than this entire reality. It's possibly the only thing that's more fundamental than they are, and as such it can exert power over them. I'd theorized that something of the sort, that sort of raw potential, must be what ultimately powers what we call magic, and that if applied without the filters we see it through in this framework it could affect deities. Namer's work strongly supports that conclusion, and since then I've done some work with filtering systems and refined the theory somewhat."

"Okay," I said. "And this is why you encourage people to summon things from the void? You're hoping one of them will kill a god?"

He laughed. "Oh, not really, no. That would certainly be nice, but it's the equivalent of winning the lottery, not something you really plan around. No, that's to provide a distraction. I have a great many plans, a great many balls in the air, but all of them are fragile, you see? Seeding that information is a way to keep the deities busy, keep them from concentrating on my actual work."

Aiko whistled. "That's ballsy," she said. "You seriously take a chance on blowing up a continent just for a *distraction*?"

Hunter smiled, not without satisfaction. "Go big or go home," he said. "You can't hesitate to raise the stakes in this game." The smile faded. "It...does occasionally backfire, of course. Like what happened with you, all those people dying, that was an unintended consequence."

"Tens of thousands of people died as an 'unintended consequence' of your little distraction," I said quietly. "*Tens of thousands*. You think that's worth it?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"I do," he said calmly, meeting my eyes. Most people flinch a little when they look into my eyes. Hunter didn't even blink. "Because this is worth it, Winter. Those people died, and yes, that's tragic. But they died as heroes in a war against the greatest foe we've ever had. These *gods* have killed *billions* down the ages for their own sick amusement, sparked wars and plagues, set cities on fire for the pleasure of watching them burn. We will *never* be safe so long as they still exist, as long as they have this control over our world."

"And what gives you the right to make that choice?"

"Someone has to," he said. "This *is* a war, Winter. And in war someone has to make the hard calls. Sometimes you have to send your people out to die. You have to sacrifice a thousand here to save a million there. I never asked to be that person, but fate decided that I would be anyway." He paused for a second. "We may lose this war," he said. "Probably will, in fact. The odds aren't in our favor. But I, for one, would rather die fighting than live in slavery. And if I do ugly things in the service of this war, it's only because I don't want to lie there dying, and see these monsters still in power, and know that there was something else I could have done."

I watched him closely as he spoke, looking for any hint of deception. I looked for any suggestion that this was just a cover for him seeking power. There was none. Hunter meant what he said.

No, that wasn't enough. Hunter *believed* what he said. He believed it with a passion, the kind of bedrock faith that I'd seldom seen.

Blaise had said that Hunter was charismatic, that he had a knack for getting people to go along with him. I thought he hadn't quite gotten it right. It probably wasn't his fault. He was looking at it from the perspective of an ancient lord of the fae, and this was a profoundly mortal thing.

Hunter was a man with passion, with a fire burning inside him. He was a man with a dream, and the will to make that dream come true. And in a way you had to respect that. In the end Hunter was just a man, fighting against things that were as far beyond him as he was beyond ants, and he knew it. But he managed to stay defiant, stay proud, and keep fighting even though he knew damned well that he was going to lose.

I had to respect him for that, and I didn't have any trouble understanding how he could get people to follow his cause. That kind of passion and courage in the face of an unwinnable battle was something that we'd always found appealing, as a species. If you looked past the blood he'd spilled in the name of that dream it was almost heroic.

"Okay," I said. "I think I get it, then. And I guess that only leaves two questions. Why me, and why Fenris?"

Hunter looked at me sharply. "Fenris?" he said. "What about him?"

"When I was about to kill you, he stopped me," I said. "I want to know why."

He smiled slightly. "That wouldn't have killed me," he said. "I took a look at the devices you were planning to use. They're good, but they're based on one of Solomon's designs. I know that design very well, and I certainly know how to deal with an imitator."

"Wait," Aiko said. "You mean...*the* Solomon? You knew him?"

"He was the first Maker," Hunter said. "We were friends once. But he wasn't willing to follow me down the road I've chosen. We haven't spoken in...a very, very long time." He was silent for a moment, looking pensive. "I miss him," he said. "His advice. He was a good man."

I blinked. "Okay then," I said. "Um. Anyway, those are the questions I still have."

"I'll start with you," he said. "That's an easier explanation. I'm interested in you—we all are, really—because you have potential. And you have potential because you were always a bit of an unknown factor."

"And what's so damn special about me?" I said irritably. "I fail to see why you all couldn't have picked some other sucker for this."

"Most people fit into neatly labeled boxes," Hunter said. "The vast majority. You can look at them and say...this person is human, that one is a werewolf, the other is one of the Sidhe. Those people are very reliable, as a rule, very predictable. That's a good thing when you want reliability, but when you need something outside the norm you can't look in the labeled boxes. The real power in this world isn't in white and black, if you'll forgive me for getting a bit poetical. It's in the grey areas, the places in between, the liminal boundaries where things fade into one another."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Less poetical, please," I said, trying to keep my voice even.

He smiled faintly. "As you wish," he said. "The vast majority of people have a single, clearly-defined and typical magical signature. Those categories are very static, very typecast. When you mix them, though, things become less certain. Usually hybrids of that sort die—the different energies react poorly to each other and the conflict is physically or mentally destructive. Occasionally one simply overwhelms the other and the subject might as well be in one of those boxes. But sometimes, very rarely, they synergize, and you get something stronger than either heritage could have been alone."

"Like making a werewolf out of a mage," I said.

Hunter's smile became a grin. "Yes," he said. "Yes, precisely, that's one of the most common interactions. And as you know, it doesn't often end well for the prospective werewolf, the process is too traumatic and one way or another they end up dead. But the thing is, and keep in mind that this is largely speculation on my part, the more factors in play the more the uncertainty increases. So when you want to find someone with a real shot at becoming something powerful, you look for someone with as many different sources of power mixing as possible, and hope that they get along."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"So this is all because I was born a freak," I said, a bit numbly. "Some sort of crazy one-in-a-million chance that should never have survived."

He shrugged. "I'd put it more positively than that," he said. "But what you're saying isn't wrong, exactly. It's not the most glamorous answer, but that's how it goes."

"Okay," I said. "And the other?"

"Ah," Hunter said. "That. That's...really very unfortunate timing on his part, I suppose, but I did say I'd answer your questions. The Fenris Wolf has been on my side for ages now. I'd go so far as to say that his assistance is the main reason I'm still alive. He was the one who first told me about you, in fact."

Aiko inhaled sharply and looked at me like she wasn't sure whether she'd have to hold me back to keep me from attacking Hunter right then and there. It was, I supposed, not an entirely unreasonable concern to have. But my reaction was actually fairly understated. I'd been expecting something like this. "Why would he be helping you when what you're doing is pretty obviously opposed to his interests?" I asked.

"Fenris wants an end," Hunter said.

I did blink at that. "He's suicidal?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Well, yes. But that's not what I mean. Fenris wants to end, yes, and I think that was what drove him to find me—he knew I was opposing the gods, and hoped that I might kill him. But his ambition goes further than that. He wants an end to the world, and everything in it."

The room was utterly silent for a couple seconds after Hunter said that. "Wow," Aiko said at last. "That's...pretty hardcore."

"Why would he think helping you would do that?" I asked.

"Well, it is a part of my plan," Hunter said. "It's not the whole of it by any means, no, although Fenris thinks it is, or maybe he only hopes. In any case, I do expect that I'll have to break the world to achieve my goals. I don't have nearly enough power or skill to maintain the full Otherside network after the gods are gone; I expect the void will reclaim it quite rapidly without them. What Fenris doesn't know is that I'll be building a new world, a perfect world. One made in our image, and not theirs."

"Megalomaniac much?" Aiko asked dryly.

He laughed, not seeming offended. "I've always had a bit of a leaning that way, I suppose," he said. "But this isn't about me. It's really not. It's about making a world that we can truly call our own."

"So basically," I said, "you took a guy that was already suicidal, and now you're deceiving him and leading him on in hopes of something you were always planning on denying him, all so you can have a really powerful ally in a war he doesn't really believe in."

"I do what I need to do," Hunter said. He didn't sound happy, but he also didn't really sound upset. Regretful, at most.

I nodded. "That makes sense," I said. "So I'm guessing that if I were to try and kill you right now, you'd just teleport away?"

"You'll note I'm well out of reach," he said, grinning. "You should have poisoned the food if you were going to try that sort of thing."

"It wouldn't have worked," I said.

"Well, no. I'm immune to most poisons. But it would have been a good idea."

I nodded. "Probably, yes. Frankly I wasn't expecting you to eat at all, though."

"So I take it this line of inquiry is your way of saying you won't be helping me, then?" Hunter asked.

I sighed. "I don't know," I said. "I can sort of understand where you're coming from. Loki and his ilk have ruined my life, that's true, and I can see how you'd say that they need to be stopped. But from what I can tell, you're no better than they are. They might have screwed me over, but you know what? The single worst thing I've seen was a monster from the void let loose in this world. You're the one who was responsible for causing that, and they were the ones who stopped it."

"I already said that wasn't intentional."

"I'm not sure that isn't worse," I said. "You play with forces you don't understand, and when something goes wrong and people die, all you can think to say is that you didn't *mean* for that to happen. You don't even sound like you're *sorry*. You're as arrogant as they are, Hunter, and a hypocrite too. You say that you want to put people in control over their own fate, and yet you take their agency away as much as the gods ever did." I shook my head. "No, I won't be helping you. And the only reason I'm not shoving Tyrfinn through your face right now is that I don't think I could get there fast enough."

"That's unfortunate," Hunter said. "You understand that I can't let an asset as valuable as you have the potential to be to fall into enemy hands, I hope?"

"You know what?" Aiko said suddenly, with a broad, devil-may-care grin. "Screw it. I've been waiting long enough to spring this one."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I eyed her. "Spring what?" I asked, a little nervously. I recognized that smile, and it seldom meant good things were about to happen.

"I actually have a secret plan for once," she said. "See, Hunter, I think maybe you were so focused on Winter you forgot some things. Like the fact that Faerie Queens were *made* to control the fabric of the Otherside. And you're a guest in my home, eating at my table. I can shut down any portal you try to open, here."

Hunter gestured, very slightly. Nothing happened. His eyes got a little wide.

"Suck on that, you pompous asshole," she said, grinning even wider. She snapped her fingers, and the door to the room slammed closed, tendrils of supernatural darkness winding over it like chains. "Another thing you might have forgotten," she said. "This place is a fortress. It's built to keep things out, but I think you'll find that it's pretty good at locking things *in*, too."

Hunter stood up, fast enough that he knocked the chair over.

"And one more thing, since three is a good number for faeries and I'm being thematic right now," she said, also standing. She didn't seem to be moving terribly quickly, but she was standing right next to me by the time I'd gotten out of my chair. "We trapped this place like crazy when we moved in. I'm pretty sure the one in this room involved propane vents, and while you might be immune to poisons, you're still flammable."

She flicked her fingers, and I smelled a quick flicker of magic, fox and cinnamon and a hint of dark lilac.

Hunter hadn't even made it to the door when the room filled with gas and light and fire.

Chapter Fourteen

I hadn't been expecting the fire, hadn't been ready for it. It couldn't really hurt me—it was just propane, and I'd come back from far worse fires than that already. But for a guy made out of ice and darkness, even a mundane fire was something to be taken seriously.

Aiko had, probably deliberately, given just enough notice for me to react before starting the fire. The thought of using that moment to cuss her out was a tempting one, but it wasn't terribly practical. So instead I reached out to the air around me and pushed it outward, pulling more air in from above to replace it.

Propane is heavier than air, and normally you expect it to displace air rather than the other way around. A sufficiently strong breeze, though, can move it. We weren't directly over a vent, so keeping that breeze up was enough to keep us from actually being immolated.

Once that was dealt with all we had to worry about was the heat coming off the parts of the room that *were* burning. It didn't take long at all for the room to be way too hot for comfort, and it was only getting worse; even if we avoided the burning gas, it wouldn't take long for the superheated air to set us on fire anyway.

I solved that problem by the simple expedient of, well, making the air colder. It was relatively easy to wrap myself in the bitter cold that was my birthright, and while that wasn't enough to make things comfortable, it *was* enough to keep us safe. It even made the air cycle I was maintaining easier; the temperature difference meant that the air in our little pocket wanted to sink, bringing in a constant supply of fresh air from above that wasn't tainted with propane.

As I was doing that, Aiko flicked her fingers and wrapped a sort of curtain of darkness around us. I wasn't sure quite what it was beyond the obvious, but it kept down the glare from the flame, and helped to insulate us against the heat.

Ensnared in that bubble of cold and darkness, we were safe, almost comfortable in the midst of the flame.

The same could not be said of Hunter. He wasn't in any way prepared for this situation. Which, now that I thought about it, was probably why Aiko had done things the way she had. Who would expect *me* to use fire if I wanted somebody dead? On the list of scenarios Hunter had probably been prepared for when he came here, being trapped in a room that was then set on fire was probably a ways down the list. And that showed.

The expensive suit was the first thing to catch, and it went up like a candle. Hunter screamed, loudly. He was composed through the conversation, and I was guessing he would normally have been just as composed as during a fight. But this situation—being trapped and in a fire with no way out—was

something that humans had evolved to be afraid of. It was the kind of thing that ignored logic and went straight to your hindbrain, and Hunter was still human enough to have that fear reaction.

Also, being set on fire *really* hurt. But I was guessing this was more to do with the fear.

By the time his hair started burning, he was at the door. He fumbled with the door, but it was very securely locked. Like Aiko had said, this place was a fortress. Even the interior doors were sturdy enough that a ram would take a while to make any progress on them.

He struggled with that for maybe half a second before he managed to realize what was going on through the panic. He pulled something out of his belt and slapped it hard against the door.

The burst of magic as the stored spell triggered was strong enough to overpower even the scent of Aiko's magic keeping us from going up like a torch. The burst of raw physical force was strong enough to tear the heavy door off its hinges, shear through the locks, and send the whole thing flying down the hallway. The slab of wood shattered when it hit the wall.

I gulped.

Hunter ran out the door, still burning. I was right behind him, physically carrying Aiko to make sure she wasn't left behind; she was fast, but not as fast as I was these days. I didn't even try to maintain the air circulation pattern as I ran, counting on the cold and darkness to mitigate the heat.

It worked, for the most part. The burning gas was terribly hot, even within our bubble of relative safety. It melted my legs pretty badly, leaving me barely able to stumble out the door. It was painful, to the extent that I could really perceive pain from physical injuries anymore, which wasn't a whole lot. But we made it out more or less intact, and Hunter didn't have much of a lead on us at all.

Most people, I was guessing, would have stopped, dropped, and rolled after they got out of that deathtrap. That, or done something stupid like try to pat the fire out. The instinctive need to get the fire out was something that most people would find overwhelming.

Here, though, Hunter's long experience showed through. He knew better than to slow down for even a moment as he ran, lest we catch him from behind. He was burning—I could smell it, roasting meat cut with a noxious edge of burnt hair—and it had to be painful in the extreme, but he didn't even pause.

I should have been able to catch him easily, all the same. I was far, far faster than any human had a right to be, after all. And, in a pure footrace, I was guessing that I could have caught him.

Unfortunately, this wasn't really a footrace, and Hunter was only marginally human. More to the point, he was an extraordinarily gifted mage with a focus in manipulating space.

As I ran, still carrying Aiko, I smelled magic, and things started to...warp, I supposed, was the best way to put it. From my perspective, it felt a bit like being on a treadmill. I was running forward at

full speed, but my actual *movement* didn't correspond to that. I felt like I'd run a couple hundred feet, but the distance we'd progressed was better measured in inches.

I didn't really know what he was doing in a technical sense; as he'd said, my grounding in relativistic physics and the precise nature of space was crude at best. But I could process it in layman's terms. He was stretching things out, making it so that there was *more* space between us than there should be. I might be running two or three times as fast as he was, but that didn't matter when I had to cover at least ten times as much distance.

I snarled. Hunter was pulling away from us now, rapidly. He wasn't going for the front door, running straight for the exterior wall instead, and it wouldn't be long before he reached it. The castle was big, but it wasn't *that* big, and the hallway only went on so long.

Seeing that just running after him wasn't going to get us anywhere, I ducked into a patch of shadow instead, thinking that I'd use that nifty champion trick to jump to another one ahead of him.

This was, in hindsight, probably not a good idea.

Aiko was almost certainly at least as strong as he was now, and what she'd said earlier was true. This was her house, he'd accepted her hospitality; those were things that could easily give the fae power over you. She was on a good enough footing that she actually *could* lock down his ability to teleport out of here.

But he still had a couple thousand years of experience on her. She might have more raw power available than he did right now, but he was far more adept at using it, and this was very much his kind of magic. She couldn't lock him down entirely.

I didn't know what Hunter did then. Hell, I didn't even know what *I* was doing, on a mechanistic level; all that was handled by the power of the Midnight Court, by the role I'd taken on. It was hard to tell what he was doing to interrupt it when I didn't really know what he was interrupting in any kind of detail.

All I knew was that I appeared back in my world less than halfway to where I'd been going, and I felt *awful*. I was dizzy and nauseous. and I had the kind of pain that I'd have described as a horrid migraine if I was physical enough for that concept to make sense. When I tried to stand, my focus slipped and my leg turned into slush that couldn't support my weight. At a glance Aiko was feeling similarly, though she expressed it more with groans and retching than with her body falling to pieces.

Hunter could quite possibly have turned around and finished us off then, but he apparently didn't think it was worth the risk. He kept running, and reached the outer wall in a few seconds. A quick gesture and a burst of power ripped a hole in that wall, reducing a large section to little more than gravel; if I had to guess, I'd say that he'd just twisted space so that it would have to warp beyond the breaking point to maintain its shape. Without breaking stride, he jumped out the hole it left.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

That should have left him plummeting to the bottom of the cliff. Instead, he soared out in a shallow, surprisingly fast glide.

I managed to stand and watched him soar out away from the castle. Within a few seconds he was far enough away that he was outside of whatever Aiko had done to keep him here; the flaming figure disappeared in an instant.

Aiko and I took a couple minutes to recover, and then went to stand by the hole, looking out after Hunter. The fire wasn't a concern; the dining room would be scoured clean, but there was nowhere for it to spread from there. It was all stone for farther than a spark could travel.

"You think he's dead?" Aiko asked idly.

"Nah," I said, with perfect confidence. "If it were that easy someone would have done it centuries ago. Think we scared him pretty well, though."

"The look on his face when the fire started was *priceless*," she said, grinning.

"I imagine the look on mine wasn't much different," I said dryly. "You couldn't have given me a little warning?"

Aiko eyed me. "Winter," she said, in the overly patient tones you might use with a slow child. "You're good at the secret plans and paranoia. But you are *terrible* at lying. If you'd known what was happening, so would he."

I opened my mouth, then paused. "Okay," I said after a few seconds. "You've got a point. And it was a good plan, in a rather...well, *you* sort of way."

"Thank you," she said modestly. "I don't think he'll be in a hurry to tangle with you again, at least. It's probably been a while since he got run off that easily."

"Yeah," I said. "That's a good thing, at least. Though I'm concerned about what he said."

"What?" she said, her tone practically dripping with sarcasm. "You mean the bit about how he's at war with the strongest things in the universe using some of the nastiest weapons known to anyone without being able to control the fallout?"

"Well, that too. But mostly the bit about Fenris."

There was a rather long pause at that. "Ah," she said at last. "That part."

"Yeah," I said, staring out into the night. "I'm...not sure what to do about that. I feel like I have to do something, but I don't know what the answer is."

"Sometimes there isn't an answer," she said. "Some problems don't have solutions."

"Ain't that the truth," I sighed. "But sometimes you have to do what you can anyway. Sometimes that's all you can do."

"You know what will happen," Aiko said. It wasn't a question. "If you do this, I mean. You know what it means, if Fenris wants to die. If he's working against the other gods."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I've got a pretty good idea. That was the last piece of the puzzle I needed, I think. I knew that Loki had a plan, that he'd arranged for so much of this. Now I know why."

"It's not too late to run away," she suggested hopefully. "The Bahamas are wonderful this time of year, I've heard."

"I can't do that," I said, though not without regret. "Fenris is my friend. I can't just walk away. I think maybe I never could."

"Yeah," Aiko sighed. "That's how it goes, isn't it?" We stood there in silence for another long moment. "You want company?" she asked at last.

"Want? Maybe," I said. "But I think we both know this is one that I'll be having to do alone. Even if you were to come with me, we'd just be separated at some point anyway. Because that's how this has to be."

"That sucks," she said. But she didn't disagree.

"I love you," I said.

"Love you too," she said.. "Guess I'll wait for you back on my island, then. Need to check in on things there anyway."

"I'll meet you there, then," I said. "Or, as the case may be, I won't."

She suddenly grabbed me and kissed me forcefully, almost violently. After a few seconds she pulled away and stared into my eyes from a few inches away. "You'd fucking better," she whispered.

Then she turned and walked away.

I watched her go, in silence. There was nothing else to say.

The mansion was quiet. I'd lost a bit of time in travel, and it was late afternoon here, almost sunset. Things were going relatively well here, it sounded like. My absence, which could so easily have been disastrous, had turned out to be a good thing instead. My minions had had to deal with some things without me, and the task had helped to turn them from a collection of misfits who all happened to have the same boss into a team.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

No. Not my minions. My people. It was time, and past time, that I stopped using the dismissive term.

I sat in the throne, and my closest supporters among the team stood near me. Tindr and Brick, who'd been with me since the start; not many of those who had were left. Selene.

I'd called them here, and cleared out the room otherwise, almost five minutes earlier. Since then I'd just been sitting there silently, trying to figure out what to say. For the most part they'd been patient with it.

"You've all been great," I said at last, breaking the silence. "I mean that. I've not been the best jarl at times. I know that. But you've always been great. You've been the best housecarls, and friends, that a jarl could ask for. Your help has meant a lot to me, and I...well, I guess I wanted you to know that."

There was an awkward pause after that. "Thanks?" Tindr said after a few seconds, uncertainly.

I nodded, not so much responding to the comment as just acknowledging it. "I'm going to be going away for a time," I said. "There's something I need to do. It may take a while longer than this last trip. I'll be counting on you to hold things together here while I'm gone. I'm sure you'll do great, though. I'm proud of you guys. Thanks for everything." I paused again, then said, "That's all, I guess."

They nodded, almost in unison. Tindr and Selene both left a few moments later, looking pretty affected by what I'd said, though I wasn't sure what emotion they were feeling; it was possible that they didn't either.

Brick stayed. "I've heard that kind of talk before," he said quietly. "Mostly from people going on missions they don't expect to come back from."

I smiled a little. "There's always a chance of that, isn't there?" I asked.

"There are dangerous missions," he said. "And then there are suicide missions. And you sound like you're looking at the latter."

I paused, then nodded. "In some ways," I said. "I'm not planning a kamikaze run, but...yeah. Suicide mission sums it up fairly well."

"It'd be a shame if you died," Brick said. "The Watchers would probably give me some shitty job after this one."

"Everyone dies eventually," I said.

"Doesn't mean you should give up."

"I'm not giving up just yet," I said. "But there comes a point, I think, where everyone has to ask whether they have something worth dying for. And sometimes the answer to that question is yes."

He nodded. "It's been an honor, then," he said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I said. "But I think I'm a bit past the point of luck."

After that, I ended up walking through the streets of my city again, for what seemed likely to be the last time. I could only see a few ways for this to end, and none of them involved me coming back here.

I was surprised at how easy it was to accept that. I supposed I was at peace with the thought. I should have been dead a while ago, really. I *had* died a while ago. My heart was torn out, my throat was cut; they put me in the ground in pieces. Everything since then had been...a gift, of sorts. A bonus.

I'd been living on borrowed time. Now, that time was running out. And that was...well, it was.

Things were the way they were. Sometimes that was all there was to say.

It wasn't time quite yet. I wasn't sure how I knew that, but I did. Asking how felt like a waste of what little time I had left before it all came crumbling down.

But there was nothing left to do. I'd said my goodbyes already. I'd made my arrangements. Anything that I hadn't done yet...well, it wasn't going to happen.

That was more upsetting than anything else. Knowing that anything that wasn't done yet, wasn't finished, wasn't going to be. But there wasn't much I could do about it now. It was too late. In my experience, most people died with things unfinished, promises unfulfilled. It wasn't often that someone got to end with everything neatly wrapped up. I'd had more warning than many.

And so now, in the window of time I had left, I went for a walk.

The streets were busy. Bustling, even, people going about their daily business. The birds were singing. It smelled like spring, like new beginnings. I found that ironic at first, and then amusing, and then strangely comforting.

These streets, my streets.

The wind was blowing, playing around my fingers and through something that wasn't a terribly good imitation of hair. It carried the scents of cooking dinner and budding leaves and freshly-cut grass. The sounds of laughter and traffic and chiming bells.

This wind, my wind.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I kept walking, without any particular destination in mind. It felt like the world was blurring around me. I was disconnected from it, an observer more than a participant, barely even aware of it. I was cut off from the world, by my nature and my choices and the things I'd seen. I wasn't dead yet, but the world was already moving on without me.

I thought about a lot of things while I walked. I thought about things I'd done and things I should have done. I thought about absent friends and absent enemies and how hard it had gotten to tell the difference, anymore.

I thought about the good times I'd had, over the years. There had been a few. It felt like there had been more bad times than good, but then, the difference had gotten blurry along the way for those too.

Somewhere along the way, it all got so complicated. So confusing. I could see more than ever before, but somehow instead of clarity, it left everything fuzzier than it was. Everything was painted in shades of grey.

When the time came, it found me standing in a spot that was nowhere special, an intersection of two back streets that I'd never stood on before and would never stand on again.

"It's a nice evening," I said, not looking away from the sunset. It was a good one, painting the sky in gold and violet and bloody crimson.

"It is," Fenris agreed, stepping up beside me.

"We should probably go somewhere else to talk," I said. "Somewhere more private."

"I think I know the place," he said, with a slight smile. He sounded sad, or maybe the better word was melancholy. He didn't so much as twitch, but a portal opened, and he stepped through without looking back.

I didn't look back, either. I wanted to—I really, really wanted to—but I didn't. There was no going back now.

It was a beautiful sunset.

Chapter Fifteen

The domain on the other side of the portal was possibly the most monotonous I'd ever seen.

In three directions, there was just about literally nothing. A flat grey plain stretched out under a flat grey sky for as far as the eye could see. And that was very literal, too. The plain was absolutely flat, not so much as a bump in the ground to distinguish any spot from any other. It was a uniform grey, too, some material like linoleum.

That was three directions.

In the fourth, it was about the same. But just at the edge of my visual range, what had to be miles and miles away, I could make out something else. It looked like a wall. For me to see it at this distance, it had to be incredibly tall, a hundred feet at least. It stretched off across the plain, out of sight in both directions.

I couldn't see movement on it, from so far away. I couldn't tell whether there were people gathered on and around the wall.

But if I had to guess, I'd say it was pretty likely.

"What is this place?" I asked, sounding about as dumbfounded as I felt.

"This is the end," Fenris said simply. He gestured to my left, away from the wall. "That's your world," he said. "Everything you know. Earth, the Otherside, all of it." He gestured the other way. "That's the void."

"Wait," I said. "You mean...the actual void? You can just walk out there and find it? I thought it was less...physical than that."

"It's hard to put this in terms that you would understand," Fenris said. "Or even terms that I would understand. This place is an enormously complex working." He paused. "An analogy, then," he said. "Picture reality as an ice cube solidified from the less ordered state of the water. The ice cube has to be in contact with the water, there has to be a place where the two meet." He gestured at the wall again. "This is that boundary," he said. "This is where the chaos of the void meets the ordered rules of the universe."

"The wall," I said, understanding. "It's there to keep out the void."

"And the things that dwell out there. Yes."

"Why'd you bring me here?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

Fenris was slow to answer that one. "This is a good place for endings," he said at last. "And I think that however this goes, things are ending today. It's a safe place, as well, with nothing to be damaged or destroyed. And it's a familiar place for me."

"You come here a lot, then?" I asked.

He smiled sadly. "This is where I spend most of my time," he said. "My behavior here is...less constrained than it is elsewhere. This place is why I exist."

"Is Loki really your father?" I asked. "That story's always seemed a bit...off to me."

"That's a hard question," Fenris said.

"If it's a sensitive subject, fell free to tell me to screw off."

"It is," he said. "But that's not why it's difficult. It's just a question that doesn't have a simple answer. 'Father' is a biological concept, you see. I'm an imitation of a biological creature, enough of one that fatherhood is something that can apply to me. Loki is not such an imitation." He paused. "He made me," he said. "Personally. He created me and instructed me. So yes, I suppose he is my father, to the extent that the term can apply to him."

"It feels so strange to finally be getting answers," I said, more or less just thinking out loud.

Fenris smiled slightly. "I'm sorry that I couldn't answer all your questions before," he said. "My behavior was constrained."

"And now it isn't?"

"It doesn't matter anymore," he said. He twisted space, and suddenly he was holding a small silver flask. "Here," he said, holding it out to me.

I took it. "It's empty," I said.

He shook his head. "There's a taste left," he said. "No more, but it's not empty quite yet."

"Why don't you just refill it?"

His lips twitched. "There is no more," he said. "The mead of poetry is not something that can be replaced."

I almost dropped the flask. "The mead of poetry," I said. "You mean the actual mead of poetry? The stuff that Odin drank?"

"One and the same," Fenris confirmed.

"I thought that was a metaphor."

He shrugged. "You'll find that the line between reality and metaphor isn't so clear as it seems," he said. "Even if the mead is just a symbol of the abstract concept of wisdom, it's a symbol with power."

"This is priceless, then," I said, rolling the flask around in my fingers. "Literally priceless, I mean, And irreplaceable."

"I've carried that bit around for longer than you'd believe," he sighed. "I'm done with it. And there's nobody I'd rather give it to than you."

I nodded. I opened the flask, very carefully, and drank. He hadn't been exaggerating when he said that there was just a taste left; it was barely enough to wet my tongue.

To say that the taste was beyond words would be obvious. It was almost by definition true.

It took me a few seconds to get my bearings again, and then I handed the flask back to Fenris. He took it, silently, and made it disappear.

"Makes me think of another time," I said. "When Carraig tacked me to that cross, and you came to keep me company."

He nodded. "It's been a while," he said.

I laughed, though it sounded like a sharp, bitter laugh even to me. "It has," I said. "So much has changed."

"Things are always changing," Fenris agreed. "But I've seldom seen things change as fast as the past few years."

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "Why do you want things to end?"

Fenris was silent for so long that I almost didn't think he'd answer at all.

"I was made to be a weapon," he said at last. "That was my purpose, my reason for being. I was created for this place, to fight the things that dwell in the void. There's always a war, on the wall. Always...." He shook his head. "I was given the power to destroy," he said. "Made to be a force of death and destruction, so that I could do what had to be done. And I was bound."

"Because they were afraid of you?" I guessed.

"Because some of the ancient gods were concerned about the possibility that I might upset their plans," he said. "And Loki didn't care enough to fight for my freedom." He was silent again for a few moments. "The funny thing is that mostly I don't mind the rules," he said. "Most of the time it's the thing I'd have done anyway, the right thing to do. But I'd have liked to have the choice."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

"Just because you were made to be a force of destruction doesn't mean that you have to end everything," I said.

He shook his head. "That's not it," he said. "That's not it at all." He looked at me, and I looked away before I'd even thought. "I've lived my life at the end of a leash, Winter," he said, very quietly. "I've spent my life fighting in their wars. And I'm done with it. I can't win this game, but I can refuse to play."

"And the people that get hurt?" I said. "The people that die? I mean, you're planning on killing *everyone*, as far as I can tell."

"They deserve it," Fenris said, and now I heard his true voice, the wolves snarling under the surface of the tones. "We all deserve it. Best to just wipe the slate clean on this universe."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," I said.

"Not going to try and talk me out of it?" he asked, sounding vaguely curious.

I shrugged. "Not seeing much point," I said. "You sound like you've made up your mind already. You've had a few thousand years to reconsider, I'm guessing; if it were going to happen, it would have already happened. And it's not like I've ever been much good at talking people down." My lips twitched in something that had only the most passing of resemblances to a smile. "Besides," I said. "If you were going to turn back, would I exist?"

"No," he said. "I don't suppose you would."

"How the hell did things end up this way?" I asked, sitting down and then laying on my back. The not-ground had just a bit of give to it, almost like rubber. "I didn't...I never meant for this to happen. For things to go like this. I look back on the road I took to get here and I don't know what I did wrong."

"This was never up to me or you," Fenris said sadly, sitting down next to me. "Sometimes it doesn't matter what anyone wants. Things just are the way they are."

"That," I said, closing my eyes, "is one *hell* of an unsatisfying answer."

"Heh. What else is new?"

I nodded. "So what happens now?" I asked.

"I expect that in a few minutes we'll start trying to kill each other," he said. "Because I am what I am, and you are what you are, and in the end nothing either of us can do will change that."

I sighed, a long, low sigh that dragged out for far longer than human lungs could have supported. "I'm sorry," I said, opening my eyes. "For a lot of things, I guess." I stood up, calling Tyrping. The cursed sword was heavy in my grasp. "If this is how it has to be," I said, "I guess there's no use putting it off any longer."

"No," Fenris said , also standing. "Are you ready, then? If not, I understand. I'm...not ready either, really."

I shook my head. "I'm ready," I said. "As I'll get, anyway. Let's just get this over with."

Chapter Sixteen

I'd only seen the full extent of Fenris's power once before, back when I was first beginning to find about the void and the things in it and all the ways I'd fundamentally failed to grasp how big the world was. That momentary glimpse had been enough to overwhelm my faculties and leave me unconscious, and for weeks afterward even thinking of it had been enough to render me incapable of thinking clearly for several minutes.

And if what he was saying was true, that hadn't even been the full extent of his power. Not even close. He'd been bound, then, restricted in his actions. Even then, I hadn't fully grasped what he was capable of.

The notion of opposing that force had still been...laughable, really. The notion of actually fighting it was something so far outside the realm of possibility that it wasn't even worth considering.

But then, I wasn't the man I used to be.

He stood and walked away from me, leaving around forty feet between us. I had to appreciate, on an abstract level, how perfect his choice of battlefield had been. There were no obstacles, no unexpected surprises or exploitable features. It was an entirely level ground, metaphorically as well as literally.

He bowed to me. I bowed back, which felt a bit silly, really, but what the hell.

And then, with no sense of transition, Fenris was different. The gaunt human form he'd usually used when interacting with me was gone, replaced by something much more indicative of his true nature.

The wolf was as big as a bus, more or less. Long and lean, he looked like he was on the brink of starvation. A silver ribbon was barely visible around his neck, and a sword was thrust up through his jaw, looking like one more tooth among a mouthful that were about as large. Yellow eyes as large as both my fists together looked at me, and I could see the desperation and hunger there.

Considering the context of the fight, and everything that had just happened, I might reasonably have expected Fenris to go easy on me. I might have expected him to agonize and hesitate, unwilling to really go all out when his heart clearly wasn't in it.

That expectation would have been wrong. Fenris was fundamentally a creature of violence, and more importantly, of *action*. He was a weapon, and a weapon doesn't hesitate. Even when he couldn't win, and he didn't want to win, and the concept of *winning* wasn't one that could even be said to apply, he wasn't capable of just giving up on a fight.

Luckily, I understood all of that just fine. It wasn't hard. All of those facts could describe me as easily as him.

And as such, when he instantly charged me at a speed nothing so large should have been able to equal, I wasn't surprised or caught off guard. I waited until the last moment and then ducked to the side, slipping around his side. Tyrfinn licked out at his face as I did, but I only cut off a bit of fur; getting out of the way was a higher priority, and with the sheer size of Fenris's current body it took quite a bit of dodging to manage.

Not much in the way of shadow for me to step through here, I noted. The light was very even, and didn't have a definite source; we weren't even casting shadows ourselves. Not really much in the way of ice, either. If my current body was destroyed, I wasn't sure that I would be able to make another one.

I'd have to do this the old-fashioned way, then.

As I dodged aside from the teeth and circled around him, I was already analyzing, planning. I felt like I should have been going through some tumultuous feelings, anger and guilt and fear and sorrow. The feelings themselves, though, weren't there. I felt very cold and very calm, perfectly able to think things through in a reasoned and dispassionate manner, and make plans.

Fenris was stronger than I was, physically. That went without saying. His first charge told me that he was faster, too. But he was, at least in this form, less agile. He was graceful, but he was just too *big* not to be a bit clumsy, despite his skill. He had less maneuverability, and he was slower to accelerate.

So as I dodged around him, I kept going, running right next to his side. He tried to swat at me with one paw, but wolves just weren't built for that kind of lateral motion in their limbs. A cat, or a bear, could swat that way, but canines generally used their claws for traction more than violence. I ducked under the paw easily, and he wasn't able to do a whole lot about it.

I didn't cut at him as I moved, not yet. This was just to get a feel for things, an idea of how this was going to go.

Fenris turned to follow me, teeth snapping at my back. I imagined it looked something like the world's largest dog chasing his tail. He had the raw *speed* to keep up with me, but I had the position and angle to stay just a bit out of reach.

The logical next step would have been to duck under him to his other side, forcing him to reverse the direction of his spin to keep chasing me. I wasn't quite ready to do that, though. He couldn't really bite or claw at me when I was underneath of him, but he *could* just let himself fall on top of me, and somehow I didn't think that having what had to be a couple tons of wolf land on me was a good idea.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I spun and started running the other way where I was, instead. That put me running straight for his mouth, which might have been a problem if he'd been ready to capitalize on the opportunity.

He wasn't, though. I couldn't really blame him. What wolf ever suspects the rabbit to run *at* him?

Fenris still snapped at me, but it was a few fractions of a second too late, too slow; I evaded to the side again easily. I lashed out with Tyrfing again, this time slashing at his eye. The intention was mostly just to distract him, force him to recoil and prevent him from biting at me again. It worked, too. Even if you're an ancient wolf-god with an almost inconceivable amount of experience, when someone threatens your eyes, you tend to flinch.

This time, though, the sword connected with his cheek, just under that huge eye. It drew blood, or something that was close enough to make the distinction irrelevant. It looked like blood, smelled like blood, soaked into Tyrfing's blade without leaving a stain like blood did.

At that point, there was only one way this could end. And I suspected we both knew it, too.

Fenris was bigger, and stronger, and more skilled, and vastly more experienced. He could, and did, go up against monsters from the void and similarly horrific foes and take them down easily.

And none of that mattered a bit.

I was more agile, readily able to avoid his attacks. I was very experienced at fighting things bigger and stronger than I was. I didn't get tired, or slow, or clumsy. And with Tyrfing, I had a weapon that was capable of actually *hurting* him.

My existence, my armaments, my training and experiences, it all came down to this. It had always been about this. This was, quite literally, the fight I was born for.

Fenris never had a chance. And he knew it.

I kept running, kept dodging, always just barely out of reach. I was too fast and too unpredictable to catch, too precise to ignore. Occasionally I wrapped darkness over his eyes, or tripped him up with air and ice, but mostly that wasn't worth the concentration it required. It was easier to keep running, keep moving. Occasionally I cut at him again, and occasionally those cuts connected. They were never serious, never dangerous, but they were irritating and they bled.

Fenris was getting tired. He was losing blood, was getting weak. And he still hadn't hit me at all.

Now, at least, I could tell that Fenris wasn't really fighting, that his heart wasn't in it. Even as it became clear that he was losing, he didn't do anything different. He had to be capable of it, there was really no doubt of that. He had thousands of years of experience; there was no way that he hadn't had to deal with something like this before. He had magic, had powers I couldn't even guess at, not to

mention an obviously impressive control over his own body's shape and size. He had to have some tricks up his metaphorical sleeves.

He didn't use any of that. He didn't try anything clever at all, in fact. He just kept going for me in the same ways, as I evaded the teeth and claws by less and less, and I cut at him more and more often.

And then he stumbled.

It was a small thing, a paw placed ever so slightly wrong, a momentary loss of footing. It wasn't a big thing, wasn't by any means a disaster. But it was a sign. The fight had been decided before that, but that was the moment where we both knew there was no going back.

As he recovered himself, I darted away, putting a bit of space between us for the first time since the fight started. I stood there, for a moment, and met his eye.

I'd often thought that looking at Fenris was something like looking into a mirror filled with power. In hindsight, that should probably have been a bit of a hint as to what was really going on, there.

It hadn't gotten to be any less true, though. I looked into his eyes, and I saw a hunger and an overwhelming weariness that were all too familiar.

He'd been right about one thing, at least. Things were ending, now. And not just him, either, though I wasn't sure whether he'd quite thought things through that far. There wasn't a lot of reason for him to have done so.

I ran straight at him, and he hesitated, likely thinking that I had some trick I was about to spring.

He was right, if so. I was still a ways away when I jumped for him, pushing off with the unnatural strength that was mine to call on now. The intention was to land on his back and stab him more deeply before he could drop and roll to brush me off.

I realized the flaw in that plan about the same time he stood up on his hind legs and bit at me. It looked a bit like a dog biting at a Frisbee on a hilariously large scale.

I didn't feel like laughing, though. I twisted in midair, reaching out to the air and pulling on it. A sharp breeze and an increase in air resistance was enough to push me off course at the last moment. It was a bit panicky, but it worked.

The end result was that instead of literally biting me in half, his jaws trapped my right arm just under the shoulder. The angle was just awkward enough that he couldn't actually bite the arm off, but he came pretty close.

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I didn't—couldn't—feel any pain. I just snarled, using that trapped arm as a support as I swung myself forward, throwing wind and darkness behind the motion to put more *oomph* into it. My left hand reached out to catch his ear, holding onto it tightly.

Using that grip for leverage, I shoved my arm *deeper* into his mouth, calling Tyrfing again as I did. The blade cut deep inside his throat. I could feel the blood spurting up over my hand, over my arm.

I felt the muscles tense under me, and his jaws snapped shut. My arm came off cleanly at the shoulder, and then when he shook his head I lost my grip and fell hard to the ground twenty feet away.

But it was too late, the damage already done. Fenris started to pounce at me where I was lying on the ground, and then he stumbled, and then he fell. Blood trickled out between his lips.

I stood, a bit off balance from the missing arm, and from something else, as well. A sort of weakness, a sapping fatigue.

I stumbled over to him, where he was collapsed and unable to stand. I stopped by his head, and rested my remaining hand on his forehead.

He snapped at me, spraying blood and slaver and broken ice on my face. But it was a feeble gesture. He was already growing weak.

"Shh," I said gently, stroking his face softly. His fur was coarse under my fingers. "It's okay. I'm sorry, Fenris. I'm sorry this had to happen to you, sorry about everything that happened. But it's okay. You can rest now."

He let out another breath, one that might almost have had a word in it, but one that I couldn't understand through the blood and the teeth.

Another, gentle, soft breath, just a whisper of air against my skin.

Then nothing.

So died the Fenris Wolf.

I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. Tears were for the living.

Chapter Seventeen

I stood there on that silent plain at the end of the world for a long time. I wasn't sure how long. Time didn't seem terribly meaningful, in that place. In a way I supposed that made sense. This was the place where the conventions of my world started to break down. Time was probably no exception.

I felt comfortably numb, now. Before I'd been in turmoil, in mental agony, even. Now that it was over and done, there was no real emotion. Just...numbness.

I didn't think of anything in particular as the blood soaked into me and poured out across the plain. Fenris had been large, very large; as the blood kept slowly draining out of the wound in his throat it made a sizable pool on the ground.

I felt like I should probably have been seeing my life flash before my eyes, or otherwise having some sort of vision quest experience. I wasn't. I'd already done that; I'd made my peace with this before I ever came here. The cards were already on the table. There was nothing left to do now but play it out.

After some length of time, I felt...something. I wasn't sure what it was, or even how I was perceiving it. It was another question that didn't seem worth asking.

Following that impulse, I turned, raising Tyrfing to point at empty air as I moved.

Less than a second later, Loki appeared a few inches in front of the sword. The god of madness considered the scene for a few moments, then raised one eyebrow ever so slightly. "Impressive work," he said. His lips had a twisted smile on them, but there was no humor in his voice at all.

"I'm not in the mood for games," I said, gesturing very slightly with the sword.

"Do you really think you're in a position to be making demands?" he asked, sounding vaguely amused now.

"I think," I said, in a very slow, measured tone, "that this sword was made for killing gods. I think that it just killed Fenris and that action is too significant for it not to have left a mark on the weapon that did the deed. I think that I have very little left to lose. And I think that we both know it's time to drop the masks and the games and just have an honest conversation."

He smiled again, a fainter but more honest expression. "Touché," he said. "Where do you want to start, then? Do you expect me to monologue about how my evil plans have finally come to fruition like a bad comic book villain?"

I stared at him for a few moments, then said, "Was it hard?"

"Was what hard?"

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

I gestured vaguely with the sword, since I didn't have a free hand to use right now. "This," I said. "All of it. The scheming, the manipulation, setting your son up to die. Was it hard?"

Loki was silent for a few moments. "Not practically," he said at last. "No. It was a very easy plan, as such things go. Very straightforward, plenty of time to plan things out."

I didn't say that he hadn't answered my question, because really, he had.

"Don't try to act the white knight," he said a few seconds later, likely guessing where my thoughts were going. "You and I are much alike, Winter. You have your share of blood on your hands."

"Don't think I've ever denied that," I said. "But I've never done...this."

"Done what?" he asked archly. "Killed someone who didn't deserve it? Betrayed a friend? Set someone up to fail and die for something that wasn't their fault?" He shook his head, not seeming concerned about how close the motion took his throat to the sword. "You said it yourself, Winter," he said, almost gently. "It's time to drop the masks. It's time for the truth to come out. And the truth is that while you may have told yourself to do the right thing, this is hardly the first time that circumstances have required you to do what is actually the needful thing."

I didn't respond.

"I'm sorry that it happened this way," Loki said. "You might not believe me, but I do genuinely regret the necessity of this. I made some mistakes, a long time ago, and Fenris is the one that paid for them. But in the end, it was necessary. And yes, it was...hard, to do this. To make this choice. But if I had the choice I'd do it all again."

I thought about arguing with him. There didn't seem to be much point. Nothing I could say would ever, ever change Loki's mind.

"You know," I commented, "I somehow thought that this would change things. That finally talking about it, confronting you, would...I don't know. Put it in perspective, I guess. But now it just feels...pointless."

"I regret that, as well," he said. "What I've done to you, I mean. I am genuinely fond of you, Winter. I would like for things to be different."

"Isn't that just how it goes," I sighed. "If only things could be different, huh?"

"If there are crueller words, I don't know them," Loki said. "But things aren't different. This is the world we have."

"Yeah," I said. "I know." I paused again. "You know, it's funny," I said. "You'd think I'd be nervous right now. Having cold feet, trying to delay as much as I can. Instead I find I just want to get things over with."

"What do you mean?"

I sighed. "Come on, Loki," I said. "I'm not a moron. This whole thing wasn't just about killing Fenris. If that was all you wanted you could have done it yourself ages ago. I think we both know what's coming next."

"You've gotten more astute," Loki said.

"Or maybe just less naive," I said.

He nodded. "Possible. Well, since you're in such a hurry, I'll get right to the point, then. Fenris was working to undermine our world in recent years, but his existence was still necessary. His role was a necessary one for our survival. Now that he is no more, someone else will have to fill it."

"And you want that someone to be me." It wasn't a question.

"You demonstrably have the necessary skills," he said, with a trace of dry humor in his voice.

I shook my head. "Unbelievable," I said. "You set all this up, from before I was even *born*, so that I could kill your son and take his place. Un-freaking-believable." I shook my head again. "How do you live with yourself?" I asked. "That's a serious question, by the way. How do you live with yourself with what you've done?"

"Every day," he said, "every single day I look at the world I helped to build. I look at people who spend their days on self-serving nonsense, who lie and cheat and steal and kill. I look at people who hate us and would destroy us if they could, and they don't even know what we do for them. I look at people who live their whole short lives, from birth to death, with never any understanding of how large the world is." His voice was very quiet, and deadly serious.

I stared, fascinated. I wasn't sure I'd ever heard Loki sound this passionate before, or this sincere.

"And I look at them, too," he said, gesturing out at the wall I could just barely see. "They're out there, Winter. All the time, they're out there, looking in at us. They would destroy us if they could, not out of any malice, but simply because that is what they are. And I know that what I do is what stands between all of those people and an utterly remorseless threat which they have no capacity to fight."

"So you're using the greater good defense," I said. "That's...not what I was expecting, honestly."

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

He shrugged. "I don't always like what I do," he said. "But what I do is necessary to protect the world."

"If this is what it takes to preserve the world," I said quietly, "then maybe this world deserves to end."

"Maybe it does," he agreed. "But do you have the right to make that choice for all the billions of people that would end with it?"

"No," I said. "But I have the right to make that choice for me. And I'm done. I'm done with your games and your plans, with you and Hunter and your pointless little war. As far as I'm concerned you're both equally bad, and you can both go screw yourselves." I lowered the sword to hang by my side, staring defiantly into Loki's eyes.

"I could make you do it," he said.

"Controlling me to that extent would make me pretty much just an automaton," I said. "Just following your orders, not acting on my own initiative. And if all you wanted was an automaton, you could just make a construct for that."

"Did I mention that you've gotten more astute?" he asked, sounding a bit annoyed now. "Because you have. So why shouldn't I just kill you, then, if you won't do what I need?"

"Because that would mean that Fenris died for nothing," I said, with a slightly manic grin. "That would mean admitting you *failed*. And you can't do that, can you? So you'll tell yourself that you can talk me around in time, that your plan can still work." I shook my head. "You won't kill me, Loki," I said. "You were never going to kill me. The only difference is that this time I'm calling your bluff."

I threw Tyrfing down at his feet, and gave him the finger. Then, without waiting for a response, I turned and walked away.

I'd walked away from Tyrfing more times than I could remember. Somehow, though, this time I knew it wouldn't follow me, that it was well and truly done.

I would have expected to be glad about it.

Epilogue

I live in Transylvania, now.

The castle is large and hollow, with just me in it. There are whole wings and towers which have been closed off for years now, collecting dust. Sometimes I go for weeks without leaving my study. Sometimes a restless mood strikes me and I rise to wander the empty halls, looking for I know not what.

At times I feel the need to leave, and I go to the forest instead. I take on the form of something that pretends to be a wolf, rather than masking myself as a man, and I hunt under the trees. Sometimes I stay there only hours. Sometimes I go on four feet for months at a time.

Aiko is still the Maiden of the Midnight Court, the youngest Queen of the Unseelie Sidhe. I am still her champion. Those choices were made for good, and there can be no turning back on them. She spends much of her time on the Otherside, going about the work that her role demands. I don't try to understand it anymore. The Courts are beyond my understanding. I've made my peace with that.

Every now and then she visits me in my castle. We make love, and eat, and talk about the way things are and the way things should be. I know she seeks her entertainment in other places much of the time these days. I don't blame her. I can't be what she needs anymore, and it would kill her to live the life I've chosen. We still love each other, as best we're able, and that's enough.

And then she goes back to her work, and leaves me to my empty castle, awaiting a visit that will come I know not when.

At times I do the work my role demands, as well. Not as often now as in those first years. My reputation precedes me. Sane people tend to fear the mad god who refused his title and cut himself off from the world. Those who thought they could manipulate me to use as a weapon learned otherwise in those first few years. Now Aiko seldom needs me to act against her opponents. The threat, the fear of me is enough.

I seldom have other visitors. Most of those I knew in my life before are gone now. Dead, or alive but disconnected. They moved on, and I cannot. The world has changed, in the years since I left it. I don't have a place there anymore.

The locals, too, avoid me. My castle, and the forests around it, have gained a reputation as a place of darkness and death. Though it's only relatively recently that I took up full-time residence here, a sort of folklore has already sprung up around the lonely castle on the hill, and the monster that calls it home. Aiko tells me the stories sometimes. Mostly they get it wrong.

That isn't the only bit of legend that's sprung up around me. In the ritual books of the new mages, those that entered into it after the world changed, there is an entry for me, the actions that will

Empty Places (Winter's Tale)

draw my attention and the sacrifices that might placate me when I arrive. I'm listed as an entity to summon only when absolutely necessary, and even then only with a great deal of care. I'm dangerous and volatile, according to the text, liable to lash out violently at any provocation and difficult to stop if I do.

I don't know who created that ritual, but it does work, and every now and then someone does invoke it. I've thought about having Aiko look into the matter, but it doesn't seem necessary. They aren't wrong. And it does me good to get out on occasion. Sometimes, when I notice the ritual tugging at my attention, I follow. Sometimes I don't.

Perhaps once a year Loki visits me. At first there was an edge of confrontation to it, an edge of tension. Now we've long since settled into a sort of comfortable disagreement, and his visits are more social than anything. He tells me of the world, the things that have happened since his last visit. I tell him about the small goings-on within my little piece of it. I think he appreciates the difference in scale.

He never asks me to take up the task I once declined, to accept the mantle of the wolf and become an unholy terror to his enemies. The offer is never spoken, but always there. Hunter is still out there; the things that live in the void are still out there. The work still needs done.

I never tell him I won't do it. But every time he leaves alone.

I don't sleep, haven't slept in years and years. I don't dream. But at times I remember, memories preserved as perfectly as a flower trapped in the ice, that cut deeper than a knife. I remember the man I was. I remember blood and fire. I remember death, so much death. I remember Snowflake. I remember Tyrfing. I remember holding the fate of worlds in my hands.

I remember me.

At times like that I sometimes think of going back. I think of taking up the sword again, and being that man again.

And then the moment passes, and the memory fades, and I go out to the forest to wash the memory away in blood and snow and moonlight. I know that I can't go back. I can't be the person I was. There are wounds too deep for healing, and there are things that can't be undone.

I made my choice. I'm at peace with that.

In name I'm still the jarl of Colorado Springs. It's been years since I set foot in the city. The work is done by Aiko, now. By Nóttolfr, who took over after Kyi left to seek her fortune elsewhere, on her own rather than as a follower. Selene, they tell me, is still there, and in truth she might as well be the jarl herself, these days.

I fill my time in other ways, now. I hunt when the mood takes me. I read a lot. I think a lot. I spend a great deal of time making things. These days I make things to please myself, rather than out of

necessity; they're works of art rather than weapons. Sometimes I spend days getting the color or the pattern of something just right. I've spent a lot of time over the past few years trying to come to terms with what I've done, the blood on my hands. I've had some success.

It's not a bad life, as such things go. It's not how I would have seen myself ending up, but in some ways that's not a bad thing.

In the evening I make myself a cup of tea, and I begin the long, slow climb up the tower. There's no rush. There's never any rush anymore, for me. No need to hurry when your days are empty anyway.

At the top, I sit on the parapet. I sip my tea, and I watch the sunset, and I pet the squirrels who come to eat the food I leave here. As the sun slips behind the mountains and the world fades to grey, I look down at the ground far below and I watch it be swallowed up by the shadows.

I think of jumping off, of the wind whistling past me as I plummet into darkness. I think of broken things. I remember that plain at the end of the world, and the infinite void that lay beyond it.

I remember Fenris's blood on my hands.

And then I finish my tea, and night settles in to stay for a time, and I go back inside. I take the empty cup back to the kitchen and I wash it, and dry it, and put it back into the cupboard. I go to my study. There's a book in German lying open on the desk, with a page of neatly written vocabulary notes next to it. There's a half-finished poem not far away.

I ignore all that and walk to the bookshelf instead, tracing my fingers over the spines of the books. I linger over a photo album, but I don't look inside. I don't need to look to see the images in my mind's eye, clear as day. The memories are all there, sharp and fresh. An echo of times gone by.

I remember what I did. The lives I took. The evil I did, in the name of a greater good. The sacrifices I made.

With the perspective offered by time and distance, I see that I was a monster back then. I'm a monster now, albeit a mostly retired one. I've made my peace with that, as well.

In the end, we can all be only what we are.