

Seed and Trellis

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Dedicated to somewhere between nine and thirteen hedgehogs.

散るをいとふ世にも人にもさきがけて 散る
こそ花と吹く小夜嵐

-三島 由紀夫の辞世、1970

A small night storm blows/Saying 'falling is
the essence of a flower'/Preceding those who
hesitate

-Death poem of Mishima Yukio, 1970

Because this territory in my internal universe is continually shifting, I've learned to look for
patterns and rhythms in the chaos that I can use as guides when I can't locate steady ground. So

I make maps from my memories. I make my maps out of words and stories.

-Jacks Ashley McNamara, from *Navigating the Space Between Brilliance and Madness: A
Reader and Roadmap of Bipolar Worlds (Tenth Anniversary Edition)*, 2013

Chapter One

I really hate being woken up by phone calls. Not a huge fan of phone calls in general, but I don't sleep well, and having it interrupted when I *did* manage to sleep was particularly obnoxious. The fact that this call had woken me out of a fairly nasty nightmare made me resent it less, but did not make me sound any happier when I answered.

"What do you want?" I didn't see who was calling before I answered. They weren't listed as a contact, but I replaced phones often enough that didn't mean much.

"I've got a situation I'd like you to take a look at." I placed the voice, a low and slightly rough baritone, after a moment. I didn't talk to Audgrim terribly often, but his voice was memorable.

"Cool. And you woke me up because...?"

"It's noon." He was trying for chastising. It didn't work very well.

"I am all too aware," I groaned. "Your point being?"

"It's family stuff. Some really weird vandalism or something at one of our businesses."

I yawned. "Yeah, still not seeing why I care here."

"I'll owe you a favor," he said. "Commensurate, with our standard restrictions." Audgrim sounded like he'd just bitten into a lemon.

That did get me to pay attention, though it didn't prevent another yawn. "That serious, huh?" Favors were, in the world Audgrim and I moved in, a rather big deal. Debt and obligation in general, really, but favors in particular had weight. We'd exchanged them before, hence the standing set of restrictions, but still not something to hand out lightly.

"Yeah. It's...really strange, Kyoko. I'm kind of at a loss here."

I sighed. "Ugh. Fine. I'll be ready in twenty. You're driving." I hung up before he could respond, and reluctantly got out of bed. It wouldn't take me that long to get dressed, given I was barely aiming as high as "presentable", but a few minutes to clear out the lingering anxiety of the nightmare would be helpful.

Audgrim had a nice car. I didn't really know enough to identify it much beyond that, cars for me having always been something other people used. All I really knew was that it was a black SUV, it was comfortable, and it looked and smelled new. Money might not be worth all that much to either of us, but even a half-dwarf tended towards hoarding and luxury.

Audgrim didn't look like what most people would imagine a dwarf as. And it wasn't just because he was half-human, either. The dvergar were just...not much like what people tended to think of when they pictured a dwarf. Audgrim was tall, six feet and change, with broad shoulders, vaguely Scandinavian features, and a contagious grin. He was generally clean-shaven,

because as he freely acknowledged, his face did not lend itself to beards. Visible stubble currently suggested both a stressful few days and the look of a mangy rodent.

“So what are we going to look at, anyway?” I asked as he pulled away from my house. I didn’t bother keeping track of where we were going, had in fact closed my eyes already. I had the window down, the fall air was pleasantly crisp, and the breeze felt nice on my face. Summer in Pittsburgh was generally unpleasantly warm by my standards, and I felt that the cooler weather today merited conscious attention.

“Some funeral home in North Shore. Smaller place, a bit older. Owner has a contract with us for security.”

I’d never entirely gotten clear on whether the local dvergar ran a security company or a protection racket. In most ways, I supposed, the difference was fairly trivial. I also wasn’t sure why a funeral home needed meaningful security, but I guess people got weird about corpses sometimes. “And you said it was vandalism?”

“I honestly have no fucking clue,” Audgrim said. We turned, and picked up speed. Down out of the tangle of tiny, steep streets around my house, then. “I don’t know what else to call it, but it’s bizarre. This is the eighth incident in just under two weeks. They’ve all been at either buildings we own, businesses we operate, or businesses we provide security to. Every time, it’s been some kind of break-in, and I have no idea why, because they haven’t been taking anything, literally nothing that we can tell. Haven’t been damaging anything really. Everything else has been kind of inconsistent, though.”

“No witnesses, I take it?”

“None,” he said, his voice sour now. “Sometimes the people on site don’t remember seeing anything, others they remember falling asleep and having really weird dreams. At least one didn’t remember anything, but there’s a window of around twenty minutes he doesn’t remember *at all*, including a conversation with his girlfriend that happened during. Cameras have been having weird malfunctions; we got a few images, but nothing recognizable or useful.”

“Huh.” Despite myself, I had to admit I was somewhat intrigued now. This was, in fact, strange. “So definitely targeting you, but not stealing anything. Anyone get hurt?”

“Yeah, this time was the first. Happened last night, around two in the morning. Security guard who was on shift at the time, human but competent and fairly informed. And the injuries are as bizarre as everything else, too. Severe frostbite for no apparent reason, and necrosis that resembles brown recluse bites. He’s in the hospital currently. He doesn’t remember much of it either, woke up on the floor like that after they were gone.”

I shuddered a bit at that. I was familiar with what brown recluse venom did to people. It...was not a pleasant thing, even just to look at. “Okay, yeah, starting to get an idea of why you’re freaked. No metaphysical trail either I assume?”

“Nope. Can’t even find traces to show that a working happened. I mean, it’s pretty clear at least some of this is magic, don’t really know how else to explain some of this shit. But no traces. You’ve got better senses for that than any of our staff, though.”

I had to laugh at that comment. Bit of an understatement, really. “Okay. Anyone else

going to be there?”

“Yeah, the owner’s on site. He’s aware of the supernatural, but not in any detailed way. He knows I’m bringing a consultant, but I didn’t tell him anything else about you.”

“Awesome. I think that’s all my questions. How’s the stereo in this thing?”

Rather than answer, he just put on some music. Bach, it sounded like, one of the few areas of overlap in our tastes. I tended to like my music either much more or much less traditional than Audgrim prefers. Classic rock, in my opinion, was one of the greatest mistakes of the twentieth century.

Bach was good, though. I didn’t immediately recognize the composition, but it had a sort of silvery, tingling feeling about it. The stereo was passable. The breeze was crisp. Today was going better than I’d expected from how I’d woken up.

The trip wasn’t too long. Two or three songs before Audgrim parked and turned the music off. I opened my eyes, blinking a bit at the sunlight, and looked around.

We were in one of the nicer parts of North Shore. Not too far from a park, it looked like, and far enough from the sports stadiums not to have much traffic. I didn’t come to this neighborhood often enough to say more specifically than that.

The funeral home itself was a relatively small building, set aside from its neighbors a bit with its own parking lot. It was nice, could have passed for a restaurant, but I didn’t like the way it felt. It had a bitterness to it, not evil, but bitter. Even at the best of times death had a bitterness about it.

The front door had a sign up apologetically announcing they would be closed for the next few days, with no reason listed. Cheapish metal door, painted, no window to show what was behind it. There was a window next to it, but the blinds were closed. Very little to show what was inside, aside from the sign out front.

Audgrim had a key, unsurprisingly, and opened the door without knocking. Inside, we were in a lobby or something of the sort; architecture not being a topic I knew much about, I wasn’t sure what the specific word was. Bright fluorescent lights, cheap vinyl flooring, fairly cheap desk but the computer was pretty new and appeared to be of decent quality.

The guy sitting behind that desk was probably in his early thirties, slightly darker skin than Audgrim but that wasn’t saying much. Cheap suit, mostly black, of course; I imagined that he wore black more days than not, in his line of work. He looked nervous, and like he hadn’t slept much last night.

“Hey, Anthony. This is Kyoko Sugiyama, she’s the consultant I mentioned this morning. Kyoko, Anthony Hayes, he’s the owner here.”

I could practically see him evaluating me. I knew what he was thinking, too. I didn’t exactly look like a professional investigator or consultant, or a professional anything, really. I looked like a Japanese girl too young to buy alcohol with bright green eyes and extensive tattoos. The hibiscus blossom on my right hand and the wolf on the left were always visible, but

I'd worn short sleeves today, so he could see that my arms were also covered in wolves and flowers, clouds and snakes. They were all very vivid, very colorful, and none of them made me look professional.

"Pleased to meet you, Kyoko," he said, his pronunciation of my name fairly terrible. I was pretty used to that, on the whole. His voice was otherwise quite pleasant, a nice dark green feeling about it.

"Call me Key." I could see Audgrim's amusement at this, though I doubted Anthony noticed; Audgrim was fairly reserved, which seemed to be a common trait among the dvergar. He knew about this little joke, though. Adding that syllable—Kiyoko, rather than Kyoko—was the most common way for Americans to mispronounce my name. Using it as a nickname was a subtle bit of mockery, more or less saying that if they were going to get it wrong, they should just stop after that mistake. They rarely realized I was making fun of them.

Audgrim knew, of course. He was one of the few people I knew whose name was harder for the people here to pronounce than mine. He didn't even try to get them to actually call him Auðgrímr, but even Audgrim was hard for most Americans. I supposed we'd bonded over that to a degree.

I looked around as we walked into the building further, took a deep breath, noticed something. "Hey, Anthony. Do you use acetone much?"

He blinked. "Um. What?"

"Acetone," I said again. I was trying to sound patient; I wasn't sure how well it was working. "Do you use it here?"

"Not really?"

"Cool. Didn't think so, but I don't really know how funeral homes work, so I figured I'd check. So this is the room where your guy was working, Audgrim?"

Audgrim was clearly just as lost, but he'd worked with me before. He knew enough to just roll with it. "Yeah. Usually behind the desk for overnights. No security camera in this room, though."

"Awesome." I walked over to the desk, squatted down to look more closely. "Okay, yup, stronger over here. Probably sprayed the whole room with the stuff." I had no idea how they couldn't smell it. But I'd gotten pretty used to that. Humans just had such mediocre senses, and dvergar were only mildly better.

I stood up again, looked at the room again now that I was starting to get a better feel for it. "Okay. And this is the only door into the building, correct?"

"Yes," Anthony said. "There's an employee entrance towards the back, but it gets locked up overnight. That one does have a security camera, also, and it doesn't seem like anyone was back there last night."

"Yeah, that tracks. I'm guessing you don't have any particularly important bodies here right now?"

"No. Nothing out of the ordinary at all, really. And it doesn't look like anyone was in

that area, either. Doors stayed locked overnight, and there's a camera in there that didn't catch anything."

I nodded. About what I'd expected. "How about an office or records area, do you have anything like that?"

"Two offices, yes. One is mine, the other is shared by a few of the employees."

"Makes sense. Mind showing me?"

Anthony clearly thought I was insane. But he trusted Audgrim, and I could see that he wasn't entirely clueless, either. Most humans, when they saw how young I looked, tended to get dismissive. Anthony looked like he knew better, past that first moment of confusion. He thought I was crazy, but he didn't think I was stupid, and he was smart enough to be wary. He showed us to the offices. I didn't have to ask which was his. It was the one that reeked of acetone.

"Ugh. Yeah, they were definitely in here also. Not in the other, I don't think. Cool if I look at your desk?"

"Um. Sure?"

"Awesome." I walked over and sat down, trying to get a feel for the space. Ugly desk, but the chair was nice. Computer was also nice, but not special. There were few signs of personality, and those I did see felt impersonal—a fake plant, a small picture of a dog. Nothing that was specific to Anthony's life. The desk was a style that had locks on most of the drawers. Carpet in this room, which had absorbed more of the acetone, leaving it even more noxious in there. Audgrim, I thought, could smell it now, based on his expression.

They hadn't sprayed the desk down fully, though. It would have damaged the material, most likely, and that would have given them away. As I dragged my fingertips over it, I could get a faint read, not much more than a tingle, but it was there. It had a nasty, slightly greasy feeling to it. I found where that feeling was strongest, and pulled that drawer open.

From the look on Anthony's face, it was supposed to be locked, and he hadn't realized that it wasn't until just now. He looked too abruptly tense for that. Looking inside, I saw what looked like some old-school accounting books. I didn't look at them more closely, just closed the drawer.

"That'd be what they were here for, I'm guessing," I said. "I don't think they went anywhere else. Acetone seems like it was just here, the lobby, and the hallway. That'd be why your people didn't get any traces, incidentally, Audgrim."

He blinked at that. "What?"

I shrugged. "It's not a perfect mask, but it would be plenty to remove faint traces. I haven't seen this trick in a while, but acetone is a pretty good choice for it, and it's distinctive." I finished looking over the desk, didn't find anything else, stood back up. They were both staring at me.

"You're going to have to explain that one," Audgrim said after a moment, when it became clear that I wasn't going to without prompting.

“Oh, it’s pretty simple, really. A substance’s physical and metaphysical properties are often related to some degree. Not always, but often. Acetone is a really effective solvent, broad-spectrum and cheap. It’s polar, and ideally you’d mix it with something like toluene to get more of the nonpolar solutes. But it’s a great solvent, and in this case that maps across.”

They continued to stare. I walked back to the door of the office, and it took a moment for them to follow.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Audgrim was the one who said it, but it was clear it was a shared sentiment.

I rolled my eyes. “Some of us got passing grades in chemistry. Fine, I’ll dumb it down for you. Acetone dissolves all kinds of shit, and that means that it can be used to dissolve magic to a limited degree. Better than water, and it’s both cheap and accessible. Also, it has a really strong odor, which makes it useful as a more literal scent mask as well. You can mix in other solvents or additives, if you want to tailor it or get a stronger effect. But even just acetone with a mild magical charge will work. They probably put it in a spray bottle and doused the whole area they’d been through, it’d be more than enough to wipe this kind of transient signature.”

“Okay, see, that I can understand,” Audgrim said. “Did they wipe it well enough to work on you?”

I grinned. “Let’s find out.”

It would be inaccurate to describe what I did next as opening my senses to magical energies. Variations of that phrasing were how most practitioners I’d discussed the topic with described it. And for them, it was probably accurate. Mages generally had some passive awareness of energy fields, enough to recognize some nonhumans, detect an active working, or pick up on a strong impression that had been reinforced in a location repeatedly. But unless they made a conscious effort, they didn’t usually get details or subtle signatures; they were barely more sensitive, in a lot of cases, than ordinary humans. Even most of the nonhuman practitioners I had met had to work to get detail.

It wasn’t like that for me. I was always aware of those forces on some level. I’d smelled the death in this place as soon as I walked in the door; it was dry, more bones-and-dust than rotting meat, but you can’t have this many corpses passing through a building and not leave an impression on it. I’d felt it in my fingertips when I touched Anthony’s desk, greasy and distasteful. It was always there for me, always had been; I’d developed the ability by the time I was talking in sentences, and didn’t remember what life was like without it.

So I really didn’t have to open myself up at all. I’d learned to filter that information out really well, because otherwise it became overstimulating and unpleasant. I was used to masking it, softening it a bit so I could function, practiced enough that I didn’t really have to think about it. But it was an active effort to do so, and all it took to bring it into focus was relaxing a little. The filters went away, and that background perception flooded in at full intensity.

The world was so vivid, everything so much more intense. The colors were rich and oversaturated, the humming of the fluorescent lights felt like music, the texture of my shirt more like silk than mass-produced cotton. It felt *great*, like I was just so much more *alive* than I’d been ten seconds ago. It usually did, right up until it felt absolutely terrible.

This wasn't bad, though. Controlled environment, not a lot of activity happening, nothing awful hitting my awareness, and it felt amazing. I was still grinning, but I could tell it was a more relaxed expression than it had been a moment prior, my jaw looser, my spine less rigid. People had told me the sudden euphoria looked quite a bit like I was high, complete with being fascinated by things no one else could see and occasionally giggling for no apparent reason.

The building's background impression was stronger now. I could taste the bitterness of it, smell the dry, sterile death in the air. There was surprisingly little grief in it, though I supposed probably the grieving families didn't spend much time back here or in the lobby. There would be meeting rooms that tasted like mourning, I was sure. But here, in the areas where this was just a business, it was detached, clinical, more formaldehyde in the scent than tears.

These things weren't actually what I was perceiving, of course. This perception didn't have much to do with anything as simple as the chemical signals people called scents. But the human brain—and mine was close enough to human for this purpose—doesn't have a native way to understand magic, to interpret these energies. And comparing things to what we already knew was how people made sense of things far outside their realm of experience, how they made information into meaning. Most people interpreted energy fields primarily as visual metaphors. For me they were a cocktail of every kind of sensory information, mixed through each other and with more mundane synesthesia tying them together as well.

There was a reason that initial rush of perception made me look high. The sudden wave of all these sensations all at once, so vivid and oversaturated, was intense, and the euphoria was momentarily overpowering. It took a few moments for me to focus enough to actually look for traces.

Using energized solvents to wipe the faint, lingering impressions left by transient presence or momentary workings was similar to using something like bleach to wipe more ordinary biometric information. That is to say, it was possible, but you had to be really fucking thorough to be sure. Also like biometrics, the average person had no way to check whether it had worked. A mage would have to be in a trance, generally speaking, to perceive the local field closely enough to be sure. You usually didn't have that kind of time when you were somewhere that you weren't supposed to be.

So I went looking in case they missed a spot. From the outside, I was sure it looked bizarre, and it wasn't making Anthony less convinced I was insane. I glanced around the office, but I wasn't expecting anything, and I was correct. They'd been thorough in there. I barely glanced at it, just enough to confirm that they'd gotten everything, and then wandered out into the hallway. I was moving erratically, staring at walls with dilated eyes and sniffing the air. Physically examining things like that, trying to get more sensory information, had no direct influence on what I could feel. But doing so seemed to bring it into better focus somehow. Maybe just because it was what my brain knew to do to improve acuity, and so the action focused my attention.

The hallway was pretty well cleaned out, too. They must have used most of a bottle of acetone in here, and the smell was terrible. Anthony started to ask something, but Audgrim

shushed him with a quiet voice that rippled gunmetal-grey. I kept looking.

And then I saw it. They'd missed a spot, in the hallway next to the door of the lobby. A patch of wall, near the floor, where there was an interruption in the background field of the building. People often weren't as careful with walls as with the floor. It wasn't a strong signal, probably only left any trace of the person's presence because they'd just done whatever the hell they did to the security guard. But it was there.

"Got something," I said, walking over to it and squatting down. From the outside, it looked like I was staring at a patch of wall no different than any other, the white paint comparably stained, nothing unusual at all about it.

From my perspective, there was a faint, shimmering overlay on it. It was iridescent, a bit like an oil slick, laid over a dark base. The shimmering feeling was common to human magic in my experience, but that base layer was unusual. When I reached out and touched it, the greasy feeling was stronger. When I focused on it, the background hum of fluorescent lights took on a slightly dissonant tone. I liked dissonance a lot of the time, but this sound was grating, unpleasant. I leaned in and licked the paint (Anthony was staring with such intensity it was satisfying even though I couldn't see his expression), and it had a bitterness more noxious than that of the funeral home itself, foul, almost tainted. It felt gleeful, too, and that was kinda creepy, all things considered.

Enough. I closed my eyes, focused on my breathing, and reinstated those filters. It was always harder than taking them down in the first place. When I got them in place, I almost fell over, the sudden loss of sensation disorienting and unpleasant. It was like opting into blindness, and the knowledge that it was better than the alternative did not make the experience less jarring. It took me a moment to stand up.

Audgrim could recognize it. We'd worked together before, quite a few times, and from what I'd been told the disoriented feeling of closing myself off from the world was as visible as the high of opening that floodgate to begin with. By the time I'd finished standing up, he was standing next to me with a hand on my elbow to steady me. I'd have been annoyed by the gesture, had it not been helpful when I almost lost my balance. I considered being annoyed anyway, but it seemed a bit petty.

He waited until I was steady before saying anything. "You get anything from it?"

"A bit, yeah," I said. "Feels mostly human, shimmers like human, but weird. There's some admixture I don't recognize, a nasty one. And it's fairly strong. Hard to say how strong exactly, there's not much to work with here, but not a lightweight."

Audgrim looked unhappy. Anthony looked *incredibly* uncomfortable. We walked back out to the lobby with nothing else said.

"Okay. You have anything else to do here?" Audgrim glanced from me to the human in the room. There were several kinds of implicit meaning, there. Anthony might be at least slightly informed, but there were conversations you didn't have in front of someone who was so relatively innocent.

"Nah, think that's about all I'm getting here. They cleaned this place up pretty good."

He nodded, unsurprised. My senses for this kind of thing were very, very sharp, but even for me, there were limits. “Okay. Thanks, Anthony, we’ll get out of your hair now. I’ll let you know if I need anything else.”

“Sure,” he said. “Nice to meet you, uh, Key.”

“Likewise, Mr. Hayes. Have a nice day.” I grinned at him, wide enough to look a little bit uncanny, and walked out the door.

Chapter Two

Audgrim didn't say anything until we were back on the road. He was driving slower now, on quieter streets, not so much trying to get somewhere as just driving for something to do while we talked. The equivalent of walking while you're on the phone. "So," he said eventually. "Interpretation?"

I took a moment to sort my thoughts out, looking out the window at the trees. We were going slow enough that I could keep my eyes open without the visual input becoming unpleasant, and the breeze was still nice, and today really had shaped up better than I'd expected. "Well, it's a bit limited. Not a lot of concrete information to work with. And a lot of what I do have is supposition, so keep that in mind."

"Noted."

"Cool. So, first off, you're probably looking at some kind of information motive. If it were an isolated event, I'd assume it had something to do with one of the corpses, but that doesn't really track with a pattern that's hit other kinds of business. Can't rule it out entirely, and I'd definitely say you should look into who's in there currently, just in case. But they were in his office looking at his books, and combined with the pattern at the other places, that feels like they were after information."

"Agreed. I'll look for a connection, and even if they weren't there about the bodies, there might be something useful there. But yeah, that's about what I figured. You think he was lying?" It wasn't really a question. Audgrim could read me well enough for that.

"Mmm, yes and no? I don't think he was lying, exactly. And I'm almost sure he didn't know that someone had been in his desk. But something about it felt weird. It felt like he didn't want us to look at the actual, I dunno, cadaver area? Not sure what the word is. But he was real quick to say there was nothing there and no need to look at it. It's why I recommended that angle."

He grunted. "Yeah, that tracks. We do have monitoring in there, and I'm pretty sure nobody was in that room last night. But that doesn't mean there's nothing important there."

"Pretty much my thoughts. And then the office itself was also odd. He struck me as the type to do his accounting on a computer, so why are there actual account books in his desk, and why'd he flinch when he realized the attacker saw them? Just weird all around. That might be me being a distrustful bitch and projecting, though." I shrugged.

"Possible, but still worth looking into." Audgrim sounded thoughtful. He didn't contest my characterization of myself. That was one of the things I liked about Audgrim, about dvergar in general, really. They didn't tend to deny reality, to sugarcoat things. He wasn't judging me, but the simple reality was that I had issues with trust, and sometimes they affected my reaction to things. "Anything else about the attacker?"

"A little, but again, supposition. They're definitely mostly human. There's some other

influence I didn't recognize, but there are way too many things it could be for me to narrow it down past that. They knew that trick for masking their presence, and that's interesting, because not many people do. There's rarely a reason to bother. Even for me, they wouldn't have left much of a trail here. Not enough to do much more than realize someone had been present, and the acetone kinda gives that one away on its own."

"Does seem a bit weird," he agreed. "We already knew that someone was doing this, just not how or why. And the smell would have been enough to lead you to the office, anyway. So why bother with this?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. So maybe it's something else, some detail in the signature obvious enough to catch in even a faint trace. Maybe they're just the kind of paranoiac who hides their trail when no one's even looking. Can't really assess motive, but it's a weird choice, and it's a pretty specific trick. To me that suggests they have experience. On which note, the trace I did find was a bit..." I trailed off, uncertain.

"A bit what?" Audgrim prompted.

"I got a fairly strong emotional echo," I said. "Nothing too clear or specific, but strong. There was a very stark feeling of satisfaction, glee even. And I'm almost sure this was left on the way into the building, not back out, so it's not that they found what they wanted in the office. Pretty sure they were getting off on what they'd done to your security guard, and I'm not sure that's as metaphorical as I'd like."

I hadn't forgotten how he'd described the injuries, and the necrosis from a brown recluse bite was seriously nasty. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what kind of person got that kind of satisfaction from making someone's body start rotting while they were still alive. Apparently Audgrim didn't like the idea any more than I did, because he was silent for a moment, and he didn't seem happy.

"Anyway," I said after a brief but uncomfortable pause. "That's about all I've got. I can take a look at the other locations if you want, but if it's the same person, I can pretty much promise I won't find anything useful. This impression wouldn't have lasted more than another day, so I highly doubt there's still anything at the others."

He nodded. "Still. Gives me a few angles to look into. If I find something, do you mind if I call you?"

I could have said no. I'd done what he asked, after all. But the favor he'd offered was commensurate, and so far I hadn't provided him with all that much. Audgrim was also someone I'd worked with before, and an acquaintance. Almost a friend, and I didn't have many of those.

And besides. I was bored.

"Sure, feel free. It might be fun."

Audgrim drove me home without me having to ask. It was just a given. He knew that I was perfectly capable of getting back on my own, but he also knew that I was very much not fond of public transportation, and rideshare services were a hassle. So he drove me home,

dropped me at the door with another promise that he'd call when he knew something, and left.

People tended to find it surprising that I had my own house. Oh, it wasn't extravagant or anything. It was an older building halfway up one of Pittsburgh's rather absurd hills, over in Southside. It wasn't huge, but it wasn't small either, a bit narrow but three stories tall to make up for it. More to the point, though, people tended to find it surprising that I owned a house at all, given what I did for a living, or more accurately what I didn't.

Usually, when they asked how I could afford it, I just smiled and acted mysterious. I figured that whatever explanation they came up with based on that was generally going to be both less boring and less creepy than the reality.

It was far more space than I needed, really. It was just me living there. I barely even used the ground floor, and the second floor was mostly a functional space. Kitchen, a small studio or workshop, two guest bedrooms as though I had guests. My personal space was on the third floor; thankfully, I didn't mind stairs. I kicked my shoes off just inside the front door, locked it thoroughly, and then went upstairs, yawning a bit.

Much like having a house, people often didn't seem to expect me to have a computer. I really couldn't understand why that would be a surprise. Sure, a lot of supernatural creatures predate electric lighting. But I wasn't remotely one of them, and even they often understood the power of modern tools. They hadn't lived that long by being incapable of adapting to changing circumstances. Other people, who knew me, were sometimes startled to see it from me specifically, because I tend to produce a lot of static discharge when I'm excited or agitated. But I, too, am capable of adapting, and that's a solvable issue. A good antistatic mat and strap, a passable Faraday cage on the computer, and backup peripherals made it trivial.

The bottom line was that I was a child of the modern era. I grew up in the early days of the Internet, my father had the right mix of money and apathy to leave me with a personal computer and nothing else to do as a kid, and I had a degree in computer science. I could figure out how to use one. It baffled me that this surprised people. I turned mine on when I got home, and went to water my houseplants.

I had a lot of them. Plants thrived in my care, always had, and I had no idea why. It didn't seem to matter what I did; the most basic tending was enough to keep them healthy and growing. I was grateful for that. They were the only company I had a lot of days, so keeping them healthy was fairly important to me.

In my personal space, it was mostly flowers, selected for their scent. Lilies and violets, calendula and Siberian iris, lavender and hibiscus...there were enough that the whole top floor of my house smelled like flowers. There was also a sort of small, enclosed sunroom on that floor, where I kept the carnivores.

Other groups were more functional in nature, including a number that I wasn't legally allowed to have. The small loft above my computer had a collection of psychoactives, for example, that would lead to a very interesting conversation if the wrong person saw them. The second floor had a bunch of edibles next to the kitchen, a mix of herbs and edible flowers.

Also on the second floor, in a separate room, I had a collection of, ah, non-edibles. I had some classics in there, wolfsbane and foxglove, belladonna, both hemlock and water hemlock.

Others were more obscure, things like autumn crocus, Japanese skimmia, yellow jessamine and blue lobelia. It was an extensive collection, and all told I had enough poison in that room to kill at least a dozen or two people. I was, of course, of such fine and upstanding moral character that no one would even imagine I would do such a thing, but I could.

I was pretty safe myself. I had a strong resistance to toxins, and especially more natural ones like these. Still, I wore gloves and a mask in that room, and I didn't use that space for any other purpose, because I wasn't an idiot.

Upstairs, the computer was powered up and I had a ton of unread messages. To be expected, really. Also to be expected, most of them I could put off for later without issue. There were several people wanting art commissions, and while it was bad praxis for a freelance artist to put off responding to those, I didn't care. As people around me often noted, a freelance artist rarely had her own house, and I was doing it as a hobby. I only took payment at all to avoid encouraging the assholes who think artists should work for free because it'll be good exposure. Just because I don't need the money doesn't mean other people don't. Of far more interest, though, was a message from Pepper.

Friendships were in many ways easier for me to maintain online than in person. It was...tidier that way. I only had four people I'd actually call a friend in this city, but I knew a lot of people online, and Pepper was the closest of them. I'd never seen her face or heard her voice. She'd never heard mine, and the only images she'd seen of me were ones that she was pretty much guaranteed not to realize depicted a real person. But we were friends in a way I couldn't often find in person. I responded to *her* message right away.

EmeraldKeychain: *Hey. What's up?* I used a fairly random username, mostly because I used the same one everywhere, and this one was almost always available. That it also had several layers of in-joke only I would understand made it even better.

She responded almost immediately. **blackpeppermint:** *howldy. not much. tired. you?* She did not use a consistent username, though it always had Pepper in it. She also did not use consistent punctuation or grammar, and expecting consistent sanity from any of my friends was wishful thinking at best. Conversations with Pepper could be...interesting as a result.

EmeraldKeychain: *Eh. Weird morning. Not exactly bad, but definitely weird.*

blackpeppermint: *every morning is weird when you're a weirdo honey*

I had to laugh at that. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Okay, yeah, you got me there. Weirder than usual, then.*

blackpeppermint: *well shit. how far should i be running do you think?*

EmeraldKeychain: *Okay, for one thing I'm not *that* bad. For another, you're already on the other side of the continent.*

blackpeppermint: *key. you are literally a hermetic madwoman who is secretly the heiress to a large fortune of suspicious provenance and you draw tentacle monsters while in a mantic visionary fugue. when a person of this description says "hi today was weird enough to tip the scale even for me" it is the opening scene of either a horror flick or a disaster movie and if its the latter i would like to start packing now.*

EmeraldKeychain: *1) Congratulations on using hermetic, provenance, and mantic all in one sentence, I am in awe. 2) Also you can use those in a sentence but you can't spell large? 3) Given you're the one who asked me to draw tentacle monsters I'm not sure you can throw stones. And 4) It's solidly a horror flick so far, so I think you're safe.*

blackpeppermint: *1) thank you, i got a word of the day calendar. 2) screw you, it was a long day at work. 3) see previoius 4) welp, good luck, hopefully you're getting cast as the final girl*

I was laughing pretty hard by this point. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Yeah, here's hoping. Work worse than usual today?* She was several timezones earlier than I was, but I was most of the way to nocturnal and she had to get up at hell o'clock for her job at a bakery. So she was still often done with work by the time I woke up.

blackpeppermint: *girl you don't even know. i spent seven hours on a wedding cake. seven. hours. then the guy showed up and threw a tantrum because he spelled his wife's name wrong on the order and didn't leave enough time before the reception for me to fix it without it looking terrible. freaking humans.*

I appreciated that about Pepper. She had absolutely no involvement with the supernatural that I was aware of. She was still very conscientious about distinguishing between "humans" and "people", because she felt that many animals had consciousness and should be included under the heading of people. It was an interesting attitude. Given that she ate them quite enthusiastically it might also be a somewhat concerning one, but it was definitely *interesting*.

EmeraldKeychain: *Okay yeah that does sound like a nightmare. I've never understood the wedding cake thing, honestly. Cake at weddings, sure, makes as much sense as anything else about weddings. But wedding cakes seem like a lot of hassle for no reason.*

blackpeppermint: *hard agree. they don't even taste good, and I would know. highly overrated. also blech, apparently dad's getting off work early today so i gtg soon.*

I winced. I didn't know a whole bunch about Pepper's living circumstances. But I knew she was living with her parents for financial reasons, and from the specific stories she'd shared, I knew that was deeply unfortunate. **EmeraldKeychain:** *woof. Luck with the relatives.* I didn't refer to her parents as family. That word was meant for better people than them.

blackpeppermint: *woof back you lunatic. luck with the slasher or w/e.*

I was smiling after that conversation, even if it did end on a bit of a down note. Pepper tended to have that effect on me. It was a strange and probably somewhat dysfunctional friendship, but I found it to be a rewarding one. She was an interesting person. She lived in Los Angeles, quite literally the other side of the continent, and we would most likely never interact in person. But she was one of my closest friends, and I spent more time interacting with her than probably anyone else.

Then I remembered I had been checking messages. The request for help with a music video was easy enough to reply to. The boilerplate email from a tattoo artist about availability and the song recommendations from an acquaintance with delusions of poesy I didn't need to

respond to right now. But then I got to an email from Caleb, about some stained glass workshop, and the smile went away pretty fast.

Caleb was in many ways a sort of inverse or foil to Pepper. He was also an old friend, and for a long time he'd been a close one. But lately I was having to pull away from him, and soon I'd have to cut ties entirely. It wasn't that he was a bad person, nothing like that at all.

It was just that when we'd met, we'd both been undergraduate students. He was twenty, I looked nineteen and at the time that was almost accurate. He was working towards a law degree, I was doing computer science and trying to figure out what to do with my life. We'd bonded over some shared interests, stuck around in each other's lives.

Now he was a practicing attorney. He expected to make partner soon with a local criminal defense firm. Meanwhile, I still looked nineteen. I could cover that to a degree with cosmetics, but I knew he was starting to wonder why I hadn't aged a day in fifteen years. I knew I had to cut ties soon. I understood that, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

Caleb was why I stopped looking for local human friends. Most people who had any real involvement with the supernatural did eventually. It was generally felt that it was cruel for one of us to draw a vanilla human into our life. This wasn't, as newcomers sometimes assumed, because they'd get dragged into something terrible, or you'd have to kill them to protect some secret. Those things happened, sure. There were horror stories about it. But they were rare.

Far more commonly, things were like this. Tension built as they noticed more and more things that were strange. Many supernatural beings, even those like me who were partially human, didn't age normally, and eventually that became obvious. Inexplicable things happened—why exactly *did* I go through so many cell phones as one after another got fried by static? My senses were far sharper than most, and that I had to worry about things like smelling an emotional resonance I shouldn't know about was unusual. But even modest awareness of things humans weren't aware of became apparent over time. Questions would be asked that you had no answer for. You couldn't keep the secret forever, and if you did tell them, all you'd accomplished was to leave them questioning their own sanity for the rest of their life. They would in some ways be as set apart from their world as you were, at that point.

It was cruel. It was almost always tragic. Like most people, I'd thought I would be the exception until I experienced this collapse myself. Other relationships had been even more unstable, but even with Caleb, who was both sheltered and kind enough to give the benefit of a great deal of doubt, it was collapsing now. On the internet it was much easier; I had no real worry that Pepper would pose the same challenge. I could control what information was apparent to her much more easily. But in person, vanilla humans were a terrible idea.

I ignored Caleb's message too. I didn't have it in me to deal with that right now.

By the time I'd gotten through all of that, it was late enough in the day that I should eat something. I didn't feel up to cooking, and ended up just throwing something frozen in the microwave. I wasn't hungry anyway, and was only eating because I knew I needed calories. As I waited on that, I glanced at my phone and realized I'd gotten a text from Maddie a few minutes ago.

It was very simple. *I have an interesting story, want to get coffee and hear about it?*

Maddie was a friend, and an easier one to interact with. She was a supernatural oddity herself, so there was none of the baggage of secrecy that tainted things with Caleb, or to a lesser extent with Pepper. But there also wasn't the element of debt and obligation that colored things with Audgrim. I'd worked with him a few times, and I enjoyed his company. We occasionally spent time together outside of that professional context. But ultimately, he was someone I knew because we were useful to each other.

Maddie was just a friend. Just someone I had interests in common with. There was less in the way of baggage and awkward history with her than anyone else I could think of. She was also one of the most straightforward people I knew. If she said it was an interesting story, it wasn't a euphemism, didn't imply a deeper meaning. It was just an interesting story.

I told her I'd meet her in an hour.

Chapter Three

I didn't have to ask where Maddie meant to get coffee. It was a given. There was only one place she could plausibly be thinking of.

In any city worth the name, there will be a place that acts as a social venue for the local supernatural community. In most cities of any real size, there will be several, catering to slightly different crowds. The exact form varies widely, but they all have a few qualities in common. They're usually neutral ground, not particularly affiliated with any major group or faction. They generally have measures in place to enforce that neutrality and prevent fights. They are usually businesses of some kind that allows for easy socialization. Some actually prevent normal people from going there, but even if they don't, ordinary humans rarely come in and rarely linger when they do. I wasn't sure if this was because of some subconscious awareness of the magic in the place, or just a more ordinary feeling of wrongness, of a subculture that does not welcome them.

I knew of four in Pittsburgh. I actually lived just a few blocks from one, a bar in Southside. It was on a stretch of Carson with a very particular culture, one I liked. In the space of a few blocks, you could find a dozen bars, a mix of dive bars, biker bars that had signs up saying club colors were banned and fights were discouraged, and a couple of places that were very Irish. There were a like number of tattoo and piercing shops, and assorted shops selling odd and very specific merchandise. It had a counterculture feeling to it that I liked.

Mark's was one of the places that did discourage ordinary humans, at least a bit. It had no advertising, not even a sign on the door, and no windows, having been built in the basement of an otherwise empty building. Not a place you would end up by accident, and vanilla humans rarely if ever did. Once inside, it was pretty much the same as any of its neighbors, at least on the surface.

It was in easy walking distance, but I rarely went there. Bars were usually too overstimulating for me. My primary social scene, then, was a coffeehouse and art gallery called Softened Dreams, a fair distance northeast. The rideshare was expensive, like always. I ignored it, like I mostly ignored the driver on the way. These things just...weren't part of my world anymore, really. My funds were not unlimited or anything, I didn't live an extravagant lifestyle. But my needs were provided for, as they had been for most of my adult life, and as I expected they would be for the remainder of that life barring seriously unforeseen circumstances. It left me out of touch, and I knew it, but what was I going to do, opt out?

The driver even tried to engage with me a couple times. I didn't know how to respond, didn't know how to interact with normal society anymore. There were so many topics, so many aspects of human life I couldn't relate to. I was quiet, and he gave up, and it left me feeling if anything lonelier than before. It drove home how much I just...didn't belong in the world around me.

It was a relief to arrive. That kind of loneliness was worse than spending days at home

with no company except plants and a computer. There's a sort of clean feeling about being lonely because I was alone. It hurt far more to be lonely in a crowd.

Maddie was early. She was always early, compulsively so. I showed up early to events of practical importance, because I knew otherwise I'd be running late, those were my options. Maddie was just...always early. She'd told me she tended to have panic attacks otherwise.

I didn't ask why. She didn't ask why I always used rideshares or taxis or just walked for miles if I had to rather than ride a bus. Someone learned pretty quickly, in our world, that there are some questions it's better not to ask. We all knew that most of us had scars. It was a sort of unwritten rule of etiquette within this community that you didn't dig into them. They didn't want to talk about those scars, you probably didn't want to know about them, and so you didn't ask. Once you'd picked up a few of your own you were grateful when people returned the favor. Maybe if you're close to someone, but even then, it's best done...tactfully.

So I didn't ask why, and she didn't either. I just never showed up more than a couple minutes early to something involving her, and she offered to give me a ride if she knew it would be awkward for me otherwise. It was a courtesy of sorts.

As expected, she was there when I walked in. Maddie looked very average, very ordinary. She was a pale girl, average height and build, auburn hair, freckles, forgettable facial features. The only thing that made her easy to spot was the jewelry. She always wore a lot, silver with crystals that looked almost exactly like rubies. It all shimmered with magic, and she made it all herself.

I got tea first. The tangerine-infused sencha was better than most in this city, and I felt nostalgic. It was quiet right now, not a very busy time of day, and there were just a handful of people sitting at the various scattered tables. Three more sitting at the bar, a large construction of glass and steel which was as much an art piece as any of the paintings on the walls, putting back various kinds of alcohol with a sort of grim determination. The only employees in sight were two baristas, neither of whom I knew, and Lacuna.

Gathering places like this usually had measures to enforce neutrality and prevent fights from breaking out between people who might, ordinarily, want to kill each other on sight. At Softened Dreams, the measure in question was Lacuna. I did not understand Lacuna; they scared me a little, and I was far from alone. I liked them, considered them somewhat of a friend even, but I did not understand what they did when someone broke the rules of the coffeehouse, and that was unsettling to me.

Maddie saw me as soon as I walked in, of course. Even if she were not hypervigilant by nature, there weren't that many people there and I was distinctive. She didn't pause what she was doing, though, just kept sorting cards on the table. She didn't look up when I sat down, either, though she was well aware of my presence. Maddie tended to be...very focused.

"Hey, how's things?" I asked, looking for a place to set my tea. There weren't many; she had most of the table covered. It looked like she was going through a full box of packs, from the latest Magic: the Gathering release.

"Not bad, been worse." She finished sifting the current stack, opened another pack. "Trip up to New Jersey last week, the weather up there is horrible. You?"

"Not bad, been better," I said. "Nothing special recently really."

Was this a lie? I wasn't entirely sure. Audgrim's situation was certainly *unusual*, but to call it special seemed like a stretch. I had no stake in it, no emotional investment in the matter. My only interest was idle curiosity and a favor owed. It was odd, it was inexplicable, but I didn't think it really counted as special, and regardless, it would have been rude to share his personal business with others.

Maddie nodded. "Yeah, I get that." She probably did, too. She wasn't new, she could recognize an evasive nonanswer, and guess at the reason.

But she didn't push, and this time there was a very good chance it wasn't politeness. She just didn't care. Maddie had exceptionally clear boundaries between her personal and professional lives. She wasn't here to investigate anything, and I was guessing the idea never even occurred to her. She just looked at the cards, sighed, and started sorting them. "Son of a bitch. I've had the worst luck with this set."

I snickered. I played the game, but not nearly as seriously as Maddie. She...kinda did everything seriously, or rather, intensely. "What are you fishing for?"

"Sacrifice deck, currently. But we'll see how things go this season."

I nodded, and sipped tea. She sorted cards, and sipped coffee. We spent a while like that without saying anything. I knew that trying to interrupt her would just make her annoyed. And besides, it felt...good. It was a companionable kind of quiet. Her characteristic smell of blood went well with the tea, and the tuneless humming was a pleasant shade of dark crimson. Most of that probably wasn't real as such; it was my brain weaving things into a synesthetic tangle. But my experience of it was real, and pleasant, so what did it really matter?

Eventually, she was done. Neatly stacked cards were sorted into separate bags, and went back into the box. A great many wrappers were collected and placed neatly in the trash. Maddie did most things neatly. Task finished, she finally looked at me directly. "So, you wanna hear something really weird?"

"Sure, hit me."

"If you want, but I'll tell you first." She grinned. "Okay, so I get most of my tools from this wholesale supplier over in West End, right?"

"Right." I vaguely knew of the place, some jeweler's supply. Didn't sell any actual jewelry, and rarely dealt with the public.

"I went there last week to get some stuff," she said. "Brushes and sandpaper, a new engraving tool, stuff like that. Thing is, they didn't have any. Someone came in and bought out their entire stock of most of it. Almost all the supplies for polishing and buffing, cleaning, engraving, anything like that."

That one got me to blink. "The fuck does anyone need with that much?"

"I know, right? Nobody needs that many brushes," Maddie said. "But it gets weirder."

Yesterday, I went to a craft store up in Lawrenceville, 'cause I still needed things. And someone bought most of *their* stuff too. Engraving tools, wire, chain, pliers, semiprecious stones, all kinds of stuff. Bought their entire stock of almost everything except fabrics and beads."

"That's absurd," I said. "You think it's the same person?"

"Gotta be, right? I mean, how many people run around throwing that kind of money away on this stuff? But then, get this, I know the worker there. He's the one who made the sale. Apparently this guy just came in and started grabbing whole spools of wire, handfuls of tools, didn't even look at them. My friend figures it's gotta be a prank or something, goes over to stop him. And the guy just stared at him, apparently pretty creepy, and then apologized and started pulling out cash. Lots and lots of cash."

I stared at her for a few moments. I was trying to figure out how much that would cost. I wasn't terribly familiar with these stores, but I could loosely guess at the cost. Buying both out of stock on this many things was...tens of thousands at least, an amount of money that even I could recognize as outlandish.

"He paid cash for it?"

"Yeah," Maddie confirmed. "For the entire purchase. Nonsequential twenties, and they aren't forged, they seem legit. Barely seemed to notice. Grabbed more stuff, added more cash, until eventually he had everything he wanted I guess. And the whole time he was apparently just...really weird about it. Didn't really look at what he was grabbing, didn't ask questions, you'd say something to him and there was always this pause while he just stared at you before responding. My friend said this guy seemed like the fucking Terminator, and he was pretty sure he was going to get shot or something, but nope. Paid cash, didn't argue about the price, walked out."

I just continued to stare for a while. I could see why she'd called this *interesting*, now. It wasn't exactly worrisome, as such. The guy was creepy, but apparently hadn't done anything actually threatening at all. The supplies were vastly excessive for any purpose I could readily imagine, but it wasn't stuff that was readily harmful, either. But it was just...something you didn't see very often.

Maddie just grinned at me and gave me a few moments to process this. She was clearly enjoying my reaction. I wouldn't call myself an expert on the arcane by any stretch, but I'd been around the block enough to be a bit jaded. It wasn't every day something got me all the way to baffled, but this managed it, and she was smug about that.

"Okay," I said eventually. "You got me, this is interesting. Any idea what he'd do with that set of things?"

"Kinda? Not really though." Maddie shrugged. "Most of it's pretty general stuff. Anything involving cleaning or polishing metal could use some of the brushes and such. Anything related to engraving or carving. Honestly, the mix has so much random shit and redundancy, even without the volume, that I think he might genuinely not have been paying attention and just got the entire section."

I shook my head. "Bizarre."

She continued to grin at me as she stood up. "Right? Anyway, gotta go, picking up a package."

"Thanks for sharing. See you around." It was a bit abrupt, but that was par for the course with her.

"No problem. Oh, hey, one other thing," she said, pausing. "You happen to know anything about arcane augmentation of horticulture?"

I stared at her blankly. "Eh?"

"Using magic to get plants to grow better," she clarified.

"Oh," I said. Right, she knew about that. "No, not as such. I don't really...do anything for that. It just kinda happens. I don't really know why."

"Pity," she said, scooping up her box. "Friend of mine has been asking, thought you might be able to help. Alright, well, see you around."

She left after that. I sat, and finished my tea, and thought about blood and jewels and flowers. When I did leave, I felt a little less lonely than earlier this afternoon, and a lot more perplexed.

When I left Softened Dreams, I didn't immediately go home. I spent a while wandering around, listening to minimalist music and thinking. The earbuds were starting to lose sound quality, I noticed. They never lasted long with me.

It was, I thought, possible that this weirdness wasn't connected with Audgrim's thing. I thought it was a pretty remote chance, though. Oh, they weren't necessarily related in any deep way. I wasn't one of those people who said they didn't believe in coincidence. That kind of paranoia wasn't my thing. Coincidences happened all the time. It was more just...

In any complex, highly interwoven system, even small changes have cascade effects. They really can't not. Things don't exist in isolation. There might be a few steps in between, but if you look hard enough some connection will exist, especially in a system this small. It's pretty basic network theory, really, even if I didn't cheat and cite a connection based on the fact that I knew about both.

So the question really wasn't, was this connected in some way? It was much more, was the connection significant enough that I should tell Audgrim about it? And I wasn't sure about that. The timing was certainly suggestive, but ultimately the events had nothing obvious in common beyond being weird. I didn't know enough about the significance of either one to say whether this oddity mattered.

I hated not knowing things. Hated that feeling of confusion, of being lost and unable to tell what was going on around me. It grated on me to a degree that I was well aware was at best irrational and most likely outright pathological. It was why it was so easy to get my attention with bait like a phone call about bizarre criminal mischief, or an unexplained text message about something interesting. I knew that my fixation was irrational, knew that it had caused me to take some pretty stupid risks in the past, knew most of the causes for that reaction in fair

detail. And yet, I still found myself falling for that bait every time.

I wandered aimlessly for a while like that. The weather was still nice, the sunlight wasn't quite so glaringly bright now, and the lingering taste of the tea was pleasant. A soft voice crooned about prices paid for survival, and what will remain when the wolves take everything. I walked until the movement and the music calmed me down, and then went home.

I kept my earbuds in on the return trip, and switched the music to a much less minimalist EDM playlist. If the driver tried to engage me in conversation, I didn't notice.

Chapter Four

The next two days passed uneventfully. I received no calls from Audgrim, no inexplicable messages, nothing. And so I spent the time much as I normally did. I slept as poorly as usual, and woke in the afternoon still tired. I had conversations with my houseplants, which still did not reply to me. I was grateful for that, really. I figured that it was a little weird to talk to plants, but I was strange enough in general that it just further cemented me as eccentric. If they started talking back, that was when I'd know I'd gone insane. Or, at least, more insane than I already was.

I spent some time drawing, started work on that music video, wrote a bassline and drum section for another musician I was friends with. Music was another thing I did entirely as a hobbyist. I had a lot of hobbies, if only because I had a lot of time to fill.

If someone were to ask how I felt about this, and I decided to be honest in my answer, I might admit to a certain disappointment. I might acknowledge that part of why I dabbled was because I was unable, for a variety of reasons, to do any of these things more seriously. I might even say that I sometimes felt a deeply-rooted pain and resentment about having been effectively consigned to the life of a dilettante. I could have acquaintances among ordinary people, but not real friendship; I could spend my time doing anything I cared to, but I couldn't do any of it well or seriously enough to satisfy me.

I didn't say these things often. People didn't often ask, and I didn't like to complain about what was, in the grand scheme of things, a very small anguish. And besides, what good would it do? Nothing that either I or they could do would change the reality of my situation. I could write music, but I would never perform it in front of people. I could make art, but it would never look quite right to anyone else. They might like it; I was skilled, and people said my work was beautiful, vivid and surreal. But it was *always* vivid and surreal, always strange, never quite lining up with anyone else's world. Even when I tried for realism, people universally said I got it wrong, that it had a sort of uncanny valley quality to it.

These statements had always been true for me. Barring wildly unforeseen circumstance, they would remain true. It didn't really matter what I, or anyone else for that matter, thought about it. Didn't matter what I wanted. It was just the reality of my life, the natural consequence of existing how I did. I couldn't change this reality. I had understood that since childhood, even if I hadn't entirely known why back then.

I had a lot of hobbies. I didn't like free time. Free time had too much room in it for thinking.

It was a long two days.

Getting another call from Audgrim was, in its own way, a relief. It wasn't that I felt any real urgency about his situation. I was still detached, not really emotionally invested in what he was dealing with. But the idleness was wearing on me more than usual, the hours blurring

together into a dissociated haze. From experience, I knew that this was prone to become a complete fugue, one in which seconds passed like minutes, hours dragged on like days, and days blurred past in the blink of an eye.

I'd have been grateful for almost any disruption to my routine at that point, anything to anchor me and give me something to hold my attention. External inputs usually seemed to work better for interrupting that kind of progression than if I tried to distract myself. The specific nature of this interruption had nothing to do with the relief it provided.

All the same, I don't expect I sounded very happy when I answered the phone. He hadn't actually woken me out of a nightmare this time, but I hadn't slept well in days, and the fact I was already awake by nine in the morning wasn't a whole lot better for my mood.

"What is it?" I kept my tone to merely surly rather than hostile, but that was about it.

"Have another oddity for you," Audgrim said.

"Another incident?"

"No, actually. I've been asking around a bit based on what you found at the last one. Not a ton of progress so far, but found someone for you to chat with and compare notes."

I saved the sketch I was working on and started shutting down my computer. "Who's that?"

"Jack Tar. You familiar?"

I had to laugh a little. "Yeah, heard of him. You're really sinking some resources into this, huh? I mean, buying my time is one thing, but Jack Tar is a different animal entirely."

"You said it was mostly human magic. I figure talking to human mages is a good plan." I could almost hear Audgrim shrugging. "Besides, it was easier than you'd think. His people have apparently got their own stuff going on, and he was pretty happy to collaborate. You in?"

"Sure, why not. Might be fun to meet him."

"Awesome. I'll pick you up in five, already in the area."

There are countless varieties of mage. Human magic comes in endless variations, and while there have been many systems proposed to categorize them, they all ultimately fall short. There are a comparably innumerable array of different social structures they form. I knew this, but I knew very little about any of them; as Audgrim had noted, I was not a mage, and I'd never really looked into it much. They all followed a handful of rules, and apparently the enforcement on them was pretty terrifying, but I didn't even know what those rules were, much less who enforced them. And everything past that was an inconsistent mess.

I was, however, familiar with the Tribe. They were too local and too prominent and just too *strange* for me not to have noticed. Maddie was associated with them, and I suppose that in some ways I could actually be considered one of them myself. It's not like they had membership rolls. As social systems went, they were so far towards anarcho-communist that calling it a system at all seemed almost rude. They were more a philosophy than a faction, and while they

were mostly human and mostly mages of varying nature and power, they'd take pretty much anyone who saw beauty and magic in modern, urban life.

Audgrim hadn't been kidding about being nearby. By the time I got my stuff together and got out the door, he was already pulling up. It was the same car as yesterday. Or, I mean, probably. I supposed it was possible it was a different one; the dvergar had money, and it's not like I'd have been able to tell the difference.

In any case, he barely waited until I was in the vehicle to start driving. I had to wonder once again what exactly it was that had him feeling so pressured about this. Yeah, it was a strange situation, but a little breaking-and-entering and one security guard getting hurt hardly seemed to merit this kind of reaction from him. Audgrim was the main local agent managing the investments of a moderately powerful supernatural nation-state which had significant local influence. I had a hard time seeing this response to something so relatively trivial making sense. So what wasn't he telling me?

"Okay, so, details?" I asked, rather than any comment about that. I was a neurotic bitch with trust issues, and there was a very good chance I was seeing threat where there was none. Simultaneously, I was a neurotic bitch with trust issues, and if the discrepancies were real, I was hardly inclined to advertise that I'd noticed.

"I don't actually have many," he said, not sounding happy about that. "After you told me you felt mostly human magic, I started making inquiries with a few people. Nothing major. Then last night Jack called me saying some of the Tribe were concerned about something and he'd like to talk to me about it. Refused to explain more over the phone."

I took a moment to absorb that before replying. "Okay. So, just to be clear, we *are* talking about the same Jack Tar here, right? Lunatic visionary urban druid, probably one of the top five most powerful practitioners in the northeastern U.S.? That guy?"

"Yes," Audgrim said sourly. "And before you ask, no, he's not one of the people I contacted. I don't know how he even *got* this number. He called me on my personal cell at three in the morning, one I definitely did not use calling around about this. Every single thing about this continues to be weird as hell."

"Damn," I said. "Wow. Okay. So where are we going?"

"Some random bridge he requested as a meeting point for no apparent reason."

I shook my head and settled in for the drive. "Damn. Your life makes mine look normal. I don't need to say that very often."

His response was to just put on some older Metallica. It wasn't my thing, but I could tolerate it, and I figured after the morning he'd had he deserved some comfort music.

Jack Tar smelled *awful*.

This probably should not have been my first thought upon meeting perhaps the most personally powerful human I'd ever seen. Though from what I knew of him he might find it funny, or possibly complimentary.

Regardless, I couldn't help it. It was overpowering. I wasn't at all sure how much was real, either. Some, certainly, was just my brain processing and trying to make sense of the power that hung around him like a cloud. His breath smelled like gasoline fumes, his eyes were the same orange as a pigeon's, his voice had the growl of the bus's engine underneath it, and everything about him shimmered like an oil slick. He had serious power for me to be able to feel it so starkly from a distance. I'd seen comparable beings, but none of them were human.

Other parts, though, were definitely real. I could tell, because Audgrim looked like he regretted this almost as immediately as I did. The cigarette smoke was just the start. Jack smelled like weeks spent unwashed, sleeping under bridges and in alleyways; from what I'd heard, he actually did, so that made sense. He was too much a creature of the street to want a house around him.

He waved at us as we approached, as though there were ambiguity about who we were here to meet. Everything else aside, he looked to be the only person standing on the bridge. It was starting to rain, and the few other pedestrians were there because they were going somewhere else.

"Mister, ah, Tar, I presume?" Audgrim managed to not sound like he was obviously reevaluating his life choices. Barely.

The druid waved vaguely with one hand, the one holding the cigarette. "Call me Jack, please. So you'd be Áslaug's boy, eh? How's she doing?" He didn't look at us, just kept staring out over the river. His voice was much more pleasant than his odor, low and slightly rough with a grey-green feeling about it.

I'd never heard Audgrim's mother's name. From the look on his face, he hadn't been expecting to hear it today either. "Uh. She's doing well, I think. Little stressed but she was in a good mood the last time we talked."

"Good, good. Who's your friend?"

"This is Kyoko Sugiyama, she's—"

Before he could finish, Jack interrupted. "Eyyy, heard of you. Some of mine say you're good company." He flicked his cigarette over the edge of the bridge and turned to look at me. And then, completely fluidly, he transitioned into Japanese very nearly as good as mine. "You're a raiju, no?"

I responded in the same language, slightly stiffly. I appreciated the gesture, really; Audgrim knew about most of this, but Jack didn't know that. It was a courtesy to not include him in this exchange, and how many dvergar know Japanese? "Only half. My mother was, but my father is human."

"Ah, excuse my rudeness. It is an honor, Miss Sugiyama, and I humbly beg your kindness." And then, just as fluidly, he dropped back into English, simultaneously dropping the formal tone. "So I hear you're in a rough spot, eh?"

"Maybe so," Audgrim said. He sounded, at best, guarded. "You wanted to talk about something?"

“Yup. C’mon, let’s go for a walk.” Jack started off along the bridge, not waiting to see if we were following. “So I know a little bit about your thing, not a ton, but a little bit. Hear your guy got pretty fucked up.”

“Yeah.” Audgrim didn’t say anything about the context, about the other incidents.

“One of my friends you called, she had some interesting things to say. Said it looked real nasty. I think the word ‘necrosis’ was used, no?” Jack lit another cigarette. I tried not to groan. Smoke itself was fine, I had no objection to combustion products, but tobacco smells vile.

“Let’s say, hypothetically, that your friend was well informed,” Audgrim said. “You said you might have something that would be important.”

“Might just,” Jack said, slowing down and brushing his hand against the railing as we walked. It was a long bridge. Pittsburgh has some pretty serious rivers, and more bridges than Venice, literally. His fingers traced the graffiti, and I could feel the ripple of his power, the slight sharpening. Not, I thought, a conscious action. But Jack Tar was a mage of considerable power, a druid who saw more clearly than perhaps anyone else the vibrant, pulsing life of the concrete jungle. People who operated on that scale, their magic wasn’t exactly an inanimate force, and his couldn’t not respond to the contact of graffiti, any more than a pyromancer can fully ignore the flame.

Audgrim waited for a few moments. When it became obvious Jack was unlikely to continue, the half-dvergr said with what I felt was a fairly impressive amount of patience, “What is it?”

“Well,” Jack said, “it’s easier to show than tell, I think. Not too far. I think you’ll see what I mean when we get there.”

After that rather ominous little sentiment, we walked in silence. I was occupied mostly with trying not to gag, even leaving a fair gap between myself and Jack. How he could stand his own odor was beyond me.

We got to the end of the bridge, the southern bank of the river, where we technically weren’t in Pittsburgh anymore, but rather the suburb of Homestead. You couldn’t really tell the difference, except that the population had more black people and there were a lot more people under the poverty line. Jack started down the steps meant to allow pedestrian access to the bridge, but then turned and climbed over the concrete wall beside them. The barricade was supposed to be tall enough to prevent that, and it was definitely trespassing to do this. Jack hopped over it easily without hesitation or comment.

Audgrim eyed the barricade dubiously. He looked at me. “Think this is a good idea?”

I laughed and scrambled up over the barricade as quickly as Jack had. It was raining, and the concrete was slick, but this wasn’t my first rodeo. On the other side, I dropped down into a stand of trees, and saw Jack was moving back north, towards the river.

Pittsburgh was a weird city. I’d never seen an urban area with so many random patches of forest. It wasn’t parks, either; there were plenty of those too, but this was actual *forest*. There were lots of places where the hills were too steep to be worth settling, and so they never did. You could be in the concrete jungle one moment, and then the next you’re in the literal one, in

what is for practical intents and purposes a patch of temperate rainforest. I liked that about it.

This was a dense little grove. I didn't know why it wasn't developed, when on either side there were roads and buildings. There's no logic to this city's layout at all. Audgrim was slower following over the barricade, and clumsier, and he was clearly starting to quietly freak out trying to figure out what was going on. I was just following Jack and enjoying the smell of the forest, the rain on the leaves. I loved these random wild spaces within the city. I was grinning.

And then we turned, and I saw what Jack had been talking about, and the grin went away pretty fucking fast. You walk up on a dead guy by surprise and that tends to happen, I find. Looked to be a young man, twentysomething, laid out on the grass in a small clearing among the trees. There was another guy sitting on the ground at the edge of the clearing under a tree, but he seemed pretty obviously to be a sentry rather than the murderer.

Jack Tar had gotten rid of the cigarette. I wasn't sure when. He had lost the casual cheer, too, and he looked grim as he walked over. "Oy," he said, quietly enough it wouldn't carry far through the trees. "Martin, anything happen while I was out?"

"Nope. Nobody showed, nothing changed." Martin didn't stand up, and seemed pretty relaxed, all things considered. His voice was casual, almost soothing somehow with how calm it was.

"Good. Aight, come take a look."

I did not want to come take a look. Corpses did not, as a general rule, bother me. I'd seen a few—not a ton, my life wasn't immersed in death or anything, but a few—and they weren't really that bad, broadly speaking. The parts of a person that mattered were already gone. The corpse was just the shell they left behind, just meat. I didn't really have that aversion to death's aftermath that a lot of people did.

Did not bother me as a general rule. But I had a strong suspicion I knew what happened to this poor bastard, and I did not want to see it up close. I was now the reticent one, trailing behind Audgrim reluctantly. I did follow, though. No way out but through, and waiting wouldn't make this any better.

Up close, the body smelled horrible. Absolutely horrible, a miasma of sickly-sweet rot that had even Audgrim gagging when he got close to it. There were extensive areas of his body that were more of a vile black sludge than flesh, some extending pretty far into the tissue. Definitely necrosis rather than natural decay, and I doubted he'd been lucky enough to be dead for most of it.

"I take it this was one of your people," Audgrim said after a moment. He sounded impressively calm, all things considered.

"Yeah. Kid with a knack for metal, worked with cars a lot." Jack looked at the body. His voice was...hard to read. "Look about like what your guy had happen?"

"A lot more extensive, but pretty close. Kyoko, think you can compare them?"

"I mean, I didn't see the last guy, but it checks out. This looks more like necrotizing fasciitis than recluse bites, but that might just be from the severity."

Jack turned and stared at me. “The fact that you even know how to distinguish those,” he said, “is both fascinating and disturbing.”

“Agreed,” Audgrim said dryly. “But also you know that’s not what I meant.”

I looked at him, somewhat incredulously. I looked at the corpse. I looked back at him. “You cannot possibly expect me to do that.”

“It’s a much better sample. There might be something useful here.” His tone was distinctly cajoling, now, and the two mages both looked somewhat lost trying to follow the conversation.

“Fuck you with your pants on,” I snapped. “The last one was bad enough.”

Audgrim just kept looking at me. I think he was aiming for puppy dog eyes. They didn’t look good on him.

“Ugh. Fine. You *owe* me for this. Can you all give me some room to work, please?”

They backed up. Not far enough, but then, it was a bit immaterial. This was going to suck regardless. No way out but through, I reminded myself. Grimacing, I closed my eyes and dropped the filters I was maintaining on my perceptions.

Chapter Five

In the funeral home, relaxing my normal restrictions on my awareness had hit me like a drug. The vivid, oversaturated intensity, the way every sensation felt sharper and more real, it had left me euphoric, thrilled, and satisfied. In a controlled environment where the things flooding my senses weren't terrible, the experience was an intense, rapid high. Hell, sometimes I did it just for that reason at home, when I was particularly bored, and spent a while drifting in a wash of magic and sensation until I passed out. When I was getting actively pleasant inputs, it could be an *intensely* pleasurable experience.

This situation, though, was none of the above. And while that rush of sensation still hit me like a drug, this time it was more like nine kinds of bad trip happening all at once. I opened my eyes and instantly regretted every life choice that had led me here.

The first, strongest impression was from the corpse itself. I did not have to examine it more closely like I had the first trace, did not have to study it up close or (gods forbid) lick it. It was far, far stronger here, between the lack of masking and the significantly more intense magic involved, and I recognized it as the same signature immediately. Everything in that little clearing was covered in it, not saturated, but stained. The air felt like grease and rot on my skin; the grass was hostile, blades sticking up at jagged angles like the teeth of a saw; the dappled light-and-shadow where the forest canopy intercepted the sun, so peaceful just moments before, now felt threatening, dangerous; the wind was a dissonant, grating whine. And everywhere, absolutely everywhere, was the shimmering, scintillating feeling of human magic.

I recoiled from that nauseating energy, and in the process I made my next mistake. I looked up, both literally and metaphysically, and I let myself really perceive the people around me.

I normally try not to do that without a really good reason. This was an excellent reminder of why, on several levels.

Audgrim was closest. He stank of iron, and the sharp, acrid mineral smell of freshly broken stone. He was saturated with dark, leaden greys. There was nothing shimmery about him at all; the dvergar are about as far from that as it gets, in my experience. He was solid, and as his name suggested, he was grim, a feeling of bitter certainty that had no room in it for such frivolities as hope. There was something else, though, honey-sweet but with an acidic bite, fear of something, but of something formless and unknown. It wasn't a good fear, more of a creeping dread that didn't even bring the adrenaline terror might.

Jack Tar was not much farther away, though, and wow was that a mistake. He hadn't backed up nearly far enough. I wasn't sure how far would have been enough, but the edge of the clearing wasn't. He was easily the most powerful human practitioner I'd ever met, and the shimmering aura he exuded looked so bright as to hurt my eyes without even being a physical sensation. Much like the magic on the corpse, he felt like an oil slick, but that was as far as the resemblance extended. He lacked that darker underlying background, that foulness.

But it was still almost as overwhelming. I could smell car exhaust and hot asphalt and the thick garbagebeerpiss stench of the abandoned alleyway, hear the roar of the night bus going by the pounding bass of the nightclub at two in the morning the quiet intimacy of the stranger you meet in the middle of the night and you'll never talk again so you can tell them anything at all, I could see the lights of the city and there were thousands, strings of headlights and every one a whole life the lights of skyscrapers that never fully shut off the lights in windows of apartments where night owls were up feverishly working until the break of day the diner that never closes the—

It was too much. It was too much of too much, all at once. It wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't just been immersed in that corrupted energy. I might even have liked it. But here and now? It was far, far too overstimulating. There was so much more hitting my brain than it was meant to be handling. On some level, the vivid intensity still felt good, it felt fantastic, like seeing clearly when I hadn't realized I'd been blind. I was enjoying it, whether I liked it or not. But in some ways that just made it worse. I didn't *want* this to feel good.

I stumbled away from the dead guy, trying to close myself off again, to reestablish those filters. I couldn't. It was always harder than lowering them in the first place, took active concentration, and I sure as hell couldn't concentrate through this. I fell to my knees, retching, and that felt good too. I was puking, and there were sparks in it. I couldn't see straight, and I heard voices, but they were distant and distorted, and they sent ripples of scarlet-silver-lemon through my vision more than they provided any meaning to my brain.

It was a relief when I blacked out.

I came to lying in the grass. We were still in the trees, but they'd carried me a little ways away from the corpse. I appreciated that; my filters were reflexive enough by now that I could literally put them up in my sleep, and I wasn't wide open anymore, but even an incidental brush with that energy would suck so soon after overexposure. My head was pounding, and my throat was sore.

I pushed myself up to a seated position, wincing as it made the headache spike in intensity for a moment. "Audgrim," I croaked, "the next time you think about asking me for a favor, go fuck yourself instead."

Once I was sitting up, Jack handed me a bottle of water. It was a thoughtful gesture, really. I was a little surprised by it, but I supposed that in his line of work he'd probably had his own share of interactions with the unwholesome. It was a nice water bottle, insulated metal, and the water was still cold. I rinsed my mouth out a few times, took a drink, and gave it back.

"So I take it you got something," Audgrim said once I was done, not responding to my first comment at all.

"Yeah, no shit," I grumbled. "Ugh. Okay, so it's definitely either the same person or someone very similar. Mostly human, but there's definitely an admixture, and I got a little clearer of a look at it. It's not integrated enough to be a scion, more separate from the human portion than that, so I'm pretty sure you're looking at sponsorship of some form. Nasty one,

don't recognize it though. Human portion's strong, but not *that* strong, don't think they could do this without drawing on that sponsor."

"Awesome," he said. "That gives us a starting point. Anything else?"

I grunted. "Yeah, a bit. Wasn't killed here, I don't think, it doesn't feel pervasive enough. There's a strong residue on the corpse, but not on the area. Probably happened last night, at a guess, it's faded a bit but not a lot. Emotionally there's definitely some glee again, but it's colder this time, more calculated; I would guess this was more deliberate, premeditated. Definitely necromancy of some kind, and it killed him pretty fast, I don't think he had time to really respond—if he cast a spell at all, it was too weak to leave a residue."

Jack was staring at me again. There was appraisal in it this time, and a kind of respect that wasn't there before. "That," he said, "is a hell of a lot to get from that quick of a glance."

"It's why we pay her the big bucks," Audgrim said. His tone was pretty dry, but now that I knew what to listen for, I could hear the anxiety underneath. He was scared, but it was a quiet fear, and he didn't really know why it was there, an agitation without understanding.

There were reasons I tried not to get that good of a look at someone. Emotions would show up in their aura, coloring it in the same way they influence the feeling of a magical working or a place. It was easy to learn things I wasn't supposed to know. I always got basic emotional impressions, but the more detailed it got, the less people liked it. I had a hard enough time finding friends as it was.

"Think you'd recognize the sponsor?" Audgrim asked, jolting me out of that line of thought.

I considered for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, probably. I'd have to actually be around them, though, I think. And I'm not sure how clear it would be on the practitioner if they weren't actively drawing on it. Don't know the sponsorship arrangement well enough to say."

"Any general guesses?" Jack asked. "Like, you said you didn't recognize it, but does it resemble anything you do know?"

I shook my head and immediately regretted it with the lingering headache. "Doesn't really work like that. It's not...there aren't really trends. There might be basic elements, werewolves smell like wolves, that kinda thing. But werewolves also smell like flowers, lavender or sometimes jasmine, and ljósálfar sometimes have notes of lavender and they don't have a hell of a lot else in common, you know? Can't extrapolate much."

Jack nodded. "Aight. Well, your guesses are pretty good. Friend of a friend found him on the bridge around midnight and called me. Moved him down here so nobody'd make a fuss about it. Another friend had heard about your thing, and I figured it was similar enough we should have a chat."

"Yeah, I can see why," Audgrim said. "You willing to collaborate on tracking down whoever's responsible?"

"Yeah, I think so. Seems like we have a common interest here." Jack still sounded, if not

cheerful, at least calm. But there was a sort of cold anger in his eyes and posture that gave him away. He was quietly, intensely furious. The Tribe didn't believe in things like leadership, and Jack didn't really live here. He wandered the whole northeastern US, roaming between different cities. But they looked up to him, and he took that seriously.

"Agreed, then. No debt on either party." Audgrim...didn't sound a whole lot happier than Jack looked. If they found this person, I was quite confident these two would murder them. I couldn't really blame them; this was a pretty fucked up thing to do to someone. I had no particular issue with someone who could enjoy doing *that* not being alive anymore. "You have any ideas as to motive?"

"Not really," Jack said. "Chris didn't really have any serious enemies. He did some shady work, smuggling and such, but he did it clean, you know? Professional, effective, didn't break contracts. He wasn't the type to get someone this pissed at him. Martin, you got anything?"

I started a little. I'd forgotten the other mage was even there, and judging from Audgrim's reaction I wasn't the only one. Martin hadn't said a word since his initial report to Jack.

He considered the question for a few moments, then shrugged. "Not a lot. Didn't know him that well. We ran into each other occasionally, but not really that close. I know about the smuggling, and last I knew he was working with someone new. That's about all I got."

"Possible that's related, then," Audgrim commented. "You know anything about them?"

"Not a lot," Martin said. "Some woman based out of...Fox Chapel, I think it was? I can probably find the address."

"Do that," Jack said. "I think we ought to pay her a visit."

The plan was pretty simple. Apparently Chris's mystery partner had a habit of eating lunch at a specific café in Fox Chapel most days. They had an open-air patio seating area she liked. That was where Chris had met her to arrange the job he'd been on, which was why Martin knew this; it had been mentioned in passing at Mark's bar. It was early enough we could be there around the right time.

So, she would be in a known, public location. Since I was the one who knew what we were looking for, I was making the initial approach. Audgrim, Jack, Martin, and one of Audgrim's employees were waiting in a coffee shop with a clear view of the café. The shopping center in question had a lot of traffic, and it was pretty unlikely anyone would notice them watching me. I would approach closely enough to get a read on her, signal them with either "clear" or "got something", more or less, and then leave and we'd go from there. I'd fried my phone while I was overstimulated and freaking out, so more precise messages were hard to arrange. But this was a pretty binary situation, so it should be fine.

Simple plan. Easy as breathing. I naturally assumed something would go very wrong. But I was—of course—curious now, and it should be relatively safe. Getting violent in that kind of very public setting was almost always a bad idea, and she was pretty unlikely to do so, even if this did go wrong.

Audgrim drove me, and Jack rode with Martin. I was very quiet on the trip, and I had my eyes closed. I'd had enough sensory overload for today. Maybe sensing my mood, he didn't put on music, and I just listened to the wind and dozed.

Not a long or complicated drive. Almost straight north, in fact. North across the same bridge we'd been looking at, into Pittsburgh proper. North through the city, and over a bridge crossing the other river, into another suburb. Fox Chapel was a considerably wealthier one, though, and it showed. The roads were better-maintained, the buildings nicer, the stores more expensive.

We parked a few blocks away, at the other end of the shopping center, and walked over. Martin pointed out the café in question, and then they went ahead to get into position. I gave them a solid two minutes to do so.

While I waited, I had to wonder what the hell I was thinking. I was getting myself involved with some people who were very obviously dangerous. I was acutely aware that if things went wrong enough, I might end up experiencing the same awful death that Chris had. And I really, truly didn't know why I was doing this anyway. What did I stand to gain here? Was my life really so boring that I was willing to risk it out of idle curiosity?

I didn't like waiting. It had room in it for thinking.

Eventually, though, it was time. I started walking, letting the feeling of this place wash over me. The shopping center was a pretty major one, and the feeling of bustling crowds was strong here. I could taste that urgency, sharp like peppermint. There was a glittering quality to the pavement in the parking lot, an aching need to be noticed, to be different from the rest. I wasn't leaving myself particularly open, but my perceptions felt more sensitive at the moment, still raw from the earlier flood. Even at a glance, I was feeling that emotional echo.

The café was busy, enough that it probably had a waiting list for a table. I approached, feeling tense, a little nervous. I had no idea what this person looked like, so anyone out of the crowd in the patio might be the target. I glanced over to confirm that my spotters were in position, ready, and then resumed walking. The sensitivity was a good thing, in a way; it meant I didn't have to experience *everything* in order to do this. It was possible to lower my blinders only partially, but it was delicate and prone to fail, and I did *not* want to scan this whole crowd and a potential terrifying nightmare at that intensity.

I was walking pretty slowly, trying to make sure I had enough time to sift things out. There was a lot of human in the mix. Normal people didn't have much of an aura at all, but you put thirty of them in one patio and it adds up. All I felt at first was that scintillating mass, like a heat haze over asphalt in a desert summer, and I was starting to get nervous.

And then, halfway along the patio, I felt something...different. I didn't stop walking, I knew better than to give a hint that obvious, but my attention was suddenly very focused.

It was an odd signature. I didn't pick up any real corruption in it, though. There was an element of darkness in it, sure, but it was more like a heavy incense than rotting meat. It was a warm prickling on my skin rather than cold grease. And as I kept walking, and got closer, I could pick up other details that also didn't line up with the earlier signature. That darker tone was an admixture, like the prior one, but it wasn't mixed into human. The underlying feeling

was quite different than that, a smell of musk and spice, a giggle tickling the back of my throat.

Nothing like the earlier energy at all. And there was a reason I called these signatures. As far as I knew, they were nearly impossible to forge. You could wipe or mask them if you knew how, but trying to simulate one or make your own feel drastically different was not possible. It was as reliable as a biometric in that way.

I did pause now. I wasn't nervous at this point. This was a false alarm, I was quite sure. I looked at the crowd, trying to figure out which of the people this was. It wasn't easy to actually sift it out with my senses for magical traces. Things tended to be an indistinct melange when there were this many distinct signatures muddling together. But there were only so many women sitting alone on the right side of the patio, and most of them were easy to mark as human for one reason or another. I kept looking and, ah, there she was.

I looked over to where Audgrim was waiting, confirmed he was looking. He was. I flashed him the "all clear" signal. I was pretty sure I was the only one who knew it was an ASL sign indicating he was an asshole. I pride myself on attention to detail.

He nodded, confirming he saw, and beckoned to me. Clearly, he wanted me to go report back to the others.

I opted to instead flip him off and make a shooing gesture. I figured he'd get the point. I really didn't have any other relevant information to contribute right now, and felt no great desire to participate in planning next steps. As far as I was concerned, I'd gotten them a ton of information to work with, and had earned a break. They were better equipped to put the data in context than I was, anyway.

I hopped the fence into the patio instead. If I was bored enough to risk death-by-supernatural-gangrene, I was bored enough to talk to a stranger.

Chapter Six

I really wasn't very good at indirect approaches most of the time. Not when it came to social situations. I used to try to be polite, to follow rules of etiquette and use social niceties. And what I found was that while I can do it, I do still know those rules, using them in any but the most formal of contexts just never seemed to work for me. I will fumble over my words, say the wrong thing, struggle to convey my meaning. When people do the call-and-response pattern that characterizes a lot of small talk, I respond in ways that do not line up with the other person's comment at all. This was overwhelmingly the lesson I had learned from trying.

So while I still remembered how those rules work, I didn't really try to use them very much most of the time. I tried to avoid the social contexts where it really mattered if I was a little abrupt or overly direct, too, so it worked out fairly well. It's not like I had to attend dinners with politicians or corporate executives anymore, thankfully.

So while I could, and perhaps should, have talked to the café staff, or otherwise provided a tentative inquiry first, I did not. I hopped the fence and walked directly over to her table. "Hi," I said, once I was close enough that it was clear I was talking to her. "Mind if I join you?"

She didn't look surprised, but she did look distinctly wary as she nodded. I grinned and grabbed the other chair at the table. It was in the corner, tucked against a wall and near enough to the fence to make a run for it easily. I appreciated the implicit vigilance in the choice.

To anyone watching, it probably looked completely innocent. Two Asian girls of about the same age meeting at a café, and if the observer were able to distinguish it, they'd even say we were both Japanese. Harmless, entirely straightforward to explain. This was actually important. She frequented this café often, and probably would not appreciate it if I made her look suspicious here. That would be actually rude, rather than just brash, and the difference was significant.

"Cool. Sorry if I'm interrupting. I'm Kyoko, by the way."

"Saori," she said. She sounded wary, too, but not hostile. I was willing to take it. "You walk up to people like this often?"

I shrugged. "Eh, not really. I'm not all that social most of the time. But I was walking by and I was curious. Fox Chapel is a *little* on the nose for a kitsune, isn't it?"

"It wasn't my idea," she said sourly, in a tone that suggested she'd had the same thought numerous times. "So...what, you came to talk to me because kitsune are Japanese?"

I blinked. The notion of this as being linked to ethnicity genuinely had not occurred to me. "What? No. What? The hell would I care about that? I haven't been in Japan in over fifteen years, and I'm in no hurry to go back. I only even know what kitsune smell like because I met a guy in New York at a convention."

Immediately, a great deal of the tension ran out of Saori. "Good," she said. "Tend to agree on that. What *did* get your attention, then?"

I shrugged again. "You seem interesting. You're cute, and I haven't gotten laid in a really long time. Also, you have good taste in music." I gestured to the shirt she was wearing. The skeletons on it, black-on-white, were easy to make out. The logo above them...if you squinted just right, you might notice there were letters in it. If you were familiar with metal band logos and knew the name you were looking for, you might even be able to read it. "Is the food here good?"

She blinked. "Uh. Sandwiches are okay, yeah. That was very direct." She didn't sound displeased, exactly, just nonplussed. "Also, wait, you know Fleshgod Apocalypse?"

"Yeah, they're on the harsher side for me, but when I'm in the right mood they're pretty good. And I know, but it's kinda...I've found that it's better to be up front with things, I guess? I mean, obviously it's more nuanced than that. You're a person who seems interesting to chat with, not a hookup. But it'd be silly to pretend that didn't cross my mind." I looked around, trying to get the attention of someone on the wait staff. I wasn't hungry, but I hadn't eaten since dinner, and it would probably be a good idea to change that.

"I think I appreciate that, really," Saori said. "Most of the people I meet are...really into spending time being boring and polite. Like, the hell do I care how your dog feels about the weather, get to the point already."

I groaned. "Ugh, right? Tokyo was even worse. One of the reasons I don't plan to go back." I managed to flag down a waitress and confirm that they did, in fact, serve both Italian subs and soda.

"Still better than the rest of Japan," Saori muttered darkly. "And don't even get me started on kitsune high society."

"I won't," I promised. "Unless you're in the mood to bitch about it sometime, I guess. Anyway, yeah, I was curious. Oh," I said in a much less bright tone as something occurred to me, "and I might have some bad news. Not totally sure it's relevant to you but, uh, yeah."

She tensed again. "What is it?"

"You happen to know a local guy named Chris? Little taller than me, maybe into something related to metalworking?" My tone sounded rather clearly like I was hoping the answer was no, and I was guessing she knew what the news was just from that.

"Yeah, we're friends. Why?"

I winced. "Um. Shit. Don't really know how to do this. He died last night."

Saori's expression went the kind of blank that strongly suggested there was something much less calm under it. "How'd he die?"

"Got killed by some kind of mage," I said. "It's, uh. Why I was in the area. Friend of mine was trying to figure out why, and thought you were a recent business contact, so I guess they thought you might be involved? Which you're obviously not," I added hastily, "already told them to piss off because it's pretty fucking clear it wasn't you, but. Yeah."

Saori took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Alright. Well. Thanks for telling me." She sipped her soda. "They're still looking, then?"

“Yeah. They, uh. Are very much not happy with whoever did it.”

She nodded. “Alright. I’d like to know when they find said whoever. Setting them on fire sounds therapeutic.” The blank expression had faded out into a grin. It had a bloodthirsty edge to it, and I didn’t think she was kidding, but I also didn’t blame her. I’m not a great person, but there are limits.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I fidgeted a bit. “To be clear, the rest was totally sincere. That’s why I was in the area, but I came to talk to you because I was curious and you seem interesting. Sorry if this is awkward, I don’t...really know how to do this kinda thing.”

“It’s definitely awkward,” Saori said. “But so far you’re still in cute-awkward rather than actually-a-serial-killer-awkward, so it’s probably fine.”

“My apologies,” I said, more formally than either of us had been in the entire conversation so far. I even bowed a little. “I will endeavor to provide you with more variety of awkwardness, so as to avoid boring you.”

That got a laugh, which made me happy. I’d thought Saori would like it, but I wasn’t totally sure my read on her was accurate, and she deserved a laugh right now. It also just sounded nice, brighter and more burning-golden than most people’s laughter. I smiled a little, relieved.

My food got there before long. It was decent, not great, but decent. Once it was there the hunger hit and I ate with reasonable enthusiasm. She seemed to have already finished her meal, but she went through another three glasses of soda while I ate, and I was not a slow eater. The wait staff seemed pretty accustomed to this.

“I gotta say,” she said as I was finishing my food, “I’m kinda surprised by this. Most of the people I talk to struggle to keep up with me.”

I shrugged, ate the last bit of sandwich. “My connections are a little loose, I think. Not always this loose, been a long day, but they’re not exactly linear and goal-oriented in general. It’s easy to change gears when the gears in question are a little stripped, you know?”

Saori grinned. “Yeah, that tracks. Okay, so we’ve done the cold open meet cute, the very direct flirtation, the abrupt transition to delivering bad news, and the awkward transition back to flirting. What’s next?”

I opened my mouth, thinking I’d suggest exchanging phone numbers. Then I remembered that I did not currently have a phone. There was a backup at home, this really was something I had to be prepared for and I generally kept a spare lying around. But I didn’t remember the number offhand.

Then I remembered this also meant I did not have an easy way to arrange transportation.

“Um,” I said instead. “I think it’s the clumsy question about whether you can drive me home.”

Saori laughed her head off at that and said she could. I paid for lunch without asking.

Chapter Seven

Saori's car was a disaster, to a degree I had to somewhat admire. It wasn't exactly that it was messy. There was none of the fast food detritus that often showed up in someone's vehicle if they weren't fastidious. There was very little trash of any kind, in fact. But it was cluttered with a bewildering array of random objects. The medical kit and emergency blanket, I could understand. Four decks of playing cards and a sack of dice made a degree of sense. Even the two coils of climbing rope, sledgehammer, electric drill, and spray paint, while maybe a little suspect, I could see why someone would have in their car.

But I had to move an acetylene cutting torch off the passenger seat to sit down. And when I reached to put it in the back seat, I ended up setting it in a box with a collection of about twenty jump ropes of different size and style. She had a small, portable ice cream machine in there. She had a set of chisels. There was a plastic tub of LEGOs in the passenger footwell. There was a large canvas bag with hundreds of brightly colored pens in it. There was another plastic box with eight or nine stuffed bats, in the taxidermy sense.

Saori's car had an assortment of random shit in it that was confusing, unsettling, and fascinating in roughly equal proportion. And from her grin as I was making space, I just *knew* that no explanations would be forthcoming as to why any of it was in there. I didn't bother even asking.

I managed to sit down and get most of the way through putting on the seat belt before the car was moving. Once I did, I had my eyes closed almost immediately. We hadn't even made it out of the parking lot, and I was guessing the kitsune was already going faster than this sedan's intended highway speed.

"So where are we going?" Saori asked me.

"Southside Slope. You know the way?"

"Yeah." She took a sharp right and sped up. I could feel the acceleration; she was very obviously not a defensive driver, and I was pretty sure she was weaving through traffic at a pace most people would find concerning if not outright alarming. She drove for about a minute before commenting, "You have your eyes closed."

"Yup."

"Mind if I ask why?" Saori's tone was interesting. It wasn't presumptive, like I would usually expect. She was genuinely asking whether I objected to the question, not actually asking it yet.

Normally, the answer would have been some form of "that's personal". But I liked her, and I was in a decent mood now. And if she drove like this and I spent any amount of time with her, the topic was one that would have to be addressed eventually. Better to get it out of the way up front.

"You know much about epilepsy? Human neurological condition, causes seizures?"

“Barely,” she said. “Not much more than that sentence.”

I nodded. “Yeah, figured. I got enough human from my father that I expect more of their medicine applies to me. I’m honestly not sure whether I’m epileptic. Probably, but diagnostic criteria don’t have a lot of room for ‘also part of it’s magic’, and the tests come back *really* weird. But for all practical intents and purposes, the term applies.”

“Makes sense so far.” I heard someone honking. It was hard to tell whether it was Saori or someone irate about how she was weaving through traffic, possibly while on a bridge.

“It’s photosensitive, or at least it’s got that in it. I get overstimulated easily, and like, usually it’s not a huge risk, it mostly only turns into a seizure with specific kinds of input. But even if I can manage it, it tends to make me headachy and nauseous. In a car there’s a hell of a lot of visual information happening, very quickly.” I shrugged. “So I generally don’t watch. You said you know the way, so I don’t really need to.”

Saori listened, and when I was finished she was quiet for a few moments. “Would you rather I slowed down?”

I shrugged again. “Eh. Not especially. I’m pretty used to it. Maybe another time if you want an active participant, and there are other things I can do to mitigate it as well. But this is easiest, and I trust you to know what you’re doing.”

She swerved again. There was more honking. Idly, I wondered how many people she pissed off doing this on a daily basis. I thought probably quite a few.

“That’s kinda stupid of you,” she said after a few moments. “You literally haven’t seen my driving. How do you know whether I’m any good at it?”

“Aside from the fact that we haven’t crashed yet?” I asked dryly. “Mostly from the, mm, the feeling of the car. It doesn’t feel anxious, it doesn’t feel like disregard.” I shrugged. “You don’t drive like this with no anxiety unless you’re skilled, insane, or both. And I’m not ruling out both, but it’s too confident to be just the insane part.”

Saori laughed. She put on music, and predictably, it was bizarre. It sounded like some kind of unholy hybrid of death metal, electric violin, and Tuvan throat singing. The stereo system was better than Audgrim’s. “Both,” she said. She had to practically shout to be heard over the music. “Definitely both. You can feel that much from it?”

“Yeah. It’s...like I said, part of the overstimulation is magic. I can pick up auras and lingering traces of energy really, *really* well. Enough detail to pick out emotional history sometimes. You use this car a lot. The vibe it has is heavily influenced by that.”

The kitsune made an interested noise, one mostly lost in a particularly intense section of the song. “That’s really interesting. I was wondering how you could smell a kitsune, cause I’m pretty sure we smell mostly human when we’re in this shape.”

I laughed. “Yeah, got me. It’s why I was the one they sent over to check you out. I got a good look at what happened to Chris—which you don’t want to, by the way, trust me—so the guy I’m working for at the moment figured I’d know if it was you. Obviously not, like I said, no similarity at all. You smell a *lot* better than that.”

“Flatterer,” Saori said. But I could hear the smile in it, before the music switched to something electronic with a pounding beat, and she turned it up far enough to make speech impractical.

Saori had to park a couple blocks out. It was just inevitable. Southside Slope is a neighborhood built on a massive hill, full of tangled, narrow streets. There are places where it’s too steep for cars, and the “street” is just a rickety old staircase with a street sign. Parking in that area was awful, and people could rarely get a spot anywhere actually close to my place.

She stopped the car. I opened my eyes. For a few moments, neither of us said anything.

Weirdly, I felt more awkward now than I had at any point prior. It was funny, in a way. All the weird or dangerous stuff—cold open conversations with a potentially hostile supernatural creature, breaking the news of a friend’s death, riding blind in a car with said supernatural creature, who drove like a maniac—hadn’t really bothered me. I at least felt like I understood those things.

But an ordinary social interaction with someone I wanted to like me? I felt lost, uncertain of myself. It had been over a decade since I was as young as I looked, but I felt like I was still that girl, a teenager who was perfectly fine with casual criminal behavior and not terribly concerned about her own safety, but got nervous and shy when she was into someone.

We sat there in silence for long enough to get a little uncomfortable before I eventually managed, “You’re welcome to come in if you’d like.”

It was some consolation that Saori also seemed nervous, which I could already tell was an unusual state for her. “That sounds nice,” the kitsune said after a moment. She sounded...uncertain, maybe, but not reluctant. I thought that was probably a good sign.

She seemed mostly balanced again by the time we got to my house, though, back to a casual grin. I unlocked the door, went in, locked it again behind us. Saori took off her shoes at the door, which I appreciated. It was one of the few Japanese traditions I hadn’t ditched, largely because it kept the floor cleaner.

“Make yourself at home,” I said vaguely in her direction while I finished locking the door. Then something occurred to me, and I added, “Don’t open the closed door on the second floor, though.”

“What, is that where you keep the incriminating evidence?”

I snorted. “No. It’s just full of poison, and I don’t know how most of it would affect you.”

She looked back at me, apparently to see if I was kidding. Seeing no particular evidence of humor, she said, “Okay, sliding over towards the actually-a-serial-killer kind of awkward now.” She did not sound particularly worried.

“I did promise to give you variety,” I said dryly, and that got a laugh.

“Touché,” Saori said, grinning. “Alright, I’ll be good for now. Anything else?”

“Nah, not really. I should check some messages, make sure nobody’s somehow found an

emergency that needs my attention in the past hour. Should just be a few minutes.”

“Cool.” The kitsune started wandering around. I went up to the third floor and turned on the computer. I’d already watered the plants for today, at least, so that was taken care of.

As expected, I had a surly email from Audgrim asking what the hell I was thinking. I replied with a polite reminder that I was doing him a pretty significant favor helping with this situation at all, a brief explanation of how far Saori was from anything that I’d registered on the body, and a note that she’d like to be present when we murdered whoever was responsible. After a moment, I remembered to dig my backup phone out of the insulated closet where I kept the spare electronics, and added the number to the message.

Saori was still looking around. I wasn’t really sure what people did with guests, I very rarely had any here, but I thought probably I wasn’t supposed to ignore her. So after making sure there was nothing else that required immediate attention, I went looking for her.

I found her on the second floor. She had, it appeared, not gone into the room with my poisonous plant collection. But she was in the workshop next to it, looking around at various half-finished art projects. “This is a nice place,” she said. “I’m kind of impressed.”

“Thanks. I try to keep it niceish. It’s just me here, so it’s kinda,” I waved one hand vaguely, “a little more than I really need, but I try to at least keep everything tidy.”

She nodded. “You’ve got a lot of tools in here,” she noted, looking around at the various supplies. There were three worktables in the room, and a lot of shelves and plastic organizers. And, yes, a lot of tools, for everything from woodworking to stained glass to jewelry making to perfumery. Many of them hadn’t been used in a long while.

“Yeah,” I said. “I kinda...I dunno. I try to stay busy. I...don’t really get out much most of the time.”

“Why not?” Saori sounded genuinely curious. “You don’t seem like the shut-in type.”

I shrugged. “Wouldn’t be, if I had easy options. It’s a bit...well, to start with, it’s hard to have a social life like this. You know? Travel sucks ass most of the time, and if I go to the wrong party and there’s too much going on, I end up convulsing on the floor.”

Saori winced. “Oh. Yeah. I can see where that would be...challenging.”

“Heh. Yeah. And those are the parties I’d rather be at, usually, that’s the crowd I like. I don’t make friends easily to begin with, either. Most people don’t take it as well as you when I tell them what emotions their car smells like, or accidentally eavesdrop on a conversation I’m not supposed to know about.” I laughed a bit, though it sounded pretty bitter. “So, yeah, I don’t get out much. I try to keep myself busy.”

“Wow. That sounds hellish.”

I looked at her, and she didn’t look like she was being insincere at all. She really thought that living like this would be hellish. So rather than cracking a joke and changing the subject, I said, “My mother left me enough of an inheritance I don’t need to worry about trying to hold down a job, at least.” I smiled. It probably didn’t look very happy. “I can spend my time doing whatever I want. I just can’t do any of it how I want to.”

“Fuck,” Saori said. “I am so sorry. Didn’t mean to shove that in your face.”

I shrugged again. “It’s life. It’s not a terrible life, either. Do you want something to drink?”

She knew the casual attitude was a lie, I was quite sure. But she also knew how to follow a topic change. “That’d be nice, thank you.”

“Awesome.” I left the workshop and wandered over towards the kitchen. “I’ve got a couple kinds of soda, a bunch of energy drinks, tea, or I could make lemonade if you want.”

“Energy drink sounds great.”

“Awesome. Fridge on the left.” I had two, one set up for produce and the other for things that weren’t too picky about how cold they got. It was ridiculously excessive, but I more or less figured it didn’t matter. I had plenty of space in this house I did not actually need, and enough money to do ridiculous things. I might as well use it. I was far more trust fund kid than starving artist in that way.

“Sweet,” Saori said. And then a moment later, “You have four full cases of energy drinks in here?”

“I like caffeine and I don’t like shopping,” I said, wandering back out into the largely-disused sitting room. “So I get enough to last a while when I do go to the store.”

“Girl,” she said, following me with a can of something cloyingly saccharine that pretended to taste like fruit. I preferred energy drinks over coffee, but I didn’t drink them primarily for the taste. “When even *I’m* telling you that you might want to step it down a bit on these, you know you have a problem.”

I laughed. “It’s kind of you to pretend it’s singular. But yeah, probably right. Um. I don’t really know what to do at this point. I don’t have many guests.”

“Yeah,” Saori said. “I can relate to that.” She drank half the can and smiled, but it was a little hollow. “Chris was actually the only person I knew in this city. Haven’t been here long.”

“That sucks ass. Like, I think this is where I would have some flirtatious line about knowing another now, but losing your only connection like that is just...I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, wandered around the room a bit. “It happens. I mean, I met him when a mutual acquaintance from elsewhere recommended me as an assistant in a smuggling run. It’s a risky profession, and he had risky hobbies. People like that tend to live fast and die young.”

“What were they? The hobbies, I mean.”

“Street racing, mostly,” she said. She was looking at the art on the walls, various prints and paintings. There were no photographs, as I was sure she noticed. No humans, either. Just nature scenes and abstract, surreal images, many not clearly an image *of* anything at all. “He did a lot of work as a mechanic, too. I needed some aftermarket upgrades done. That’s why we became friends after, that and rollercoasters.”

I shuddered. “That is one thing I’ll just. Leave to you. Very not my thing.”

Saori laughed a little. “Yeah, I can imagine. Talk about sensory overload, doesn’t get a lot

more intense than a good coaster. Anyway, that's why I was hanging around with him, after we finished the job."

"What was it?" I asked idly. "The job, I mean. Like, was it something that people would kill him for?"

"Not in the slightest, far as I know." She shrugged. "Like I said, only been here a short time. About two months now, and I'd never seen the place before that. So it's possible it was important, but as far as I know it was completely ordinary for him. He'd worked for the client before and he wasn't moving anything special."

"Huh. This whole mess has been so fucking weird." I sat down on one of the couches. It was nice. I should use it more often. "I got into it as a favor for an acquaintance of mine. The dvergar have a pretty big security company of some kind locally, not sure if you're familiar."

"Nope, not familiar with any of the local players. I've been meaning to fix that, but it's just been..." Saori trailed off. "A challenging month," she said eventually.

I didn't ask about that, nor about why she'd moved to a completely unfamiliar city. She'd said it wasn't her idea to live in Fox Chapel, which suggested someone else was involved, and I didn't ask about that either. I didn't ask why I felt a layer of smoke and heat mixed into the feeling of kitsune. I was curious about all of those things, but I knew better than to pry.

"Well. They do, and the main local supervisor is this half-dvergr I've worked with a couple times before. My skills are...not useful all that often, but they're not common, you know? So a few days ago he calls me and asks me to take a look at some really bizarre vandalism."

"What'd it look like?" she asked idly.

"Nasty." I shuddered a little. After the clearer exposure, I was very confident in my read on that one. Whoever attacked that guard, they enjoyed it *way* too much for comfort. "But kinda random. Bunch of places associated with the dvergar have been broken into for no apparent reason. This one was a funeral home, and it was the first time one of his employees was seriously injured, so I guess that escalated the response some. But it felt really random and weird, and I have no clue what they were doing there."

"Huh." Saori sounded thoughtful now. "And then Chris was...?"

"Killed the same way Audgrim's guy was injured," I confirmed. "Don't really know why that happened either, it sounds like he didn't have any serious enemies. But it felt planned, so it wasn't that he just walked in on something or whatever. It's all just...very strange."

"Sounds like, yeah." She was quiet for a few moments. "So what are they doing? Like, in terms of investigation or whatever."

I shrugged. "Hell if I know. I'm not an investigator, and I'm really not that involved in the local scene. I know a few people, sure, but sorting through who would be motivated to do this? Not something I can help with."

She made a thoughtful noise. "Who else is there, locally? Like, who are the major players?"

“Beats me,” I said cheerfully. “There are a bunch of werewolves. I’m told that all the forest makes it more appealing for them than most cities. I occasionally hang out with one of them, he’s terrible at poker but hosts good barbecues, and I’ve at least met a couple others through that. I know a couple of minor mages and oddities. There’s a girl who’s about twelve generations removed from an Egyptian goddess who’s fond of me. But I try to avoid major players as a topic; I only know Audgrim because someone recommended my services to him at one point and he stayed in touch afterwards.”

Saori nodded. “Yeah. I can understand that. You think they’ll find anything?”

I shrugged. “Dunno. They’ve got a strong human mage, guy who visits town occasionally and was associated with Chris. They’ve got a security company for manpower. I gave them some raw data to work with. I haven’t really tried to evaluate how likely it is they’ll get somewhere with those resources. Honestly, this conversation is more meaningful to me than that whole topic.”

“What, I’m more important than an ongoing crime spree with at least one murder involved?” Her voice was light, joking.

“Yes,” I said simply. My voice was not, and I was guessing she could hear the simple truth in that word, the sincerity, because for a moment her dark eyes had a very different emotion in them, one I couldn’t name.

“Why? You just met me.”

I shrugged. “Saori, it’s...you have no idea how rare this is for me. Like, that I meet someone and it goes well. Even the friends I do have, there’s usually tension, there’s stress, things feel awkward or sad. Hanging out with you has been fun. I don’t get fun very often.”

She was still looking at me with that odd emotion visible. I couldn’t at all tell what it was. And then a few moments later, it was gone. In its place was a sort of reckless, casual disregard that I could already tell was much more her default state.

“Well then,” Saori said. “We’ll just have to fix that.” She grinned. “So. When you said earlier that thoughts about me being cute and you needing to get laid crossed your mind, how serious were you?”

I found myself smiling back. It was funny, really. We’d been talking about some pretty heavy topics just now. Normally, I would expect the sudden transition back to lighthearted flirtation to feel forced. But it didn’t. Saori just had a sort of infectious excitement that was hard to resist, particularly when I didn’t really want to.

“The bedroom is upstairs,” I said by way of answer. Saori’s grin was sharp, now, and her laughter tasted like fire in the back of my throat.

Chapter Eight

Later. Much later. I'd fallen asleep at some point, tangled in a pile of limbs with Saori. She hadn't woken up yet. Probably not surprising; I hadn't actually had a nightmare, but I could hardly ever sleep *deeply*. I didn't sleep very long most of the time, either; I usually woke up in the afternoon, but that was because I went to bed after sunrise often as not. I wasn't sure I could extricate myself from the tangle without waking her, and didn't try. I was quite content to stay where I was, though I did free one arm enough that I could stroke her hair while she slept.

The kitsune seemed smaller, asleep, when she wasn't in motion. She was, I noted absently, attractive. I hadn't really seen that yesterday, or rather I had seen it but not in a way that provided any clarity about her physical appearance. Too hard to tell where objective reality stopped and my less concrete senses began.

Now, I could see that she was attractive. I was guessing people would call her hot more often than beautiful, but they *would* call her that. Her hair was cut short and unevenly, but artistically so, and the deep crimson streaks in it were real, barely visible against the black. Being this close and familiar, I could pick up scents of fox and spice even through my filters, but nothing past that. Thus, I could tell that some of that scent of incense had just been a floral perfume.

It felt...nice, having her cuddled up against me. Very nice. I was happy to stay there until she woke up. It didn't take long, anyway. I'd been tired enough, in enough ways, to go to sleep earlier than my norm, and it was still morning when she started stirring.

Saori woke up in an interesting way. It wasn't exactly abrupt. It was languid, even, with a few moments of stretching and happy noises before she opened her eyes. But it felt like she was mentally alert as soon as she started stirring at all. There was no drowsiness, no momentary uncertainty as to why she was in an unfamiliar bed, nothing. She stretched and pressed against me, then opened her eyes with a smug grin.

"Good morning," I said.

"Hi. How'd you sleep?"

"Eh. Had worse. You want breakfast?"

"Sure. Do we have to get up for that?"

"Sadly, yes."

Breakfast happened. I was a tolerable cook, not great, but I could do it. The reasons I so often ate frozen food and snacks instead had more to do with motivation than skill. That was easier to find than usual, this morning, and I put something reasonably edible together.

Saori, as she'd implied the previous day, didn't often have room to criticize someone about caffeine use. We'd gone through two energy drinks each by the time the last of the

sausages was gone. Caffeine was always interesting in how it affected me. I still got most of the stimulant effect, but I had much the same resistance to the unpleasant effects of overuse that I did to other toxins. Between that and my poor sleep quality, it wasn't hard to see why I bought these things in such bulk. I could have just gotten caffeine supplements, but I dislike pills more than sucralose.

"So we didn't really cover this last night," Saori said once I was done cleaning up the kitchen. "But what do you see this being? Like, in terms of relationship things."

"I dunno. What do you want it to be?" I went over and joined her on the couch. "I'm not being flippant, to be clear. I'm just pretty open. Like I said yesterday, you seem like an interesting person to talk with, not a random hookup. So I'd like to continue spending time with you, and if you're interested I'd enjoy it including sex. But in terms of things like exclusivity, or a formal label to the relationship, I don't really have strong preferences."

"That's an unexpectedly thorough answer."

My lips twitched a little. "Relationship goals are a topic I've had plenty of time to think about."

"Heh. Fair enough." Saori was quiet for a moment, seeming lost in thought. I let her take her time considering the topic. Eventually, she said, "I've tried the monogamy thing, a few times. Hasn't ended well. So if you don't have a preference I don't feel a need to impose it. And then formality and labels are both terrible, so pass on that, thanks. That said, though, *definitely* interested."

Saori was smirking and moving closer. I wasn't entirely sure what she was planning to do, but I was looking forward to finding out.

And then someone rang the doorbell downstairs.

Saori paused at the interruption. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, reminding myself that murder is not an appropriate response to all of life's annoyances. While I was doing this, they rang the bell again.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I should go get that."

"Yeah, they don't seem likely to leave on their own." She disentangled herself from me.

I went downstairs and checked who it was. Unfortunately, I knew him, so murder was probably not a great solution in this case.

I opened the door all of six inches and glared at the guy on the front step. "The hell are you doing at my house, Derek?"

Derek smiled. It was probably supposed to look sheepish. Given that he was the werewolf friend I'd mentioned to Saori, and I'd personally seen him ripping deer apart with his teeth, he probably wasn't going to make it any closer than "very dangerous puppy," but the effort was there. And in fairness, reaching very dangerous puppy eyes was still pretty impressive for a werewolf. "Sorry. I tried calling, but you didn't answer."

"Broke my phone. I'll send you the new number later." I tried to close the door, tried being the operative word. He had his foot in the way.

"I kinda need your help," he said.

"Why do people keep telling me that?" I asked, not directing the question at anyone in particular. "Did someone start spreading malicious rumors about how I'm deeply benevolent and a great person to ask for help with things?"

"Someone's gone missing," he said, not acknowledging my attempt at humor.

I stared at him. "You guys are, like, a hundred times better equipped to work a missing persons case than I am."

"We can't," he snarled. The smile was gone, and there was real, violent anger in its place. I must have flinched a bit, because he closed his eyes and took a couple deep breaths before continuing in a calmer tone. "We've been trying, but it's not going well. It's not normal, and we can't get a scent to follow."

I paused for a moment at that. Werewolves' skill at tracking was legendary. You mix a sense of smell at least as acute as a bloodhound's with human intelligence, coordination, and in some cases a *lot* of experience, that tends to happen. Put that together with some other things, and....

"Did they," I asked slowly, "use acetone as a scent mask, by chance?"

He blinked, startled. "How do you know that?"

Of course it was. And while I really, really wanted to tell him to screw off, it would be a terrible idea. If nothing else, I hadn't forgotten that Saori had significant personal interest in this whole mess. Ignoring the chance to follow up on this in favor of resuming our earlier conversation would likely leave the kitsune rather...unimpressed.

"Son of a bitch," I said, probably sounding exasperated. "Uh, no offense."

"None taken. So...."

"Ugh," I sighed. "Yeah, I'll look at it. Wait here, I'll be down in a few minutes."

Saori insisted on coming along. I insisted on riding in her car rather than his. Derek didn't like this very much, but he knew better than to push me on it when I clearly didn't want to be doing this to begin with. Honestly, he almost certainly knew exactly what was going on there. Even in skin, his sense of smell was at least as sharp as mine, and we hadn't really had time to shower. Hell, Saori was even wearing one of my shirts. It was a little large on her, but adequate, and hers was...going to need washed.

Derek knew better than to mention this, too. Though in this case that wasn't so much to avoid pissing me off as because I was shameless, Saori was smirking at him, and he knew he'd likely hear far more than he wanted to about it if he brought it up.

He drove more slowly than Saori probably wanted to, but fast enough I wasn't paying much attention to the route. Northwest, I thought, which meant not especially close to any of the previous locations I'd seen. Details beyond that were lost in a haze of wind, some unholy hybrid of swing and bagpipes, and Saori's golden-fire laughter.

It was a longer drive this time. I was pretty fine with that.

Eventually, though, it had to end. Derek pulled into the driveway of some house. Not rural, but far enough into suburbia that having a back yard large enough to play football in was not terribly extravagant. I didn't recognize it. There were two cars in the driveway already, and it really wasn't large enough for four, so Saori parked hers on the street. Having one tire on the neighbor's otherwise immaculate lawn was probably not strictly required, but such is life.

"Alright," I said to Derek as we approached the house. "Walk me through what happened."

"Mike lives here with Samantha, that's his wife. He's one of us, she's human but knows about it. He went missing yesterday evening. And we really don't know how. There's no indication of violence at all. Sam was here at the time, and she doesn't know either. She says Mike got up and went to answer the door. She didn't hear anything being said. Next thing she remembers, she was waking up on the floor two hours later and he was gone."

I didn't bother asking whether she was a reliable source. They'd have checked that long before they were reduced to asking *me* for help. Derek was acquainted with me, and I'd met a couple of the other local wolves, but this was something they'd much rather handle in-house. Getting an outsider involved, and not even a particularly trusted one? They were desperate. It hadn't taken them as long to reach that point as it had for Audgrim, but then, this was both more personal and more urgent than his situation.

"And when you got here, you found the place untouched, but reeking of acetone?"

"Yeah." He sounded...displeased. "They practically soaked the driveway in the stuff. We can just barely follow Mike's trail from the front door out to the street, and only because we know him. Can't pick out anything else through the noise."

"And once they got to the street, they'd be gone." Saori sounded intrigued, though it wasn't a question.

Derek answered it anyway. "Yeah. Got in a car, but...."

"But there are dozens of those passing through here on any given day." I nodded. "Yeah. Anyone else here right now?"

"Samantha is. And then Cassie and Andrew, they're both ours."

I nodded again. "Cool. Let's go say hi."

It was not hard to tell which of the people in the house was Samantha. She looked to be early middle-aged, for one thing, and werewolves are as ageless as I am. For another, she'd been crying. The other two people in the room looked comparably upset, but in a way that was less tear-stricken and more quietly furious.

I very carefully did not carry myself in a confrontational way as we entered the house. Even Saori seemed to know better. Werewolves...had a reputation for both overprotectiveness and anger management problems. I really didn't want to deal with that right now. Neither of them looked particularly dangerous, but then, neither did I. And the smell of wolf and lavender

in that room was overpowering. I was *very* careful not to seem hostile walking in there.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Kyoko, and this is Saori. Any chance we could chat with you?”

Cassie looked at me, then at Derek. “You didn’t say she’d bring someone else.”

“I know,” I sighed, before he could answer. “But my friend here has a bit of an axe to grind with someone who might be related to this, and it would have been really awkward to ask her to stay home.”

“I’m definitely setting them on fire when we find them,” Saori said helpfully. “Acid and needles also under consideration.”

Cassie smiled a little at that. Andrew didn’t, but he didn’t object, either. “Let’s chat, then,” Cassie said. Her glance took in Samantha, and I shook my head a tiny bit. No need to involve her in this, at least not yet. She almost certainly didn’t know anything useful, and she didn’t need to have strangers talking about her missing husband in front of her. She’d had a hard enough day already.

We went back outside. I wandered into the yard and sat down under a tree. It emphasized the whole nonconfrontational look, and also supplied shade, because for once it wasn’t cloudy and the sun was *extremely* confrontational about it. “Okay,” I said. “Is it alright if I ask a couple questions?”

“Go ahead.” Andrew sounded slightly less on-edge than Cassie did, though it might just have been better masked. None of the wolves sat down. Saori did, but that may have just been so she could cuddle up next to me.

“Cool. So you know someone was present and took Mike. Anything about them?”

“Him,” Andrew said. “Pretty sure. There are a couple fragmentary footprints, and the stride length and weight distribution look male. Fairly average height and build, wearing boots, casual walking pace. Nothing else.”

Werewolves are scary good at tracking people.

“Alright. Not a lot, but I guess it’s something. Acetone from the street to the door. Any in the house?”

“Little bit just inside the door,” Cassie said. “Little on Sam too, but that might just be nail polish remover.”

I nodded. So he hadn’t needed to go inside. And Sam wasn’t injured, either. Between that and the gap in her memory, this sounded a lot like the *other* break-ins Audgrim had mentioned, and very little like the attack on Chris, or like what happened to Audgrim’s worker at the funeral home. I hadn’t smelled any acetone on Chris, either, and even if he’d been moved, the smell would have lingered on his clothing. The implications were potentially interesting.

“Is it okay if I look around a little bit?”

The two of them glanced at each other. Glanced at Derek, who shrugged. Andrew nodded. “Sure.”

"Thanks." I stood up and walked back over to the house, braced myself, and then let the world flood in.

It wasn't as easy as the funeral home, was much more overwhelming. Open environment, and there had been a bunch of werewolves through here. Saori too, for that matter, and her signature remained fascinating, that thread of smoke in her scent captivating now that it felt so clear. But it was nowhere remotely close to as unpleasant as looking at Chris and Jack had been, and my swaying was solidly from the "wow, this is so vivid and wonderful" kind of high. It took me a few tries to get my bearings and start actually examining things.

The driveway was a lost cause, and I barely even glanced at it. Environments like this one—outdoors, open to the air, few physical objects for energy to saturate—didn't hold traces well to begin with. If he'd also soaked it in charged acetone thoroughly enough to keep the wolves from catching anything, and then said wolves spent almost a full day trying, I wasn't going to be picking up anything out there.

I went to the doorway, instead. From the sounds of it, that was probably where he'd done whatever magic was involved in this. It was also where he'd have most wanted to hide his trail, but he'd probably been hiding mostly from the werewolves, and that meant a very different focus than hiding from me.

Still, he'd been *very* thorough. I looked around the door frame, the small section of tile flooring just inside the door, the door itself, and got a whole lot of nothing. There might have been a residue on Sam, but realistically even if there were, it would have faded into her own aura by now. I didn't try to examine her beyond a glance; it would have been both rude and pointless.

But there was something, a tiny lingering trace of energy left in the coat closet. And it felt...interesting. It was very, very similar to what I'd been seeing so far. It had the shimmering feeling of human power, and it had the dark, vile admixture within that power. Rather than rancid meat, though, I got the cloying sweetness of rotting flowers. It felt slick, but rather than cold grease, it felt like oiled silk slipping between my fingers, or like grasping for the details of a dream when they were already fading from my memory. And perhaps most telling of all, there was none of the sadistic glee I'd felt both times before. This was calm, and very relaxed. Almost soothing, if anything.

I glanced down. Unless Mike wore women's shoes, his were missing. I smiled, very slightly, and then closed myself down again, leaning against the wall to stay standing through that moment of disoriented *loss*. It always felt bad to put those filters back in place, even when what they were showing me felt terrible.

But I'd gotten what I needed, I thought, and I went back outside, closing the door behind me. There were things starting to fall into place. It was still mostly conjecture, but I was grinning as I walked over to the others, and it wasn't entirely the product of the high.

"Hi," I said. "So, I've got something. Not a lot. Something, though. I'll be happy to explain but I have a question first. Are there any other werewolves you haven't heard from lately? Not necessarily missing as such, might be a perfectly reasonable absence. Just someone you haven't heard from in, oh, let's say five or six days." That would put it a day or two before

Audgrim had first called me.

The three of them glanced at each other. After a few moments, Cassie said, "Steven's been on a business trip for the past week. I haven't heard from him, not sure if anyone else has."

"Awesome. You mind giving him a call for me?"

She called him. There was no answer. She tried again, and still, nothing. The three of them asked around, and it did not take long to establish that none of the werewolves had heard from Steven in at least six days.

They were starting to freak out when they told me this. I couldn't blame them. This was a bit of a spooky thing to have guessed. I felt a little bad for them, because I strongly suspected it wasn't about to get better.

"Thanks," I said. "You mind waiting a little longer? There's someone I think you'll want to meet, and I'd rather not explain twice."

Chapter Nine

By some fortuitous quirk of timing, Audgrim called me less than five minutes later, before I'd actually managed to find his phone number again. "I found something," he said.

"And good morning to you too. Does it have to do with the bodies at the funeral home?"

There was a brief pause. "Yes, actually," he said a moment later.

"Awesome. I'm going to make a series of guesses, and then you can tell me how close I am, okay?" I was grinning wide enough to look a little unhinged. Saori was too, and she'd turned down the music so she could hear the conversation clearly.

Another pause. Audgrim knew enough to just roll with it, but even for me, I had to admit this was an odd conversation. "Okay," he said after a moment.

"Great! So, I'm guessing one of the corpses is weird. It'll be a guy. I don't know whether he has identification on file but if so it'll probably be under the name Steven. The owner, Anthony was it? Yeah, Anthony will have taken this corpse with, ah, fewer questions asked than average. I don't know whether he's been involved in, uh, body-laundering I guess? Before, but it seems plausible. Either way, on this occasion it will have been odd, felt strange, but it was a lot of money. The body will not smell like acetone and will likely not have necrosis-related injuries, but will likely have some kind of injuries. If I'm remembering right and you have some kind of sense related to metals, you'll have gotten a strong impression of silver on those injuries. Okay, how'd I do?"

Audgrim was very, very quiet. I was still grinning. Saori started laughing so hard she actually had to slow down. The werewolves were in a separate vehicle, which was good because I somehow doubted they would find this situation amusing. When Audgrim did eventually respond, it sounded like he didn't either. "How do you know all this?"

"I will be thrilled to explain, but it'll be easier in person. Mind meeting me at the funeral home? I'll be bringing a few friends, just as a heads up. I think you'll find chatting with them very...enlightening."

There was another pause. "I'll be there in ten minutes," he said, and then disconnected from the call. Saori, still cackling, turned the music back up and went back to a speed that would have made a traffic cop very unhappy if they could have caught her.

Audgrim got a later start. But he was closer, and while I had the address, none of us actually knew the route. So we ended up getting there at about the same time. The funeral home was closed again, or maybe still, and the only vehicles in the lot were Audgrim's SUV, the werewolves' van, and Saori's sedan. Given that the black SUV practically screamed "spooky organization," the van was a large model with no windows beyond those mandated by law and no markings on it, and Saori drove like a madwoman and parked illegally across the lines for no apparent reason, it probably looked pretty sketchy.

Then again, if I was right, and it seemed like I was, that was likely par for the course for this place.

I wasn't grinning anymore. Oh, the situation was still funny, in a macabre way. Getting to drop that many eerily accurate guesses on Audgrim had been really entertaining. But I was not blind to how serious and potentially dangerous this situation was, and the dry, bitter feeling of death and dispassion hanging around the funeral home was less pleasant with more context.

Audgrim and the wolves were clearly, distinctly wary of each other as they got out of their respective cars. Unsurprising, really. Neither dvergar nor werewolves were terribly fond of showing weakness to outsiders. And this would absolutely register as weakness to both parties, too. Security was Audgrim's business, and wolves were protective, and all of them were currently being forced to admit they'd failed.

"Okay," I said. "Uh. Introductions, this is—"

"We're acquainted," Audgrim said. He hadn't looked away from Andrew. All three of the werewolves had insisted on coming along, and I supposed I couldn't blame them. Audgrim's tone wasn't warm, but it was professional, so I was guessing "acquainted" wasn't a euphemism in this case.

"Great. Well, uh, this is Saori, she's the person I mentioned yesterday, Audgrim. Is Anthony here?"

"No. I told him to take the day off so that I could check on the security system." Audgrim actually sounded colder when he mentioned Anthony than when talking to the werewolves. All things considered, that was probably good.

"Okay," I said. "Can we go inside? I've got some bad news for all of you, I'm afraid, and it'd be better not to be standing around in the parking lot talking about it."

"Right." Audgrim unlocked the door, and waved us in. He locked it behind us, too. I did not miss that the sign on the door still said this place was closed indefinitely, and still didn't say why.

I sat in the chair behind the receptionist's desk. Saori claimed the one chair set out for clients. That didn't leave any for the others, but I was guessing they'd rather stand anyway. "Alright," I said. "So, I've got some more information. A lot of it is supposition, to be clear. In particular, I have very little idea about motives. I'll try to indicate the parts I'm not sure of. Anyway, to start with probably the worst news." I looked at the werewolves. "I'm pretty sure your friend Steven is dead." I turned to look at Audgrim. "I'm pretty sure someone murdered a werewolf and effectively dumped the body at a business associated with you."

I paused there in case anyone wanted to comment. Nobody did. I could have heard a feather drop in that room, never mind a pin. So I continued. "There was a recent disappearance. I was able to look at the scene and I can tell you a few things based on it. One, it was definitely similar work to what you've been dealing with, Audgrim. Human magic, sponsorship, I'd even be willing to bet it's the same or a very similar sponsor. But it's not the same person, I don't think."

"Why?" Audgrim asked. He didn't sound disbelieving, as such. Just...curious.

"Different mechanisms and emotional resonance," I said. "This trace felt calm, soothing, totally at odds with the sadistic glee I felt here. There was also no physical injury. One person passed out and woke up hours later with no memory of the time between; the other seems to have gotten up and walked out peacefully with the attacker. Took the time to grab his shoes and everything, no rush, no violence at all. Pretty sure he felt relaxed and peaceful while he did so, too."

"Nothing like what happened here," Audgrim said quietly. "But very much like what's happened at our other places."

I nodded. "Yeah, I caught that too. Human mages tend to specialize, they might have some breadth but...these are very different workings, with wildly different emotional resonance and slightly different signatures. Willing to bet it's not the same person. Relationship between them is still unclear. Anyway, that's the first point. Next: Like here, that location was soaked in acetone. I noted that the murder victim across town had no such scent, so there's a mix of methods in that respect as well."

"But the murder was, presumably, also violent," Cassie commented. "No? So it more closely resembles the methods used here than at our person's home."

"Right. Mix of methods that doesn't vary on the same pattern as the presumed perpetrator," Audgrim said. They were rapidly putting connections together, more readily than I had, honestly. I was great at getting the raw data, but I was aware I was garbage at actual detective work.

"Yup," I said. "So, there's that. Here, Audgrim, I noticed that this place's owner seemed shady. He didn't want us looking at the bodies, and he was calm right up until he realized someone saw the accounting books that seemed a little out of place for his other patterns. Why use paper books rather than software? I bet, I just *bet* that they have some information he doesn't put in the official books. This place might be mostly aboveboard, but he occasionally does business he's not supposed to, disposes of bodies or something."

"I notice," Audgrim said, "that the acetone trail here led directly to those books."

I grinned. "Didn't it just. That's what actually made me think there was one of the wolves here, which, I mean, we haven't checked yet but I feel pretty confident. The acetone was definitely in part being used to mask their signature, but I can't help but notice that it would also have led a werewolf straight to the suspicious material implicating this place in killing one of their own."

"Why?" Derek asked. "Like...what's the purpose of that?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. Like I said, motive is beyond me. But I'm sure you'd have gotten here eventually, you're resourceful. And Audgrim would have looked into the cadavers on his own and found the link to you. You would have ended up talking to each other about it even if you hadn't both for some insane reason decided I was a good person to ask about this shit. So that's interesting."

"And the injuries here were very similar to the murder across town," Audgrim said. He sounded thoughtful. "Again, very clear relationship between them. But the trail there led

straight to Saori.”

I sighed. “Audgrim, I already told you it wasn’t her. And I promise she has an airtight alibi for when Mike was taken yesterday.”

“I was in her bedroom,” Saori supplied helpfully. “Or possibly on the couch.”

Audgrim waved his hand vaguely. “I’m not accusing you of anything,” he said, not responding to Saori’s comment. He’d worked with me enough to get good at ignoring that kind of thing. “More just observing that...the trail from the necrotic assault led to you. And while I have no reason to think you’re capable of *that*, a kitsune *would* be a plausible suspect for the subtler attacks, the enchantments and dreams. I don’t know whether the mismatch is significant, but it’s there.”

Andrew grunted. “Okay then. Let’s go see if you’re right about Steven.”

I was right. It was, at best, bittersweet. One of the...coolers, for lack of a better word, had a body in it that was most certainly not supposed to be there. Apparently Audgrim knew something about how the paperwork went for this kind of thing, and this guy had none. He was also definitely Steven, because the other werewolves went very, very still when they saw him.

I swallowed, and discreetly moved a little further away from them.

“Definitely used silver,” Audgrim said quietly, looking at the corpse. I’d been right about dvergar having some awareness related to metals, then. “Heavily charged. Here, here, and here, at minimum.” He indicated two long cuts on Steven’s torso, and a deeper stab wound that pierced a lung. There were other injuries, but those were the worst of them.

When Audgrim said that, Cassie’s fingers twitched at her side. Andrew had a snarl very nearly as intimidating as if he’d been in fur. Even Derek had a different tension in his spine, a different sort of anger. Saori had sidled slightly away from them too, now. It wasn’t a conscious thing, I was guessing. More just...an awareness in the hindbrain of predators and imminent violence.

I didn’t know why silver hurt werewolves. No one knew, not that I was aware of. But I knew that it wasn’t as simple as silver preventing them from healing. It did do that; werewolves normally heal injuries absurdly quickly, and silver shuts that down hard. But it was more than that, an anguish not like other pain. Probably only a werewolf could truly know what it felt like, but their descriptions made it sound awful. It was a soul-deep pain that started out bad and could escalate to completely debilitating agony based on a number of factors.

Using silver on werewolves was pretty fucked up, but I thought that they could have overlooked it to a degree if it happened in a fight. They’d still kill someone for doing that, but they’d understand it. The simple reality was that with how tough they were, it was impractical to kill one without the stuff. You could do it, but it took a *lot* more work, especially for vanilla humans. So silver weapons, preferably charged with extra magical energy to amplify the effect, were standard issue against werewolves. The wolves were generally practical enough to accept that in a fight you sometimes had to do messed up things to people in order to survive.

But this hadn't been a fight. The wounds really looked like Steven hadn't been fighting back when they happened, and that made this torture, and *that* was utterly unconscionable. Seeing that someone had done this was sort of like finding out that someone was testing chemical weapons on prisoners. It was a qualitatively different kind of crime than simple murder. The werewolves had already been angry, but this...escalated that.

It occurred to me, watching this, that these attacks really seemed almost designed to make everyone hate the perpetrators as much as possible. They waltzed past the dvergar's security over and over, repeatedly making their company look incompetent. They killed Saori's personal friend in a horrific way, and left the body somewhere it was sure to be found. Specifically made the werewolves feel helpless to protect their own, and killed one of them in a way that was...fundamentally *wrong*. This was some extreme provocation all around.

"Kyoko, do you think you could get anything from him?" Audgrim was the one to break the silence. "I know it's been some days, but..."

I sighed. "But this would be a particularly strong impression. And the body has effectively been quarantined for that time. I'm willing to try, I guess. But could you all please, I dunno, go back to the lobby or something while I do?" I was really not in the mood to look at that crowd too deeply. I supposed it would also push the noise-to-signal ratio in a bad direction, but I asked mostly just for my sake.

They left. Saori gave me an encouraging hug first, which was some consolation. "No way out but through," I said, out loud since no one was going to hear me but Steven, and he wouldn't mind.

The room felt really unpleasant without my normal filters. This was a place where bad things happened on a regular basis. Not necessarily evil, as such; I didn't think it played host to things like *this* very often. But even at its best, this was fundamentally a place where bad things happened. It smelled like death. It smelled like embalming fluid, and hummed with a veneer of peace laid over a deeply horrible reality. I did not like this place, and that was while actively trying not to pay attention to it.

Steven himself wasn't much better. It had been days, but there was an enormous amount of pain and fear in him when he died, and enough lingered to put me on edge, to make every shadow into something frightening and dangerous. I could catch the wolf-and-lavender feeling of a werewolf still lingering on the body. And very faintly, I got a glimpse of the shimmering, stained signature pattern I was becoming far more familiar with than I'd like. It was enough.

I staggered a little on the way back out. I didn't normally do this so often, or with such vile energy patterns. It was starting to take a toll. Not all of the dread-pain-horror feeling had faded when I stopped scanning Steven's corpse. The shadows felt threatening, angles seemed slightly wrong, the floor further away than it should be. I sat down again when I got to the lobby, but this time it was because I needed to.

"Whatever you people are paying me for this," I said after a few moments, "it is *definitely* not worth it. Ugh. Very faint signature. Hard to be certain without a stronger one, but it's the same kind of sponsor behind it, and I *think* it's a different human pattern than either of the others."

“It’s something to work with,” Audgrim said. He looked at the werewolves. “Common cause while we take these people down?”

Andrew nodded, a tight, carefully controlled movement. “On this hunt, yes. When I find them, I am going to rip their heart out.”

It was, I noted with a sort of dark, slightly hysterical amusement, good that there were multiple people involved. Between that and Saori’s pyromaniac inclinations, there wouldn’t be enough to go around otherwise.

“Good. No debt to either party. I think highest priority is your missing wolf, since he might still be alive.”

“We got nowhere trying,” Cassie said. “I think we might want to trade. You look for Mike, we’ll try scent tracking some of your locations. They might not expect that.”

Huh. That was...pretty clever, actually. The werewolves and dvergar had very different methods and resources to work with. It was possible they’d only covered one of those trails, not expecting the other to matter.

Apparently Audgrim agreed, because he was nodding. “I’ll get you locations and known information as soon as possible. Andrew, you still have my contact information?”

“Yes.”

“If you can send me information on Mike, I’ll get started on that immediately. Send as much as possible, I’m not sure what will be important. I may also loop the Tribe in as relevant, Jack Tar has the same agreement with me to cooperate during this hunt. I recommend we both also look into Steven and see if there’s anything in his recent activity that stands out.”

Huh. I’d never actually seen Audgrim in this role before. He had a considerable amount of personal presence, and he was very decisive with it. There was no hesitation in him at all, no feeling of doubt. Watching giving instructions to the wolves, practically giving them orders, it was easy to see why he’d been picked to manage the dvergar’s local interests.

“It would be helpful if you could get anything about the transaction here,” I added. I had thoughts, nothing concrete, but there was something...off, an intuition I wanted to check on.

“I’ll be having a long conversation with the guy who owns this place,” Audgrim said. “I’ll make sure to bring that up. And Kyoko?”

“Yes?”

“Try to get some rest. You look like shit.”

“And you look ridiculous with your jacket inside out, but I didn’t start bringing that up, did I?” I grinned at him, and left before he realized I’d made that detail up.

Chapter Ten

Saori insisted on driving me home. She didn't exactly insist on staying there with me, but she offered to stay, and make sure I got some rest.

I thought about saying that I didn't need a nursemaid. Then I thought about Saori's home, in a part of the city that was an obvious bad joke, and not a joke she chose. I thought about how she was alone in a city she did not know, one where her only local friend was recently murdered. I thought about incense and ashes and blood, and the loneliness of a stranger in a strange land. And I thought, also, about the hollow feeling of one person rattling around in a house meant for four, talking to her houseplants because sometimes you have to talk to *someone* and they were the only companions she had.

I said I'd love that. She grinned with obvious enthusiasm, and I found once again that her cheer was infectious. And, if I was being honest, I *did* look like shit. I looked exhausted in the car's mirror, like I'd been awake for three days straight. My hands had a twitchiness in them that reminded me of someone strung out on harsh stimulants. The echoes of Steven's death still hadn't fully faded from my perceptions, and I was flinching from nothing occasionally when a random shadow or breeze became too threatening. So it was, on the whole, probably just as well.

I did actually rest, though, if only because I was too tired and anxious for anything strenuous. Lunch was followed by cuddling. I watered the plants, and I could swear the lavender in the bedroom felt happy for me and the sundew a room over was expressing the equivalent of a congratulatory smirk. Optimistically, I wrote this off as the product of stress and a lot of overexposure in the past few days. I was really hoping the plants weren't starting to reply when I talked to them. But even beyond that, I was not okay with the thought that they were starting by congratulating me on developing a sex life. There were just...*so* many implications there that I did not care to contemplate.

Probably just stress. Sure. I believed that.

In any case. We ate. There was cuddling. I had no real idea when one of these clowns would next decide they urgently needed my assistance with something, so I didn't want to start anything too involved. After I dozed off on the couch and started drooling on her, Saori decided I should go to bed, and I had to admit it was probably a good idea.

When I finished brushing my teeth, I found her standing in my bedroom with a very odd expression. I wasn't sure how to parse it; if I'd been in a clearer headspace I might have been able to put a name to it, but as it was, all I really had was the mental image of a fox who has just discovered turtles for the first time.

"Something up?" I asked.

Saori didn't say anything for long enough that I wasn't sure she was going to. When she did respond, the kitsune's voice was similarly odd, carefully controlled but laced with an emotion I couldn't put a label on. "You have a lot of stuffed animals in here," she said. She was

looking around like she hadn't seen the room before. I supposed that was fair; she might have been here last night, but she wasn't exactly paying attention to the decor.

I wasn't sure how that was relevant, and it wasn't a question. But it seemed to invite a response, so I shrugged, grabbing one and tossing it over towards the bed. "I guess? I sorta have a habit of sleeping with one."

"Why?"

I was feeling increasingly perplexed at this point. "I don't usually sleep very well," I said. "And they're comforting sometimes when I have a nightmare. Saori, is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure," the kitsune said, still looking at a plush rabbit with that odd expression. "I'm not sure how to tell."

"It's alright if you don't want to talk about it."

Saori shook her head. "No, it's nothing like that. More just..." She trailed off for a moment. "This isn't something I'm used to. Most people I've known wouldn't do it. I don't know how to explain."

I considered it for a few moments. "What would you expect to see instead?"

"It would depend on context, I guess. Just...not this."

I thought about it some more. What about this would she be so unaccustomed to? Not, I thought, the objects themselves. They might be a particular focus for the emotion, but not the cause of it. That seemed to be more about the underlying motivation or reason I had them.

And then it clicked. "Most of those people wouldn't admit they needed it, would they?"

Saori shook her head. "No. They wouldn't."

I was familiar with that attitude, that philosophy. I thought about the vulnerability inherent in needing comforted, and the kind of person who would see it as weakness. I thought about Saori, and the reckless, devil-may-care attitude she presented most of the time. I thought about how she woke up, not exactly abrupt, but very *quick*, and alert before she'd even opened her eyes. I thought about a home she hadn't picked, in a city not her own. I thought about smoke and ashes, and all the things they meant.

I didn't know the details. I mean, I'd just met her. And I was aware that while Saori looked human most of the time, she fundamentally was not, not even to the limited extent that I was. I did not know at all how that impacted things, either in terms of her nature and identity or the things she had experienced. Much of her life hadn't even happened in this world.

But I was pretty sure I wasn't the only one in the room who had nightmares.

Gently, and with much the same care I would use when handling a baby bird, I asked, "Would you like one?"

"That would be nice," she said, with that same tone. I still couldn't have described it, but I understood it a bit now. It had a lot in common with how she'd looked last night, when she realized I was serious about talking with her mattering more to me than people being murdered.

I got the impression that people had not often tried to comfort Saori. I thought I might want to change that.

I grabbed a different plush, a leopard older and more battered than most of them. “Alright. This one I’d like to keep but you’re welcome to take any of the others.”

I didn’t see which she took, or if she took one at all. It didn’t really matter, in some ways. As she’d observed, I had a lot of the things, and while they had a certain amount of meaning, for most the comfort they provided was more tactile than emotional. And I knew she could get one herself if she wanted, anyway. It was the offer that mattered.

Saori stayed the night with me, unsurprisingly. I laid awake in the dark for a long time, holding the kitsune while she slept, lost in thoughts I couldn’t put words to, couldn’t make into language. When I finally did find sleep, my dreams were troubled, full of blood and storms and rotting flowers.

I was—of course—woken by a phone call. Saori jerked awake when my phone rang, with a momentary flicker of anxiety visible in her eyes. I couldn’t blame her, given I probably looked pretty much the same.

I grabbed my phone, and answered it on the second attempt. “Audgrim,” I said, “you’d better have a *very* good reason for calling me at four-thirty in the morning.”

“I have something to show you,” he said, sounding somehow even more dour than his default. “Urgently.”

I took a slow, deep breath. “You remember that favor you promised me when this started?” I said. “It’s going to be a very fucking big one.”

“Yeah,” he said, and that grim tone had been joined by a bone-deep fatigue. “Yeah, I think it will be.”

Audgrim sent one of his employees to get us rather than come himself. In some ways, that was as ominous as all of the other signals he was giving off of inexplicable urgency. He knew how I was with cars, with strangers, really with every component of this experience. And dvergr culture, in classic Scandinavian fashion, very much emphasized a lead-from-the-front management style. A jarl had to be as scary as any of his vikings or housekarls, back in the old days, or he would not be a jarl much longer. Audgrim *always* came himself when he wanted something from me, to the point that I had only interacted with his employees at all a handful of times.

But this guy definitely did work for him. I checked fairly thoroughly, and still wasn’t happy with it. He insisted on riding in the same car with us, saying that Audgrim had ordered him not to let me out of his sight. I insisted on Saori driving, which he didn’t like much, but he acknowledged it was reasonable of me to find getting in a car driven by someone I didn’t know...unpleasant. Saori was a spectacularly reckless driver, and she didn’t know the car she was driving, and I still trusted her more than him.

She *was* spectacularly reckless, too. The devil-may-care attitude was firmly in place again this morning, and she was all grins and laughter and cynical mockery. I didn't think it was a lie, exactly, or even a mask as such. This attitude, this careless mischief and random insanity, was a genuine and important part of her. It was just also the part she wanted to present to the world, while concealing anything else behind it. It was *very* thorough; I suspected that in the past few days I'd seen more of what was behind that shell than Saori normally showed in a year.

In any case, she took directions from Audgrim's employee, but the way she followed them had him sounding like he was seriously questioning his career choices. I considered this my token revenge for being woken up so early. And, fortunately for him, the drive was a short one.

I wasn't sure where I'd expected us to be going. But it definitely was not up the same hill I lived on, and to a particularly inaccessible part of it. There were a lot of old houses like mine on Southside Slope, with a maze of narrow, twisting roads between them. But there were also areas that were too steep, too rocky, and just generally too much of a pain in the ass for anyone to have developed them. He had us go to one of those, along an access road that basically no one used. It was private property, but teenagers used to have a habit of sneaking in to sit around a bonfire, to laugh and tell ghost stories and have disappointing first kisses, and generally be dumb kids like teenagers do. I wasn't sure whether they still did that here.

But there wasn't anyone there currently. I was glaring at Audgrim's employee by now, though he may not have noticed through the relief at being back on solid ground. "The hell are we doing here?" I asked.

"It's a little ways off into the trees, miss," he said.

I continued glaring at him. "You realize how insanely suspicious this is, right?"

He looked at the ground. "Yes, miss. Apologies. Mr. Eyvindson said that he didn't want to leave the site unattended."

I heard Audgrim's last name so rarely that it actually took me a few seconds to recognize it. It wasn't really even *his* name; Eyvindr had been his father's name. I took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. "Fine," I said. My voice sounded very even, very precise. People who did not know me often made the mistake of thinking this meant I was calm. "Which way?"

He swallowed, hard. I realized that Saori was right next to me, also glaring at him, and she did not appear calm at all. I hadn't noticed she was even carrying that knife until it caught the moonlight, which was impressive given its size. "Um. This way, miss, apologies again." He started off through the trees, further into the grove. We followed. I had to feel bad for him, really. He was not getting paid enough for this. I didn't even have to know his salary to know that.

It was not a long walk. And somewhat to my surprise, we actually did find Audgrim rather than, say, a dozen people with guns. He did still have some people around, and probably they had guns, but they weren't pointed at us, so it was fine.

He was, himself, standing in a small clearing in the trees. I started to move out into it,

but paused as I saw something, and knelt down to look at it first. There was a length of silver wire in the grass that had caught my attention when the light hit it right.

But once I saw it, I could see that it was just one piece of many. I saw silver, copper, steel, gold, all laid out on the ground. There were bits of stone, bits of glass, all kinds of stuff, all set out in an intricate design that sprawled across the whole clearing. It looked like a mix of elaborate geometric patterns and vaguely runic symbols, and everything about it felt indefinably *wrong* to me.

I stopped when I saw that, and Saori did as well, perhaps just taking the cue from me. I so very much did not want to step out into that clearing. “Audgrim?” I called from the edge of the trees. “What the hell is this?”

He looked over at me, and his posture actually looked relieved when he saw me. “That’s what I was hoping to ask you,” he said, loudly enough for me to hear clearly. “We found this thing, and I don’t know what the hell it is. Been trying not to mess with it, but I don’t know what to do beyond that.” He walked over towards us, which was good, because having a conversation at that distance was annoying and I *really* didn’t want to walk towards him right now.

“How did you even find it?” I asked as he approached.

“We’ve actually been making a bit of progress,” he said. “In particular, I was able to track down their missing wolf at least slightly.”

“How?” I asked, more out of idle curiosity than anything.

Audgrim shrugged. “That street only gets so many cars on it. The intersections on either end have traffic cameras, which was pretty lucky for us. I grabbed license plates for every car that went through there in the right time window, then started cross-referencing them to find anomalies. Once I had it narrowed down to three vehicles, I started looking for where they went after they left. Two were totally mundane, a food delivery and some guy who was visiting his sister.”

I stared. Saori, after a moment, said, “You can do that?”

Audgrim just smiled. I had to work not to shiver. I knew that the dvergar had a lot of influence, locally. They’d maintained an interest in this city since it was founded, and on an intellectual level, I’d sort of known that he could probably get a lot of things done that he didn’t really have the legal authority to do. But it was one thing to know that, and another to see it being used so *casually*. It had only even taken him a few hours.

“Okay,” I said after a moment. “So you got that. What’s that have to do with this place?”

His smile faded almost instantly. “Directly? Almost nothing. It was a rented car, we couldn’t really get much past that. They drove to a parking garage and then switched cars, and that we couldn’t follow. The wolves confirmed Mike’s scent was in the garage but that’s about it. But since it suggested that they didn’t bother hiding from mundane authorities, I also grabbed pretty much every local police report from the past two days to look at.”

Because clearly having access to creepy amounts of surveillance data wasn’t unsettling

enough. "What'd you get?"

"Not too much so far," he said. "It's a lot of information to sift through, and we don't really know what to look for very well. It's really only a few of the strangest incidents that I've been able to look into. This one, in particular, was...odd. There were a ton of complaints about noise and activity here over the past three to five days, and then two nights ago a whole bunch of calls all at once a little before midnight, then nothing."

"Got written off as a bunch of high schoolers having a party?" I guessed.

"Yeah. But the timing and some of the details were odd, like how rather than music, the noises being reported were loud sounds that resembled fireworks, creepy laughter, stuff like that. Also a weird time of year for it, the school year just started again." He shrugged. "Seemed odd, so I asked Cassie to go see if it smelled like anything."

"And she found this?"

He nodded. "Apparently the whole area, from here to the access road, smells all kinds of wrong. She described it as being like a bunch of scents distorted and blended into each other. I don't know how their scent tracking works well enough to guess at what that means. She really did not like it, though, so she backed off and called me. Came in and found this whole setup."

I sighed. "And you wanted me to come look at it, see what was going on?"

"Maybe?" He shrugged. "I'm genuinely not sure what this is, what to do with it, I don't even know if it's related. This is pretty far outside my area of expertise."

I nodded. "Alright. Well. If I'm here already, fine." I knelt down to look at the bit of metal closest to me again, brushing my fingers over it. The impression was immediate, strong, and unpleasant, without me even having to open myself up more than my default state. Grease and rot and something sick and putrid and alien. I shuddered and stood back up. "Kay, that was easy. Definitely them, and there's a lot less human in this relative to that sponsor. Seems to have involved several people, and it was spread out in time. Very strong, very inhuman. Some form of ritual magic but I doubt I'll be able to tell you more than that. This isn't my area of expertise, either, and beyond telling you who was here, I don't think I've got anything for you on this one."

He nodded. He looked like he'd expected that, and like he was expecting something worse next. I got the strong impression that I wasn't going to like what I was about to hear.

I was not disappointed. "I'd like for you to call the firm," he said, quiet and unsure of himself.

To anyone else in that clearing, my reaction to this sentence probably seemed completely disproportionate. I turned and stared at him in silence for a long moment. My expression was blank, and when I did speak, my voice had gone back to that very level, calm tone that never meant anything good when it came from me.

"You want me to...is this your idea of a practical joke or something?"

"No," he said quietly. "No, I'm serious."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" I asked.

He glanced around, and then started walking back out into the clearing. This time I followed, and Saori did as well, looking increasingly confused. I knew what he had in mind, though. It was as close to private as we were getting, and some conversations you did not want to have in front of a dozen of your employees.

"None of my people have the right skillset to analyze this," he said quietly, once were out into the clearing. "And even if I wanted the Tribe looking at this, it's not their kind of magic."

"Sure," I said. "But you have to know this will be...an incredibly bad idea." I shook my head. "Audgrim, it's...why? Like, seriously, why? Nothing about this situation merits the kinds of resources you've been throwing at it. Calling me because of some vandalism is one thing, it's odd but I can understand it. Talking to Jack Tar was another thing entirely, but he was wanting to help you anyway, sure, reasonable enough. But calling the firm is...what the *hell* is so important about this that you'd pull *them* in on it?"

"I don't fucking know!" Audgrim said. Shouted, really, and I must have flinched, because he closed his eyes and visibly forced himself to calm down again. "Kyoko, it's...look. Everything I know says you're right. It's vandalism and two dead people, that's nothing, it doesn't matter. But the family is leaning on me hard. I've got my mother breathing down my neck, even my uncle took the time to tell me in person not to fuck this up. I haven't seen him in years, and he cares enough to come and tell me this, and I do not know why. But I have never seen them get this intense about something before. And that scares me, especially when, like you said, nothing about it seems like it should even *register* on their scale."

"Um," Saori said, sounding very much not happy to be interrupting. "Sorry, but. What the hell are you talking about?"

Audgrim clearly needed a moment to cool down anyway, so I was the one who answered her. "There's this consulting firm called Varkalnen, Nilsen, Casimir, and Associates. Though 'consulting firm' doesn't really capture it. VNC has a reputation for being...they can put you in contact with a consultant or specialist on any topic you want. I'm not being particularly hyperbolic, they really do have almost literally anything. But prices...can be considerable."

"Ah," she said. "I think I'm beginning to see what you mean."

"Yeah," I said, feeling very tired. "I have...a limited amount of contact with them. Mostly because my mother had more. They're the ones who administer the trust fund she set up for me, as well as having been responsible for much of my education. They're the ones who gave Audgrim my number, a long while ago, when he wanted someone to look at a very unusual computer system. But that was a simple thing to ask for. Getting an expert on ritual magic to come look at this on short notice is...not."

"The first taste is always free," Saori said, her eyes distant. "Always."

I smiled a little. "Yeah." I looked over to Audgrim, who had apparently been content to let me explain this without comment. "You know this won't end well."

"Maybe not," he said quietly. "But the cost will be on my head. All I need you to do is make the initial call."

I sighed. The first taste was always, always free. And he really should have known better, but I wasn't here to protect him from his own choices.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll see what I can do," I said.

Chapter Eleven

My point of contact with VNC was almost always the same person, some woman named Kelly Lamarcke who was apparently the firm's primary agent in this region. VNC was at minimum a global organization, and quite possibly had interests in other worlds entirely, and they had a sprawling bureaucracy to support that. My understanding was that she was relatively low in that bureaucratic hierarchy.

I was just as glad to mostly deal with a relatively low-ranking member of the firm. I'd been around one of the name partners exactly once, and would be quite happy to never repeat the experience. Jack Tar was the most personally powerful human I'd ever been around. But that was a position he held only because while I did not know what Elaheh Nilsen was, and she might well have started out human, if so I was sure she left that behind a long, long time ago.

Kelly was creepy enough, honestly. She knew who was calling before she answered, impressive considering that it was a number I'd never used with them, and she sounded perfectly crisp and professional at four in the morning. I explained what I needed, making very, very sure to specify that I was in no sense taking on this debt myself.

She needed about ten seconds before she told me that she'd have someone on site within an hour and hung up. I shivered a little, and walked back over to where Audgrim and Saori were waiting at the edge of the clearing. "One hour," I said, "and you're negotiating price with them directly after it's apparent how much you're paying for."

He nodded. Saori grinned and chewed gum. "I have to say," the kitsune commented, "the deal with the devil vibe is actually pretty stylish when you're not the one paying. So we have some time to kill?"

I shrugged. I wasn't getting back to sleep tonight anyway. "Sounds like."

"Awesome! Round of liar's dice?"

Of course she'd brought dice. Unsurprisingly, within forty minutes I was several hundred thousand imaginary dollars in the red. I wasn't great at any game that involved bluffing. Audgrim had very few tells, and while I was not certain how Saori was cheating, she definitely was. The security employees mostly stood around and watched; I was quite sure they found the sight of their boss sitting in the grass losing at dice while Saori cracked bad jokes to be enough entertainment on its own.

The hour passed, quicker than most. I found myself feeling grateful that she'd brought a way to pass the time. Almost exactly fifty-five minutes after I got off the phone with Kelly, I got an impersonal text message from an unfamiliar number saying our consultant would be there in five minutes. Audgrim tried to make himself appear professional; Saori and I didn't bother, though I did note that her knife was out of sight again.

And then, after exactly five minutes, the consultant walked up out of the trees. I was not sure how he'd kept the suit that nice walking through the forest, but then, I also wasn't sure at

all how he'd even gotten here this quickly. Some questions weren't worth asking. He walked over to where the two of us were sitting and Audgrim was standing, and nodded politely. "Miss Sugiyama, good morning."

I winced. "Call me Kyoko. Please."

One of the faintest smiles I'd ever seen flickered across his face, more visible around the eyes than anything to do with his mouth. He turned towards Audgrim, and nodded again, a tiny bit less deeply. "And Mr. Eyvindson. I take it this is the site you want me to examine?"

Audgrim nodded. The consultant smiled again, this one more visible and less sincere, and walked out into the clearing, pacing around, occasionally kneeling down to examine one of the objects more closely. The three of us followed, I think mostly because we weren't sure what else to do. Nothing was said as he worked his way in from the edges, going over the entire clearing on the way to the center. Now that we were closer, I could see that at the center of the clearing, and thus of the things arrayed within it, was what looked like the stump of a tree, one that had been recently cut down. The tree itself was nowhere to be seen.

And then, finally, he stopped and turned to Audgrim again. "This is an interesting structure," he said. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Assume I know nothing about the topic and go from there," he said.

The consultant nodded. "Understood. Well, this is a focus for ritual spellcasting. Definitely a ritual spell, rather than a ritual as such."

"The difference being?"

"A ritual is...a series of actions which follows a strict formula," the consultant said after a moment. "It's not magic, as such, though it might involve or result in magic. Rather, it's a formalized invocation of another power which will get a relatively reliable response. If you slit a lamb's throat and spill the blood into a silver bowl, and offer this sacrifice to Black Annis, a hag will come to guide you home, however far you've strayed. Things like that."

"So they're a way to get someone else to do things, rather than doing them yourself."

"Yes, entirely. And they almost always involve some form of price, of sacrifice. When the ritual is invoking a greater power, the price can be very high, and the outcome less certain than the example I provided."

Audgrim nodded. "Okay, I think I understand. But this isn't that?"

"No," the consultant said. "This is something else which uses a similar name. A ritual spell is a working which is carried out over time using magic. Because the structure of the working is more elaborate, it tends to involve much more in the way of props and foci than spontaneous magic, and the effects can be much stronger and more precise. But it is ultimately powered by the caster, not by an external agent."

"Do you know what this one was meant to do?"

"Hm," the consultant said. "Yes, but some of the details will require explanation. At its most basic level, this was a spell of binding. It compelled a being to appear, and bound it to obey the commands of the caster. In this case, they were binding the spirit of this tree." He gestured

at the stump in the middle of the diagram.

There was a momentary pause after this. When Audgrim did speak up, his voice had the cautious tone of someone who is sure he heard correctly, and also certain it cannot possibly have been what the speaker meant to say. “The spirit...of this tree,” he repeated.

“Yes. Though it’s not...” the consultant grimaced a little bit. “This language is very poorly suited to describing the supernatural. A lot of terms overlap in confusing ways, like the difference between rituals and ritual spells we just went over. When people refer to a spirit or the spirit world, they are normally describing things which exist only as thoughtforms or concepts, with no physical embodiment. This is not such a being, but rather one more akin to a dryad or nymph, a creature which does have physical form.”

Audgrim was still staring at the man with that same “you can’t be serious” expression. “And that creature was...here?”

“Not exactly,” the consultant said. “It was in an Otherside domain. From the resonance patterns I’d guess Faerie, but a tree spirit of this kind might be linked to any number of domains, and Faerie is only a tentative guess. It just had a strong connection to this tree.”

Okay, that made at least slightly more sense. I had only a vague understanding of the Otherside, but I did know that it was an incredibly vast set of linked worlds. Thousands, at minimum, and while most were apparently tiny, others...weren’t. Faerie was estimated to be about as large as the surface area of the earth, on its own, and while it was one of the largest, it was hardly the only one in that range. The Otherside was *huge*.

And it had a comparably wide variety of creatures in it. When Audgrim referred to his family, he meant the dvergar who lived on the Otherside but had an interest in the city. The raiju were over there somewhere, as were the kitsune. These beings visited the mortal world, interacted with humans, but they were not native to it.

If the VNC consultant said there were dryad-like spirits over there, I could accept that. If he said he wasn’t entirely sure this one was from Faerie, I could accept that too. If anything, that he could even recognize the target and guess at where it came from suggested an impressive knowledge of the layout and fauna of the Otherside.

Audgrim was nodding. “And they used that connection to force it to manifest so they could bind it?”

“Yes, exactly. It’s a strong sympathetic link, very useful for that kind of thing.”

“Okay, I can work with that. Do you know who did this, or why?”

The consultant shrugged. “Not exactly. As to who, I don’t know who the caster was, but the ritual design is Sidhe in origin. And as to why, that ties into one of the oddities I mentioned that will require some explanation. You see, this ritual pattern is...several kinds of inexplicable. To start with, it’s far stronger than would have been necessary. This is the sort of ritual binding you would use to command something quite strong. A genius loci of a major natural feature, a Sidhe noble, a young dragon, that general range. Using it on this spirit is...an extreme degree of overkill.”

I frowned, looking at it. This part I did know something about. “That kind of binding takes a lot of power,” I said. “Like, you’d need a *lot* of energy to power that.”

“Yes, quite,” the consultant agreed. “That’s part of why it’s so odd that they would use it here.”

“When you say a lot,” Saori asked, “how much are we talking?”

The consultant barely glanced at her, and the answer was clearly directed towards Audgrim, but he did answer. “There are...perhaps a dozen mortal mages living who could support this working using just their own power,” he said. “For the vast majority of people, human or otherwise, an external source would be required to maintain it even long enough to get the spirit to appear.”

“What kind of source?” Audgrim asked.

“Ah,” the consultant said with some satisfaction in his voice. “That’s the *interesting* part. Because out of the major methods, I would normally expect geomancy. Place the ritual on a naturally occurring ley line, and use that to power it. It’s delicate, but usually the simplest method, and particularly effective for binding something linked to nature like this. This region is also a confluence for them, there are several lines that parallel the rivers and some from other sources. We’re standing over one of them, even.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ coming,” I said dryly.

Another flicker of a smile that didn’t reach his lips. “Indeed. The ritual structure here does have those geomantic elements, but it’s not tuned correctly. You have to adjust those structures based on your location and the nature of the line you’re pulling from, and this is not set up in a way that would work here. However, there are also secondary structures there, there, and there,” he gestured as though it meant anything to us, “which suggest blood magic as an alternative power source.”

“They killed someone for this,” I said. My voice was softer now.

“Yes. Likely someone with meaningful personal power—animals or random people off the street would not be enough for a ritual of this size, not without using a lot of them. It would be most effective if there were a sympathetic link to the target, so in this case someone with ties to nature or to Faerie would work best.”

Audgrim’s face tightened, very slightly. “I see. Anything else?”

The consultant was quiet for a moment, and looked at me for some reason, and then looked back to the center of the ritual site. “Yes,” he said, “one final note. They killed the spirit with this. Not necessarily right away, but the connection to the tree was a fundamental part of its being. Now that the tree is dead, it will wither and die as well in a short time. This was not necessary for the ritual itself; they did it after it was already conjured and bound. Any further questions?”

The clearing was silent except for the breeze. He smiled again, this one back to the false, professional look that didn’t show up in his eyes at all. “Excellent. Someone will be in touch to discuss payment. Good day, Miss Kyoko, Mr. Eyvindson.” He nodded politely and walked back

into the forest, which still did not touch the suit, did not so much as scuff his shoes. He hadn't given his name, hadn't acknowledged that anyone other than Audgrim and I was even present. Maybe, for him, they weren't; *they* did not have a business relationship with VNC.

It was quiet for a few moments before Saori said, "Well. Shit."

"Does seem to sum it up pretty well," I agreed. "So, you figure they used the werewolf as a sacrifice?"

"Seems likely," Audgrim said. "Timing lines up, and werewolves are natureish, I think."

"I don't think they'll like that very much." I looked at the diagram laid out under our feet. A ritual strong enough to cage a noble of the Sidhe Courts, set up to use multiple serious power sources, and they used it for...this. The spirit of a random cypress.

"Understatement of the week," he said sourly.

"Nah," Saori said. "Understatement of the week was calling this situation weird. 'Weird' is when I spike a monastery's incense with hallucinogens. *This* is outright bizarre."

Audgrim just stared at her for a moment, took a deep breath, and then said, "It somehow does not surprise me that you two get along."

I snickered, and looked around. Saori wasn't wrong, this was just...why? Why would anyone go to all this work for some random tree practically in my backyard? Hell, even if you discounted the lycanthropic sacrifice—murder clearly was not something these people particularly objected to, so I doubted they'd seen that as much of an issue—this was just...so much work to set up. The time, effort, and expense involved in setting up this ritual structure was just...a lot to throw at something so trivial.

And then I paused as a thought occurred to me. "Hey, when are you going to be talking to the funeral home guy?"

"In about an hour or two. Why?"

"Cause there's something I'm curious about," I said. "Hell, go ahead and call one of the werewolves, too. I think I know somewhere these lunatics have been. And if I'm right, I highly doubt they bothered to hide their scent when they did."

"I'll just give you Andrew's number," Audgrim said. "And we're still working on other avenues, by the way. Couple of wolves have been searching around where we found Chris's body, and we've been looking into the werewolf from the funeral home."

"Awesome. I think I've done more than enough for this morning, so unless you somehow have yet another random question for me, I'm going to go home and get some more sleep."

Audgrim gave me a slightly odd look, then said, "Yeah, that seems like a good idea. Like I said yesterday, you look like shit."

"Thanks, wasn't sure." I glanced over at Saori. "You mind if we walk home?" I was feeling antsy again, agitated and restless. It was the same feeling I'd had after meeting with Maddie, what felt like much more than a few days ago, and for much the same reason. I didn't

understand this, couldn't make it make sense. I had information, but I couldn't make it into meaning. I was aware that my fixation on that understanding, on knowing the meaning of what I observed, was neurotic. Didn't do shit to make it go away. Walking, movement, things like that helped, they made it easier to shift away from that headspace.

I didn't actually ask Saori whether she wanted to go back to my house with me. I was socially clumsy, but even I could figure that one out.

Chapter Twelve

It was a nice time for a walk. It was morning, technically, and by the time we were done at the ritual site, the sun was starting to consider showing its face. But it hadn't committed to the idea yet, and the predawn stillness hadn't yet given way to the bustle of the early-morning commuter rush. We passed a few people, but this neighborhood wasn't all that busy in general, and mostly we had the street to ourselves.

It was a nice time for a walk. I had enjoyable company, and the past few days *really* hadn't been enough time for that to stop feeling novel and pleasant. I really wasn't sure what Saori was to me, and we'd already more or less established that we weren't applying a simple label to the relationship anyway.

But regardless of how the relationship was characterized, this was more time than I had spent engaging socially with someone, in person, in weeks, maybe months. The sex was nice, but even just having someone to *talk* to did a lot to pull me out of that agitated headspace. By the time we were about halfway back to my house, I was grinning and laughing quite sincerely.

"So how'd it go with the incense, anyway?" I asked, reminded by some comment about the flammability of the average housecat.

"With the what?"

"The bit you mentioned earlier, about lacing some monastery's incense with drugs. How'd it go?" I was assuming that she hadn't been kidding about that.

Saori laughed. "Right, that! Kinda disappointing, honestly. It was a nice idea, but I think I used the wrong drug or something. All it really did was give a few monks headaches, which, you know, still funny but not really what I was going for."

"I probably have something better at home," I said. "And if not I can definitely get it."

"Wait, seriously?" She looked over at me with a distinctly hopeful sort of smile.

I snickered. "Saori, I have a literal room in my house for growing my collection of poisonous plants. Did you *really* think I don't have any psychoactive houseplants?" I paused. "Well, I mean, a lot of the poisonous ones *are* psychoactive. Belladonna is practically the reference drug for deliriants, for example. But I also have some that aren't likely to kill someone."

She was grinning now. "Damn, nice. I am so glad I met you, seriously."

I started to respond to that, and then paused. I could hear footsteps behind us. And while that was not, in and of itself, notable, there was something...odd about them. I couldn't tell what, something about the cadence, perhaps, or a slight feeling of thrumming anticipation.

Nothing big. But I was, as I had told Audgrim a few days ago, a distrustful bitch, and my general attitude was that if I did something bizarre and insane, I was already so far into the eccentric range that it wouldn't stand out much. So I didn't even take the time to say anything,

just pivoted to face towards the person.

Some guy in a hoodie and jeans. Nobody special, but he noticed me noticing him, and he went from a fairly normal pace to a much faster one, not running, but very purposeful. It was one of the less steep portions of the hill, and the sidewalk was good enough footing to allow for that pace.

By the time he got close enough for me to see the knife in the twilight, I was already moving. He didn't expect that. He also clearly didn't expect me to step *towards* him as he got close. He seemed slow now, and clumsy, though I knew a lot of this was just that my perceptions sharpened when this kind of thing happened. I was moving quicker, processing quicker. It felt like I had all the time in the world to watch and respond while he tried to adjust and stab me.

Humans, as I understood it, had this feeling too. People felt like things slowed down when adrenaline was running high. I just...took that a little further than humans did.

He went for a thrust, which was fairly reasonable. Not normally the best option, you had to hit a vital target for someone to bleed out quick enough to matter. Slashing was usually better with a short blade like that. But he had momentum, moving slightly downhill like this, and it was a good weapon for thrusting, a stiletto or similar. Reasonable enough, under the circumstances.

I could feel myself snarling as I stepped towards him, getting slightly out of his line of movement in the process. He had too much momentum to adjust quickly, and the blade went past about four inches from my ribcage. I grabbed his arm as it did. It was a pretty standard balance break drawn from aikido. I could feel the anxiety in his posture, yellow-orange and startled.

People sometimes had a tendency to think my inhuman nature was funny. And, to be fair, in some ways it was. When Saori had to leave her phone in the other room to be sure I wouldn't fry it in my sleep, and she commented that it felt like she was a kid who had to turn in her electronics when it was bedtime, that *was* pretty funny. When I needed an antistatic mat at the computer so I didn't break it when I got excited about a video game, that was hilarious.

I produced enough electrostatic discharge to ruin electronics because my self-control slipped a little. It was funny. But people sometimes let that amusement blind them, didn't think through the implications. I did that by accident, but that did not mean that it *only* happened by accident. And in the folklore, raiju were not benign or gentle creatures. Not even a little bit.

I was guessing this guy didn't think it was very funny when I grabbed him and hit him with enough electricity to send most of his muscles into involuntary, spastic convulsions. He probably also did not think it was very funny when, as his leg jerked unexpectedly and his momentum carried him forward, my other hand caught him in the solar plexus. As with the balance break, it drew on principles from martial arts, in this case mostly boxing. As with the balance break, and really most human martial arts, it had significant differences when used by someone who was *not* human.

I was not a particularly large woman. But that doesn't matter much once the supernatural becomes involved, and raiju were not gentle creatures. I was stronger than I

looked. I was a *lot* stronger than I looked. And a hook to the solar plexus was a nasty punch to begin with.

His feet came off the ground. At this point, my grip on his wrist was really the only anchor his body had. I broke his fall enough that he didn't crack his skull on the sidewalk, but it was still a hard fall onto concrete.

Saori had that knife out again. I wasn't surprised; it was a pretty fast reaction time, but from her driving I had already known she was outside human range for that. She didn't need to do anything with it, though. There didn't seem to be any other attackers, and this guy was...pretty thoroughly out of the fight. She was mostly looking at me.

I knew what she was seeing. Raiju are also not particularly human creatures. Most of them, as I understood it, could mimic human bodies, and I was only half-raiju anyway. But when I was actively drawing on that heritage, I looked like a mix of a wolf and a storm cloud. I didn't go fully lupine like a werewolf; I was still bipedal, and I was recognizably myself. Same body shape, same vivid green eyes; the fur was the same black as my hair, and the lightning crawling through that fur was the exact same shade as my eyes.

No one would be intimidated by my normal appearance. I was just a Japanese girl in her late teens or early twenties, nothing special. But this? People tended to find this pretty fucking scary.

Saori said, "You're hot when you're messy," and grinned at me. She hadn't put her knife away, but she didn't seem anxious at all.

"Thanks," I said. My voice was odd, the enunciation strange because of the fangs and laced with crackling electricity. "You have any zip ties?"

"Why would I be carrying zip ties?"

"Why are you carrying a bag of dice?"

"Okay, that's fair," the kitsune admitted. "But no, I don't."

"Ugh. It's not far, at least. Give me a second." I closed my eyes, focusing, and pushed the storm back down. It was, really, a lot like the filters I maintained to limit the constant flood of sensory information. And like those filters, forcing the storm in my blood into the background again was both harder and less pleasant than letting it out in the first place. At least the transition was essentially instant and painless for me; I didn't even feel my body changing, not at all. The werewolves had it *way* worse.

I staggered a little as the world went back to moving at a more ordinary pace and the lightning stopped crawling over me. I hadn't done this in quite a while, hadn't called on the beast and the storm inside of me. I just didn't need to very often. Not in recent years.

After I adjusted again, I picked the guy up. I was stronger than anyone my size had a right to be, and it was pretty effortless. I draped one of his arms over my shoulder, so that at a glance it would look like I was just helping a drunk friend stagger home. He was semiconscious, but not enough to struggle, or, I thought, even enough to talk; he wasn't going to be shouting for help or anything. Saori scooped up his knife.

“Honestly, kind of impressed,” Saori said, following me. She had a kind of exuberance about her, practically skipping as we walked. It would certainly help to sell the “group of drunk friends going home after a night out” look, though I doubted that was why the kitsune was doing it. “You took him down pretty fast. But also that was rude, I didn’t even have a chance to play with him first.”

I grinned. “Guess you’ll have to be a little quicker next time, huh?” She pouted. I snickered.

It was not a long walk, and he wasn’t actually that much weight for me. But I was tired, once the adrenaline started fading. Not really because of the fight, as such. I just hadn’t gotten much sleep, and it now appeared unlikely I was getting more before I had to be active for the day. It left me in a bit of a bad mood, and I may have been less gentle than I could have been as I hauled him into my house.

Saori locked the door behind us while I carried my captive to a room on the ground floor I rarely used for anything. She joined me about when I had managed to find a pack of heavy zip ties in the closet. “Honestly, I feel kind of insulted,” I said as I rolled him onto his stomach and put him in a simple hogtie. “This is what they send to attack me? *This* jackass?”

“Disrespectful, really,” Saori agreed. “This knife is trash, by the way. It’s a show piece, and not even a good one. You should be ashamed of yourself.” This was clearly directed at the guy on the floor, who was starting to stir by now.

He started to struggle a bit, to pull against the ties. Then he looked up and saw Saori, standing there holding his knife and talking shit about its quality. He saw me digging through the closet, and remembered that I’d taken him out in a couple of seconds while unarmed. He might have seen the irritation in my posture, the boredom in the kitsune’s face. If he were particularly quick to get his bearings, he might even have gotten around to thinking about the implications of me having heavy zip ties on hand and knowing how to use them to restrain someone effectively.

He went still again. He went *very* still, and he didn’t say anything at all.

I found what I was looking for, which took a few moments. I had a lot of crap in that closet, and hadn’t had much need for some of this in a long time. “You mind watching him for a few minutes?” I asked. “Think I should go call our friend.” I did not use Audgrim’s name in front of the guy who was sent to kill me. There was a chance he was going to survive this experience, and it would have been rude to let that information slip in front of him when I didn’t have to.

Saori shrugged. “Sure.”

“Awesome.” I tossed her a roll of heavy duct tape, a bottle of isopropanol, a long-handled lighter of the kind you use to light a gas grill or campfire, and a box of small iron nails. “Have fun.” I didn’t expect she would actually torture him, but she was the kind of unpredictable that plausibly *could*. Given that he’d attempted, however clumsily, to kill me, I felt that scaring the shit out of him like this was a fairly proportionate form of revenge.

From the way Saori was grinning, I was pretty sure she agreed, and from the way his

breathing sped up I was pretty sure it worked. I smiled sweetly at him and went upstairs.

Audgrim answered his phone with, “What’s up?” and a somewhat cautious tone.

“Some idiot tried to stab me just now,” I said. “Probably related to your thing, seems a bit implausible it was coincidental.”

“Were you injured?”

I chuckled. “No. No, I was not. He’s tied up on the floor of my house. Wasn’t sure if you’d want to interrogate him or something.”

“Awesome. I’ll have someone come by and pick him up.” He disconnected without saying goodbye.

I went back downstairs and found Saori playing with fire. As expected, she hadn’t actually *done* anything to him. But she had a lighter, and it hadn’t taken a genius to figure out that the kitsune liked fire by this point. It did not surprise me that she had something on fire. It *did* surprise me that she’d found some tea lights in the closet, set them out on the floor, and drawn a pentacle around the guy, while chanting in faux-Latin. But it was pretty funny, and it did have the poor bastard terrified.

It was less than two minutes later that someone rang the doorbell. I checked the door, and found one of Audgrim’s employees.

I corrected myself a moment later. It was the same employee, specifically, who had come to get me earlier. I paused when I realized this, then opened the door. “You got here very quickly,” I said. I didn’t sound happy about it, because I wasn’t.

“Yes, miss,” he said. “Mr. Eyvindson told me to keep an eye on you.”

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this guy hadn’t done anything wrong, and it would be unfair to take my frustration out on him. “Come in and grab this idiot, then,” I said, and stepped out of the way. As soon as I’d closed the door behind him, I was calling Audgrim again.

“Yes?” he said.

“Audgrim,” I said slowly, “why did you have one of your employees watching me?”

“Because I thought you might need someone on hand,” he said. “It *is* a security company. This is something they do.”

“That implies you knew I would be attacked,” I said.

I could almost hear his shrug. “Knew? Not really. But there was a strong suspicion, yes.”

“And you didn’t tell me because...?”

“Because you’re shit at lying and I didn’t want it to be obvious you were expecting trouble.”

“Why not?” I could hear my voice taking on that worryingly blank, even tone again.

“Because we gained valuable intelligence this way,” Audgrim said. “It’s...look, who did they send?”

“Some random guy with a knife,” I said.

“Right. The thing is...okay, let me start at the beginning. It’s safe to say you’ve contributed a lot to this investigation, and I don’t think we’d have gotten nearly this far, this quickly, without you. But when you examine the cases so far, there’s an immediately apparent trend. The attacker is attempting to conceal information, and they’re doing so in ways that are tailored to the target. Yes?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Scent mask when they hit the werewolves, but not with the Tribe. Camera issues with your places, but not when they kidnapped the werewolf.”

“Right. But they don’t appear to have specifically done anything to hide from *you*. At no point have we found specific countermeasures of that kind, and that suggests strongly that you were not a known factor *a priori*.”

I started to object, but paused. The acetone wash, even if they had done it everywhere, wasn’t specific to me. Other people could find those traces if they wanted to badly enough. It was useful with the werewolves, too. They had other reasons for doing that. And acetone was practically free; charging it with enough energy to make it effective for this purpose was trivial for any competent mage.

Audgrim was still going, anyway. “So consider the situation. The attacker has been well-informed in other ways. They know which businesses have contracts with us. They knew where the werewolf lived. These attacks have been very precisely targeted. So, the question becomes how they are getting that information.”

I was starting to see where he was going with this. “And they knew to attack me, now.”

“Yes. That strongly suggests their intelligence is being updated. This is not just research they did beforehand.” He paused, as though trying to phrase something, then said, “Now, consider the nature of the attack on you. The first, obvious detail is that they didn’t commit serious resources to it. The fact that they thought a random guy with a knife would be enough to kill you strongly suggests that their information about you is still very limited.”

“Gosh thanks,” I said dryly. “This matters why?”

“Because I know the werewolves have seen you fight,” he said simply. “And my employees have either seen it or been briefed on it.”

I started to ask what he was talking about, but then remembered that there had been a pretty nasty brawl at one of Derek’s barbecues. Some very stupid faeries had been upset they didn’t get an invitation, as I recalled. And one of the favors I’d done Audgrim in the past had gotten pretty messy at the end, though that had been almost a decade ago.

“I see,” I said quietly, as realization dawned on me. “You’re looking for leaks.”

“Yes. It’s not the only way they might be getting fresh intelligence, but it’s a possible one,” he said. “If they had a source among either my people or the wolves, they’d have known better than to think this would be worth trying. So I sent my most trusted employee with you

in case they tried something that would have worked. Next there's the detail that they didn't incorporate any magic at all into the attack."

I frowned. That...was a good point. When they'd attacked Chris, or the security guard for that matter, they'd used some kind of supernatural necrotic thing on them. Steven, the dead werewolf in the funeral home, had smelled like magic. This guy had none at all, just the faint shimmer of vanilla human.

"What this suggests to me," Audgrim said, "is that they know you would have a good chance of learning something important if you encountered their work directly. This time there *was* a specific countermeasure that took you into account. And it's not one that my employees would know to use, they do not know how your abilities work at all. The wolves might have, and the Tribe certainly would. So we've gained a lot of useful information here, if only in that we know they're getting fresh information, that they know where you live, and that there are specific details they do and do not have."

"You used me as bait," I said quietly. "Actively so. You encouraged me to go home, expecting they would know my address. You set this situation up intentionally, without telling me."

"Yes." There was no shame in Audgrim's voice at all. No pride, but no guilt either, no apology, just a statement of fact.

"You know that favor you're owing me after this?" I said, still in that very quiet, level tone. "You offered commensurate. I want you to think about what that means at this point." I hung up on him without another word.

Chapter Thirteen

We couldn't really stay at my house at that point. Never mind getting more sleep, I wasn't even going to be going home again for a while. I handed off the captive to Audgrim's person, and followed him out the door.

Saori was quiet while we went out to her car. She'd heard the entire conversation, of course. Her hearing was, like mine, outside of human range. Finally, she said, "He's kind of a dick, isn't he?"

"Little bit," I sighed. This was the first time he'd done something quite this intense, but he was always...very much a dvergr in some key ways. He was aptly named; Auðgrímr meant grim inheritance, and he'd certainly gotten his share of their infamous grim, coldly rational patterns of thought.

"You think he's right?"

I considered this for a moment. "I think," I said slowly, "that he's noticed something potentially important. But I don't trust him to tell me everything, for obvious reasons, and I think he's making some leaps in logic that might not be warranted. There are a ton of reasons they might not send someone with magic to kill me. There are lots of ways they could have learned where to attack the dvergar, and this explanation notably does *not* account for why the dvergar themselves care so much."

"Yeah, pretty much my read on it too," Saori said. "Worth keeping in mind, but he's got some shaky logic going on there. You think he let your address slip on purpose?"

"No, not really. That's not his style. And if he did, he wouldn't know whether they could figure it out themselves." I shrugged. "I'm not that hard to find. I do think we should be vacating the area now, though. Not a huge fan of staying at the one place we know isn't safe."

"Right, yeah," Saori said, starting the car. "Anywhere in mind?"

I started to say no, then paused as I remembered what I'd been meaning to do earlier. "Yeah, actually," I said. "Do you think you can get to Lawrenceville? I've got something the werewolves might appreciate."

Andrew responded to my text quickly enough that I was pretty sure he'd already been awake. He didn't ask any questions beyond confirming who I was, just said that he would be at the address I gave him in half an hour.

Saori drove fast enough that half an hour would leave us a decent margin. I did not, however, want to be sitting there blind while she did, not right now. So once I'd gotten the meeting arranged, I settled in with one of my easier compromises.

Saori glanced over once, and then did a minor double take, perhaps unwisely considering she was in the process of illegally passing a bus while she did. "You have an

eyepatch?" she asked, sounding a bit incredulous.

"Yup. Among other things. Like I said, I have other ways to mitigate the overstimulation." I shrugged. "I don't really know the rules or mechanisms. Probably no one does, like...the best guess I have is that I've got a cocktail of photosensitive epilepsy, exceptionally acute perception of magical energy, enough precision within that perception to pick out things like emotion and personality, and intense synesthesia."

She laughed a little. "Yeah, good luck trying to figure out anything in that mess. I think I follow."

I grinned. "Yeah. So I've kinda figured out some ways to mitigate it, but I don't really know why they work. Having a patch over one eye makes visual stuff less overwhelming. It can still get unpleasant, but it's more manageable. Hell if I know why."

"Eh," Saori said. "Why is kinda immaterial. It works. Screw reasons."

I had to laugh at that. "Yeah, kinda where I am with it."

This was the first time I'd seen Saori's driving. I'd had a pretty good idea of what it was like, but I hadn't actually *seen* it before. Now that I did, I could understand why that security guard had been so glad to get out of the car. It wasn't just that she drove fast, though she did, particularly with how little traffic there was to get in her way. Nor was it just that she drove aggressively or pulled risky maneuvers, though she did those things too.

No, the things that made Saori's driving terrifying were much more how casual she was about those risks, and how close she cut the margins. I doubted any ordinary human could have matched it; the kitsune's reflex time was just quicker than humans had the capacity for. Her manual dexterity was pretty up there, too, and between these things, she could get away with some really stupid shit. She swerved through traffic with virtually no margin for error. She didn't have any problem at all leaving gaps of just inches between her car and someone else's, and I honestly had no idea how she was managing to avoid crashing. Even if she were this good, I would still expect the panic and shocked flinching from other drivers to be throwing things off enough to cause a wreck.

The fact that she had zero problem with doing this one-handed while also chugging an energy drink or flipping through music on her phone, I thought, probably had less to do with skill and more to do with a reckless disregard for the safety of herself and others. Between that and the maneuvers she was pulling, I was a bit nervous, even though I both knew that she was well outside of the range of human capacity, and had pretty limited concern for safety myself. I did not blame that man in the slightest for looking queasy after just a couple minutes in a car with Saori.

As she started onto a bridge, I glanced out the window. Dawn was beginning to start in earnest, and I could see the sunrise reflected in the water. I could see the way that the light played over the standing waves, the almost-patterns of the river. I could see the lights of the city, not yet turned off for the daytime, and how they were reflected in the river as well. The Monongahela was a respectable river, wide enough that the bridge was over a thousand feet long trying to cross it, a huge span of water all gleaming with stolen light and as we kept moving the parallax kept shifting the reflections and the river just kept *going* and—

I blinked, forced myself to look away. The problem, always, was that it was beautiful. There was a very strong temptation to just keep watching, and lose myself in the intricacy and intensity of what I was seeing. It was much the same temptation as when I wanted to abandon my perceptual filters and let the world flood in, let that perception of magic that got me high in the space of a few moments just keep going. And, much like that impulse, it would feel great if I did, right up until I started seizing.

"You're pretty relaxed for someone who just had an assassination attempt on her," Saori said, taking the exit ramp from the bridge at a speed that probably represented more of a danger to my life than said assassin had.

I wasn't sure entirely whether she was trying to distract me from what I was seeing, but it was appreciated either way. "You're not exactly freaking out about it either," I pointed out.

"Well, sure, but I'm a violent lunatic," she said reasonably. "I'm excused."

I had to laugh a bit at that. "I wasn't always a hermit, you know. Just because it's been a while since I've been in a fight doesn't mean I forgot how."

"What were you before, then?"

I was quiet for a moment, trying to figure out how to answer that. Eventually, I sighed and shrugged. "I dunno. A dumb kid with something to prove and a grudge against the whole world, I guess. I didn't know that I wasn't quite human yet, didn't know about any of this. My mother died when I was quite young, and my father was...uninformed at best. It went poorly."

Most people, when they heard this story, responded with some formulaic expression of sympathy. It was more irritating than anything; sympathetic platitudes got old very quickly, I had found. It had been worse when I was a kid, for a number of reasons, but it was still...tiring. I'd heard them all so many times.

"Do you want me to immolate him for you?" was not a response I had heard before, and I was honestly grateful to Saori for that.

"That's kinda just your thing, isn't it?"

She grinned. "Look, I'm just saying, as the size of a fire increases, the number of social problems it can't solve limits onto zero."

"That is a strange maxim, and it troubles me that I can't readily find an exception," I said after a brief pause. "Anyway, no, not really. He was...I don't know whether he was a better person before she died, or I was just too young to recognize certain things about him. But either way, I'm not bitter enough for that anymore. And it wasn't entirely his fault, either. Treating my visions as a mixture of epilepsy, hallucinations, and post-traumatic stress was not wholly unreasonable for someone who didn't know anything about the supernatural. He was a dick about it, but not malicious, I think."

"Does it matter?" she asked. "Still a shit way to treat someone. Still hurts."

"And you'll notice I don't talk to him anymore," I said wryly. "He's not part of my life. I'd rather not make him one again, even for long enough to set that part on fire. Anyway, yeah, it went badly. Everyone was walking on eggshells around me, I was living in a different world

than they were, nothing made sense. I was...unsurprisingly upset at life, at society, really at the world as a whole."

"I am, in fact, unsurprised." She was also driving with one hand while taking a corner at unsafe speed, and had her other out the window flipping someone off for getting in the way. I had to respect her on some level, and not just because I was utterly incapable of driving myself. The kitsune might be a violent lunatic, but she was undeniably a violent lunatic with both style and skills.

"Yeah, somewhat inevitable. So I fell in with a group of people who...well, at the time they seemed like dangerous people to know, and I was the kind of teenager who found that appealing. In hindsight they were mostly just dumbass kids who got used by the actual Yakuza members as disposable tools, but even if I'd known that I don't think I'd have cared."

"Why would you?" Saori said. "You weren't there because you thought they were smart."

I smiled a little. "Yeah. Pretty standard rebellious phase. Only real difference was that I was stronger than a human and one of the things my father did trying to fix me was have me study martial arts, thought I'd learn discipline or something. So when I started to participate, and I got sent to beat the crap out of people, I did it very well. That got me more respect than usual; I still spent time with the dumbasses who get used as tools, but also with the people who were using them."

"Respected, good potential for advancement. Why'd you quit, then?" She was starting to slow down now. We were almost there, I realized. The drive had passed more quickly than I expected.

"It wasn't fun anymore. I felt empty, like my life was hollow. Things were escalating, and badly. And then at the end there was...a particularly extreme incident, when I first learned about the raiju stuff, that convinced me I should stop and think about things." I shrugged. "After I had, I decided I didn't want to go back to go back to that lifestyle. Still not sure if I made the right call."

"Heh. Yeah, I can understand that." Saori parked behind an extremely Italian restaurant. We had a solid ten minutes to kill before Andrew's estimated time of arrival. "So what are we doing here, anyway?"

"Waiting for him to get here. I don't like explaining things twice." I was only mildly shaky as I got out and stretched. All things considered I thought that was pretty good.

"Aww. People waiting to hear something while you're smug about already knowing is only fun when I'm in on it." Saori was good at pouting; her puppy dog eyes were much better than Derek's, pleading rather than just hapless.

I snickered. "It's just a few minutes. You'll live."

Andrew was running early. Not by a lot, but a bit, and we'd been a little slow walking over to the address I gave him. Saori, it turned out, had a distinct preference for walking in

alleys and side streets rather than anything like a major thoroughfare. I didn't quite understand this, but it was easy enough to humor her.

In any case, he walked up just a few minutes after we did. The werewolf looked somehow even more tense than before. I didn't like that. You could only put so much tension on someone before they snap, and I didn't particularly want to see what happened when the person in question was a werewolf. One the others looked up to, I was pretty sure. Werewolves did not naturally form pack structures and hierarchies any more than actual wolves did; the whole notion of an alpha wolf only really happens in captivity, not in nature.

But they were still organized to a degree. Lone wolves, literal or otherwise, tended not to do great in this world; if you didn't have a group backing you, you'd generally get killed or run off by someone who *did*. So they formed packs, and like any close-knit group, there were some wolves whose voices carried more weight than others. The social structure varied widely, but there would always be some people who were respected more than others. Older, stronger, smarter, whatever the reason, when they talked, people listened. I got the impression Andrew had that kind of authority, that other werewolves listened when he was talking.

I did not want to see someone who got that kind of respect snap. He was probably pretty scary as an individual, and he had a good chance of bringing other wolves over the edge with him, too.

So when he walked up with a nod and a terse, "Kyoko," I did not respond with a sarcastic comment about saying good morning. I had *some* self-preservation instinct.

"Andrew. More bad news, but also a possible lead."

"Start with the news."

I nodded. "Alright. Current suspicion is that Mike is dead, some kind of ritual sacrifice to power a spell. It was a very strong binding spell, and it's not clear why they used it to bind some minor tree spirit to serve them."

He didn't look terribly surprised. I didn't really blame him. It was pretty obvious by now that these people did not hesitate to escalate to murder. If someone was missing and in their hands for well over a day, they were probably not coming back in one piece.

"Understood. And the lead?" His voice had a blank, professional tone to it that I didn't like. It reminded me too much of both myself when I was truly angry, and some of the actual Yakuza members when things were about to get violent.

"They used a ton of supplies to set up the ritual," I said. "Lots of metal, lots of gemstones. By coincidence, I happen to know that about a week ago, a jewelry supplier in this area made a very, very strange sale. Someone who seemed wrong, creepy somehow, walked in and bought literally their entire stock of a lot of supplies and tools. Notably, metal, engraving tools, and semiprecious stones."

"Nobody buys that volume without a reason," Andrew said. "You think they were getting ready for this?"

I shrugged. "Hell of a coincidence if not. I don't entirely know, but there's someone

creepy buying tons of supplies and tools for making jewelry, and someone made a really creepy ritual focus using the same kinds of materials and tools, so....”

Andrew nodded. “Yeah, I follow. This was a week ago?”

I nodded. “Give or take. And, I mean, it’s kinda...there’s no obvious link here. I only know about this because a friend of mine buys supplies here, thought it was weird that she couldn’t get any, and told me because she thought I’d find it an interesting story. I highly doubt they would have bothered to cover their trail here.”

“A week is a pretty old trail,” he said. “But worth a shot.”

“Pretty much what I figured, yeah.” I shrugged. “I can look too, but after a week of people walking through here I can more or less guarantee that anything of that nature is gone.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Andrew said. “Save yourself for something that matters. I’ll get a few of our people out here to look at it, and we’ll go from there.”

“Werewolves are kinda cute, huh?”

I looked over at Saori. I looked at the werewolves currently spilling out of a van. They were larger than any dog I’d ever seen, and there was something distinctly carnivorous in the way they carried themselves. They looked as intelligent and dangerous relative to wolves as a wolf did to a dachshund. I looked back at her. “Cute?”

“Definitely,” the kitsune said. “How do you think they feel about ear scratches?”

“How are you still alive?” I asked.

“Trade secret. You think this will work?”

I shrugged. “Dunno. Got a chance, though. They’re *really* good at this. It’s kinda fun to watch.”

“Let’s,” Saori said, downing the last of the energy drinks I’d grabbed from a gas station while the wolves were getting set up. I was definitely going to have to step up my current purchasing pattern for those with her around. She went through as much caffeine as I did, and that was *saying things*.

Outside, the wolves were getting started. There were three of them in fur, and then Andrew and the girl who drove the van in skin. This was generally how they operated. A few stayed in skin so they could do any necessary talking, and so they could pretend the others were their dogs. I wasn’t sure how *anyone* fell for that, but I guess people will see what they want to see.

I wasn’t sure if I knew any of the ones who were in fur. I was okay at recognizing wolves, but I hadn’t spent enough time around the locals to be confident in it. They all smelled very strongly of wolf and flowers, though, and it was slightly overpowering. Not bad, but...strong.

They started at the door of the jewelry shop. It wasn’t open yet, and it was still early enough that the streets weren’t too busy; that was part of why I’d wanted to do this now.

Humans are gullible on the whole, but it was best not to be stupid.

From there, they spread out. It really was kind of fascinating to watch. The three wolves were so *fast* at it, that was always what I noticed. There was no fumbling, no false starts, nothing. Just three wolves who were eerily well-coordinated, and two people that looked human unless you looked very closely, following behind them.

I expected that they'd found something, because almost immediately all of them were going the same direction. Saori and I followed at a slight distance, and kept watching. They were moving faster than a human jogger would find comfortable, even while tracking, and they made it look effortless. On the rare occasion one lost the trail, the others quickly brought them back onto it.

I wasn't sure how werewolves were able to communicate with each other silently like this. It was apparently not telepathy, not quite. It was emotions and sensory impressions being transmitted rather than words. Something about lupine instinctive social cues and communication, elevated to a supernatural level. In any case, they were able to do it, and to make it look easy, even at that speed, even after a week for the trail to go cold.

"You're right, this is kinda fun," Saori said. "Definitely cute, though. Bet they're great cuddlers."

I rolled my eyes. We kept going, following the apparent trail down the street, turning twice, looping back in the direction we'd come from, then another sharp corner into an alleyway. I wasn't sure if the person who left this trail had been taking such a strange route because they wanted to hide, maybe making sure no one was tailing them, or they just moved like this. In any case, it led into an alleyway, and then they stopped, letting us catch up to them.

"What'd you get?" I said to Andrew once we were in easy range for conversation.

"Quite a bit, actually," he replied. He still sounded detached and professional, but there was a distinct thread of satisfaction in it, and he had a lot more calm, forest-green relaxation to my senses now. That was a bit of a relief. "Definitely not human. Not even very close to human, probably shaped like one but they do not smell like a human at all. Slightly musky, jasmine, and vanilla, of all things. Cassie thinks it *might* be familiar from where the mage got murdered, but she's not sure. Anyway, they left the store, walked on this weird route, then walked up to this wall and vanished."

"Otherside portal, pretty sure," Saori said.

"They just crossed to an Otherside domain here?" I asked.

"Yeah, almost certain of it. Don't know which, it's functionally impossible to follow someone through a portal." She shrugged.

"Why'd they come here to do it?" Andrew asked. "Couldn't they have saved themselves the trip?"

"Yeessss but also no," Saori said. "It's...ugh, don't know how to phrase it that would make sense to you. It's...a place has a certain resonance, any given location does. It's much easier to open a portal to somewhere that is close to where you are in your current domain."

“What’s the resonance based on?” I asked, more out of curiosity than anything. I’d heard of Otherside portals, but only in a very vague way, and I’d certainly never used one.

“Anything? Everything?” Saori shrugged again. “It varies based on any number of factors, everything from generalized energy fields and atmosphere to historic events to the way the person making it feels emotionally about a place. It’s not something I could quantify.”

“Not traceable then?” Andrew asked, staring at the wall as though it had done something to personally offend him.

“No, not at all,” Saori said. “And even if I could, I couldn’t take you there. You have to know somewhere very well to reach it with a portal. The chance that I happen to know the same destination point they used is essentially nil.”

I nodded. I’d only heard of these things in vague terms, but one of the things I *did* know was that if a portal failed, it was very, very bad for anyone who was trying to use it at the time. “Dead end, then.”

“Yeah, but useful,” Andrew said. “Not human at all, like I said. That’s not consistent with what you’ve been picking up. Guessing it’s the whatsit, the sponsor you’ve mentioned.”

I nodded again. “That makes sense, yeah. Would you know it if you smelled it again?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, with total confidence. “Any of us would. It’s very distinctive.”

“That might come in handy, at least. Now we just need to find them.” I was grinning, and to my surprise I found it was sincere. It wasn’t just that my hunch seemed to have been correct, and it wasn’t just that we were making progress. There was something else, some other satisfaction that I didn’t understand and couldn’t clearly define.

Andrew was smiling, too, or at least showing teeth. “Yeah. Still working on that part. I’ll keep you in the loop.” He turned and left without another word.

One of the wolves in fur stopped next to me and leaned against my legs for a moment before leaving. Someone I knew, presumably, though I didn’t know who. It was comforting all the same. Saori took the opportunity to give them ear scratches, and was rewarded with happy wolf sounds before they walked away.

“So did you have any other secret plans to spring on me?” Saori asked once that was done.

“Eh, not really.” I paused. “Have I eaten recently?”

The kitsune glanced sidelong at me, which was nice, because sidelong was a fun word and I rarely had a reason to use it. “Do you not know?”

“I tend to lose track,” I admitted.

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s go with no, then. Wanna?”

“Probably a good idea, yeah.” I didn’t feel very hungry, but I really did tend to lose track and forget to eat. Even if I wasn’t hungry, I needed calories.

Calories in this case came from a sketchy 24/7 diner, the kind of place where the graveyard shift has seen so much bizarre shit in the middle of the night that practically nothing fazes them anymore. It was decent, though the cook went a little heavy on the pepper for my taste. I paid again, without asking, and left a generous tip, because people who work at that kind of place never get paid enough for the insanity they have to deal with.

“So how much money *do* you have, anyway?” Saori asked as we were leaving. She sounded more “curious about oddity” than “interested in value”, which suggested some things about her own perception of wealth.

I shrugged. “I honestly have no idea. Like I said, VNC manages the trust, and I have very little involvement with the actual funds. I have an account with enough in it to cover ordinary expenses, and my understanding is that the rest is mostly invested. They have good accountants, and the interest is enough that I’m unlikely to run out. If I want to access more of it for something, I have to call them to arrange that.”

“Sounds nice,” the kitsune said after a moment. “But also kinda creepy. Like...that’s not an organization I’d love having in that position.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And it’s also a bit...where did my mother get that much money? You know? Granted she was a rajju, and nonhumans sometimes do just have that kind of wealth on hand, but...why was she one of them? And why didn’t she tell me or my father about it before she died?”

I’d asked those questions so many times, over the past fourteen years. I never found an answer that I liked. The extremely unsettling nature of her death and the fact that she already had arrangements in place for that fund, set up so that I wouldn’t even know it existed until I was twenty-one, were just icing on an already disturbing cake.

“Your family sounds about as healthy as mine,” Saori said as we were getting back to her car. “And that is not a good thing.”

I laughed. “My condolences. So what do you want to do today?”

“What would you normally do?”

“Go home and dissociate,” I said dryly. “Maybe draw something. Not really an option right now.”

Saori laughed. “Right, point taken. Let me rephrase. Is there somewhere that you would generally recommend that someone new in town visit?”

I considered for a moment, then said, “How do you feel about coffeehouses?”

“You mean, like, coffee shops?”

“No, coffeehouses. The owner is very particular about that. No clue why, but she is.”

“And just like that you have my attention,” Saori said. “Which way?”

Softened Dreams was busier this time. It was morning, and even among my crowd, morning meant an elevated desire for coffee. A lot of the tables had people sitting at them alone or in small groups, conversing quietly, working on computers, writing in notebooks, generally doing the things one expects in a coffee establishment by any name.

Maddie wasn't there, which was hardly surprising. She was at least as nocturnal as I was. I saw other people I recognized, though, among both the staff and the patrons. A few were acquaintances of one kind or another. At least one would be thrilled to put a knife in my neck if he got the chance, but he wouldn't try, not here. Starting a fight in public was foolish. Starting a fight *here*, surrounded by dangerous people who valued this place's peace and quiet, with Lacuna in the room watching you? That was outright suicidal.

I found an open table and sat down. Saori was looking around with obvious interest. “This is an interesting space,” she said. “I like the layout, lot of art up. Nice tables, too.”

“The owner, woman named Hope Robbins, uses it as an art gallery. In theory, at least; she doesn't sell pieces very often, more of a collector than anything, I think. She's actually here right now.” I gestured slightly towards a table at the far side of the room, away from the door, where Hope was sitting and reading a paperback novel.

“Huh,” Saori said. “Who's the person standing next to her?”

I paused, trying to think of how to explain. “That's Lacuna,” I said after a moment. “I...don't know what Lacuna's deal is. They're always here, literally always I mean, this place is open twenty-four seven and they're *always* here. They're clearly very devoted to Hope, but beyond that I don't know why they do this. They never talk, but they're actually quite nice if you engage with them. But it's a bit...Lacuna is why nobody starts fights here—which, incidentally, *do not* start a fight here.”

“Noted. What do they...do to people that try?” Saori was clearly deeply intrigued by this.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. “I don't really know. Like I said, I don't know what their deal is; they're definitely not human, but I have no idea what they are, and I'm not asking. I think they kill people, but it's hard to be sure. It's definitely magic, it's definitely very scary magic. I've never seen Lacuna have difficulty dealing with someone who causes problems. You

start trouble, they show up, they give you one warning, and if you don't listen they just...I think people are dead afterwards. But I don't understand what happens to them well enough to be sure, and I don't even know how to describe it."

There was a pause while Saori absorbed this. "Okay," the kitsune said after a moment, "I've got to ask. Is *everything* in this city just absolutely bizarre? Because I can work with that, but it'd be good to know."

I chuckled at that. "Sometimes it fucking feels like it. Anyway, this is my main social venue. It's quieter than other local hangouts, more relaxed."

"Feels like it, yeah. Tranquil. I think I like it. Is the coffee any good?"

I shrugged. "Dunno, don't drink coffee. They have good tea, though."

"Cool, I'll let you know." Saori started to stand up.

"Oh, hey," I said, as a thought occurred to me. "Do you want to meet anyone while you're here?"

"Is there anyone here you're friends with?"

I looked around the room, considering the question. There were certainly people in the crowd I recognized. Some I knew from seeing each other here, some I'd actually interacted with a bit; we were acquaintances, but I wasn't sure I'd call any of them friends as such.

And then I spotted someone. It was not surprising that I hadn't noticed her on my first glance around the coffeehouse; she was sitting alone at the smallest table in the room, tucked into a dark corner in the back. I grinned when I spotted her. "Yes, actually," I said. "But it'd be better for me to check first. Melissa is...very skittish in some ways. If she does feel up to it, keep that in mind, she startles easily. And don't try to touch her, not even a little bit."

Saori nodded. "I can do that. I'll go get coffee, then, and you can ask her." She didn't contest my suggestions at all, which was good; it meant there was a chance in hell they'd like each other. I always wanted my friends to get along well, but the simple reality was that sometimes people didn't mesh well, and Saori's usual behavior would...not be fun for Melissa.

I stood up and walked over to the corner where she was sitting. I made sure to approach slowly, and give her plenty of time to see me coming. "Hey there, honeybee," I said once I was close enough to speak softly and still be heard. I made a point of using that endearment with her occasionally. Not long after we'd met I told her that was where the name Melissa came from, and she'd found it very touching. "Is it alright if I sit with you?"

It wasn't a rhetorical question, because sometimes the answer was no. Melissa was in some ways my closest friend, and definitely the most emotionally intimate. But much like how I had to compensate for my neuroses, sometimes she simply wasn't in a state to be social with anyone. There was a reason why even though she was very close, I spent less time talking with her than with Pepper.

We all had scars in this world. I knew a lot about Melissa's. Her life had for years been hell on earth in ways that I didn't like to even contemplate. I was there for the very end of that time, and even just that brief glimpse was enough to still feature in my nightmares occasionally,

almost a decade later. I was *very* conscientious about Melissa's issues.

Not today, though. When she saw me she smiled, and she nodded at my question. "That sounds nice," she said. Both voice and smile were bright, cheerful, and showed no particular sign of any underlying distress.

I sat in the other chair at the table. "It's been a little while," I said, keeping my voice softer than I often did, softer than hers by a fair margin. "How have you been doing?"

She considered for a moment, then shrugged. "I think pretty well. How are you?"

"I've had an...interesting week," I said. "Very eventful. I actually made a new friend who might enjoy meeting you, if you'd like."

Melissa considered that for a moment as well, and then asked, "Do you think I'll like them?"

"I don't really know," I said honestly. "I think it's possible, though. She's nice."

"Okay then, sounds like fun."

"Great," I said, smiling. It was a small smile, subdued. I tried to keep most emotional displays pretty subdued around Melissa. "Let me go get her."

Saori was loitering around the bar, holding a large cup of coffee. I could smell that it had some kind of alcohol in it, but it wasn't overpowering. "So?" she asked as I got closer.

"She's chill with it," I said. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

I wasn't sure what Saori was expecting from my description. It probably wasn't what she saw, though. Melissa was a very ordinary-looking girl, with skin the sort of bronze that could belong to any number of ethnicities, from various Mediterranean regions to American Indian to indigenous Hawaiian. She was casually dressed, black hoodie and jeans, and she had an easy, relaxed smile. The only odd thing about her appearance was a reddish shade to her eyes. I could pick up enough of her signature to get other details, a sound like desert winds, a taste in the back of my throat that burned like chilis and venom. But her physical appearance was totally ordinary.

"Melissa, this is the friend I mentioned," I said softly as I pulled another chair over to the table. "Her name is Saori."

Melissa smiled. "Hi," she said, in a bright, coppery sort of voice, cheerful and casual, louder than mine by a fair margin. She did not look nor sound skittish in the slightest. "Nice to meet you."

Saori glanced at me. I could practically see her asking what the hell I'd been warning her about. I didn't say anything. Either she'd listen or she wouldn't, and this was in some ways an important barometer. If she couldn't act based on what I'd told her rather than the emotions Melissa was displaying, it was very unlikely that they would mesh well.

Ultimately, the kitsune rolled with it. "Nice to meet you, too," she said, mimicking my softer tone, sitting down slowly. That was good; sudden movements could be pretty bad for Melissa, much like loud voices or touch. "Kyoko said that you're a good friend, and I'm glad I

could meet you today.”

Melissa smiled, laughed. “Kyoko is silly, but thank you. I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Nope. I just moved to Pittsburgh recently, and I haven’t had the chance to meet many people yet.”

“And you already took the time to meet me? I’m flattered.”

“What can I say,” Saori said with a slight smile. “I have a weakness for charming girls who make my friends happy. A terrible character flaw, I know.”

Melissa laughed again. Saori sipped her spiked coffee and smiled. I relaxed a little. Yeah, these two were going to get along just fine.

We spent almost two hours hanging out with Melissa. Saori did an excellent job of keeping what I’d said in mind; she only started to raise her voice twice, and both times she caught it almost immediately. There were no sudden movements, no attempts to touch Melissa, though I could tell that the kitsune was only getting more perplexed as time went by and there continued to be no signs of anxiety or stress in the other girl.

Eventually, though, I noticed the indications of social anxiety and fatigue starting to show up in Melissa’s body language. It was nothing overt, no facial expressions or shift in her tone; just a slight tension in her spine, a slight shift in how she held her shoulders, the taste of venom in her aura sharpening a tiny bit. I only spotted it because I knew to look. Most people, definitely including Melissa herself, would never have guessed.

I stretched, slowly, and yawned. I really had not gotten enough sleep last night. “Alright, honeybee, think we need to get going,” I said. “Got some other errands to run. It was great to talk to you again, though.”

“Yeah, really glad I ran into you,” Melissa said. “Sorry it’s been so long. Rough month.”

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “Glad you’re feeling a bit better.”

“Mhmm! And great to meet you, Saori. Feel free to let me know if you want to chat again, Kyoko can give you my number.”

The kitsune finished her coffee and stood up, still moving pretty slowly. It wasn’t the first cup, and more than one had been alcoholic, but she didn’t show any indications of impairment from it that I could tell. “I’ll be sure and do that,” she said. “Thanks again for chatting with us, this was fun.”

I had to give Saori credit. She waited until we were out of the coffeehouse entirely and a short distance away before she, inevitably, asked, “Okay, so uh. What’s...going on there? ’Cause that is not someone I would describe as skittish.”

I considered for a moment how to answer. Normally, I would consider it rude to talk about someone else’s personal life and history like this. But Melissa and I had discussed the topic before, and she was fine with it. The comment about giving Saori her number, as well,

was fairly clear in its implications. So it was more just a matter of how to convey a messy and complex story succinctly than anything.

“Melissa’s a scion,” I said eventually. It was a catchall term for pretty much anyone who was mostly human, but had a trace of some heritage that was strong enough to matter. “She’s about ten or twelve generations removed from Serket. Egyptian scorpion goddess, not sure whether you’re familiar.”

“I know the basics. Nothing too detailed. She’s not a lightweight, though, as I recall.”

“No. She’s a major deity, enough that even twelve generations removed, Melissa’s got some noticeable power in her. When she was about sixteen, before she’d ever displayed anything overtly, some witch *did* notice it, and decided he wanted to know what made a Serket scion tick.”

“Oh, shit.” Saori did not sound anything like happy now. Even if she didn’t know any context at all, I expected the venom in my tone would have said plenty about how this had gone.

“Yeah. She has power, but it hadn’t developed yet and she certainly did not know how to use it. It was trivial for him to kidnap her. He was a powerful human mage who specialized in mental effects, particularly the manipulation of emotion. He kept Melissa captive for the next four years.”

Saori looked like she felt a little ill. I really didn’t blame her for that. I’d seen some pretty fucked up things in my life. But that had been...special. There was a unique sort of violation in being forced to feel things that you didn’t want, that didn’t belong in the context you were in. It was bad enough when it was being done with something like psychotropic drugs.

With magic, though, it could get so much worse. Oh, it was possible to do emotional magic gently; I actually knew of a few therapists who used low-intensity workings routinely to help people. But applied maliciously? It afforded an enormous amount of control over someone, over the fine details of how they felt. And it let you push things well past the range of normal human emotions, into extremes that were not generally possible without supernatural influence. I’d felt that kind of thing a handful of times in my life, and found it to be one of the most profound violations I could imagine, an experience that was so disturbing it was hard to even begin to capture it in words.

Melissa had felt it every day for almost four years, while being kept as a sort of cross between a trophy and a laboratory rat, with all that each implied. I didn’t like to think about the things that happened to Melissa. I didn’t like to remember that I lived in a world where things like that even *could* happen to people.

“Please tell me you killed him,” Saori said after a moment.

“I didn’t personally kill him, no. But I watched while Audgrim did so. He is very much dead. My understanding is that Audgrim literally had the ashes mixed with salt and holy water before dumping them in the sewer.”

“*Good.*” Saori fit an impressive amount of contempt into that syllable.

“Agreed. It was...death is sincerely too good for some people. Anyway. I stuck around in her life afterwards. She...found it comforting. And I do genuinely enjoy her company, we’re pretty good friends now. She’s gotten a lot better over the past eight years. But you can’t go through that kind of thing without lasting consequences.”

“No. No, I don’t imagine you can. This is why you were saying to be cautious, I assume?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s...the thing is that Melissa spent years being subjected to extremes of emotion, completely unnatural feelings at extreme intensities. One of the consequences of that is a sort of severe alexithymia. She can’t recognize her own emotions much at all. They don’t register in a way that she can identify, not really; they don’t feel like what she learned emotions were. But they still affect her.”

“Ah,” Saori said. “Yeah. That explains some things. She doesn’t realize that she feels scared until it hits an extreme enough point that it resembles that supernatural emotion.”

“Exactly. And she’s had to deal with a lot of really intense cognitive dissonance, with externally imposed incongruent and inappropriate affect. So she has to actively work to remember what emotion a situation reasonably *should* prompt, she can barely recognize what it *is* triggering, and she doesn’t notice she’s being triggered and escalating until it goes supercritical, at which point you’ve got a scion with appreciable power suddenly going into a meltdown. Usually by that point the flashbacks are strong enough to resemble a psychotic episode, so she might also not know where she is or who she’s with.”

“Fuck. Poor girl. But also I only understood, like, half the words you just used.”

I laughed. “Sorry. One of my degrees was in cognitive neuroscience. I lapse into jargon sometimes. Honestly, one of the best indications that I’m upset about something is that I start using more formal language and technical terminology.”

Saori glanced at me. I recognize the look she was giving me; it was one I’d received a lot, both literally and metaphorically through the medium of the internet. People who knew me as an artist or as a supernatural oddity tended to have a very particular vibe when they were suddenly having to adjust that understanding to include “also she has a degree in cognitive neuroscience and another in computational biology”.

Most people did not then proceed to say, “Not gonna lie, kinda hot. You want to go spend time that could be used productively on irresponsible sexual hijinks?” But Saori was, as I’d very much figured out by now, not most people.

I was laughing pretty hard by this point. “When you put it like that, how can I refuse?” I said when I had enough breath back for it. “You good to drive?”

“Yeah, I process alcohol pretty quick. Also, are you really going to complain about danger when you’ve already seen how I drive sober?”

“No, but I like to at least know when I’m risking my life for dumb reasons.”

Chapter Fifteen

It wasn't quite that simple, of course. Going back to my house at the moment was such an obviously stupid idea that even Saori couldn't justify it. And that complicated things. I could have offered to pay for a hotel room, but my resources were not infinite. And the reality was that while Saori obviously did not care for her living arrangements, avoiding the topic was a temporary solution at best.

So I didn't offer, and she didn't ask. She was reluctant to invite me home, but she did. I agreed without comment. She put on some really surreal electronica on the way, a minimalist trance song with repetitive vocals discussing the value of checking one's tie in the mirror.

I liked it. The sound was only okay, but the tactile synesthesia was fantastic, like having someone petting me while lightning was crawling through my fur. I was getting the impression that spending time with Saori was going to rapidly be increasing the strangeness of my music library.

We eventually arrived at a small house in Fox Chapel, in a quietly wealthy residential neighborhood, the kind of place where prosperity was a social weapon. The cars were mostly new and shiny; the lawns were ruthlessly well-maintained. It wasn't about looking good, not here; it was about looking better-than, about outdoing the neighbors. This house looked no different than any of the rest. It also felt no different, no emotional resonance or energy signature to mark it as distinct from any other building. That part was more surprising to me.

But it was definitely her place. Saori unlocked the door and waved me in. "C'mon, the water's fine," she said.

I walked inside and found a building that was...the word "sterile" came forcefully to mind. It was anonymous, generic. This impression only became stronger as I wandered through the building. The floor was plain black carpet, the walls were almost violently white. The living room had one couch, which looked like it might be less comfortable to sit on than the floor next to it. The kitchen had one table with two black chairs, all in plain black metal, and a white tile floor.

There was no sign of identity here, no personality, no life. This was a house that had never been a home, and there was nothing about it that said anyone lived here at all. The walls were blank; the floor was empty. There was exactly enough furniture to get by, all of it lifeless. The place barely even smelled like her. Walking through it, I couldn't recognize Saori in it at all.

"You weren't kidding about having just gotten here, huh?" I said eventually.

Saori shrugged, looking a bit uncomfortable. "Yeah. It's...I didn't really have a lot with me when I came to the city. At all. It's a long story."

"You want to talk about it?"

The kitsune paused, and then said, "Not really. It's...I was in a pretty bad situation, and

didn't have a lot of options. The people who got me out of it offered to set me up with a place afterwards. And, uh, I guess they have a pretty crap sense of humor."

I was socially clumsy at times, but it wasn't hard to read between those lines. Favors that significant were not generally freebies, especially when the person providing them knows you're desperate. I rather doubted that her escape from whatever happened had come without a price.

I was curious, but I didn't pry. Saori clearly didn't want to talk about that, and pushing would be both invasive and unlikely to work. She'd tell me eventually if she wanted to. For the moment, I just grabbed her by the hand and dragged her into the bedroom. We drove thoughts of smoke and ashes far away for a time. Afterwards, she dozed in my embrace, and I laid awake, thinking about blood and storms and the prices we paid for sanctuary.

I was, in some ways, impressed. I got all the way to just past sunset before the next random phone call. I swallowed a bite of takeout spaghetti before answering. "What do you want?"

I was a bit surprised to hear Jack Tar responding. "You always answer the phone like that?" He sounded vaguely curious.

"Pretty much. Sometimes I'm less polite about it. How the hell do you even have this number?"

"Little bird told me," he said. "Also told me you found a neat little piece of magic up on the hill, no?"

"Wasn't me that found it," I said, shrugging even though he couldn't see it; like a lot of people, I had a tendency to gesture while talking on the phone. "But yes, I looked at it."

"Right, whichever. The salient part is that the dvergr told me a bit about it. Fae work, no?"

"Sidhe, apparently, yeah. At least the structure is, hell if I know beyond that. Still about the same signature, so human caster with some backer. But using a Sidhe ritual design, yeah."

"Yeah, that. Well, it's kind of interesting to me," he said. "Cause there are next to no fae around here. You have some edge cases like the dvergar, but the ones that are affiliated with the Sidhe tend to leave the place alone. Too much iron here, and not just physically; they call this Steel City, for fuck's sake. Metaphysical landscape's not real friendly to that crowd."

I hadn't heard that, but it made sense. The dvergar might be...something like fae, but more in the sense of a political alliance based on common interests than a shared identity and nature. They shared few qualities beyond that. Dvergar were legendary blacksmiths and had some kind of power over metal. But the beings people thought of as faeries, in all their myriad types, hated iron the way werewolves hate silver, as something much worse than simple pain.

"Cool. Point being?"

I could almost hear Jack grinning. "Point being that it ain't hard to narrow things down a bit, if they're the ones doing this. There aren't many at all who have holdings in the area and

have enough power to back this kind of thing. I only know of four, in fact, and one I'm willing to vouch for as not the kind of asshole to be involved in this shit."

I was starting to feel interested, despite myself. At some point, I realized, I'd started to actually care about this. I wasn't sure when. It might have been when someone tried to stab me, but I thought it might also have happened before that, maybe when I'd felt the lingering terror and agony on Steven's corpse. That, I thought, had been a moment not wholly dissimilar to the raid where I met Melissa. I had very little hero complex in me, but just...there are limits. Regardless of why, though, I didn't feel dispassionate and uninvested anymore. I actually cared about this situation. I was not thrilled about this discovery.

"Okay, so you've got it down to three then," I said. "Assuming, and it's a big assumption, that the person we're looking for is both Sidhe and local."

"Well, that's the part where it starts getting interesting," Jack said. He was definitely grinning. "See, the fourth I know well enough that I went and asked her about it. She didn't tell me much, but she *did* tell me not to get involved, in a way that says she knows about something. Said that people who fuck around with occasions such as this do not enjoy finding out."

Saori snickered. I rolled my eyes a bit. "I doubt in that exact phrasing. But 'occasions such as this' is rather interesting, if that part was accurate."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing. Implies both a known event and the significance of timing, and it screams that this is Sidhe business one way or another. So I asked around a bit more, and of those other three, one has entirely pulled out of the area, not sure if it's temporary. Another is practically a hermit, barely ever leaves his home a little ways outside of town, and I don't know much about him. And the last is presently refusing all visitors and messengers, which is not normal."

"Huh." I considered that. "No clue what that all suggests, but it's certainly suggestive of *some* kind of significance."

"Yeah, about where I'm at too."

"Do you know what Court affiliations are involved?"

"Yeah," Jack said, and now he sounded...less than thrilled. "The one who left is Sunlit, and the two who stayed are both fairly highly ranked nobles with Midnight."

Saori and I both winced at that. The Midnight Court was currently the most common casual name applied to the Unseelie Court of the Sidhe. The Unseelie weren't evil; ideas like "good" and "evil" were almost never a useful model with which to understand the Sidhe. I wasn't even sure they were more dangerous than the Seelie. Either one was perfectly capable of things much worse than just killing you.

But the Unseelie were more predatory. They were more violent, more destructive, crueller on the whole. The names Midnight and Sunlit weren't really descriptive of them in any fundamental way; they were metaphors, shorthand chosen because they were evocative and readily understood. But they were metaphors that had been chosen for a reason. Darkness wasn't evil, and light wasn't good; sometimes the shadows hid you from the monster, or the

sunlight burned the flesh from your bones. But the night was secretive, threatening, and cold.

The Sunlit Sidhe had fled, and both of the Midnight had remained. I wasn't thrilled about the implications, not even a little bit. It also did not escape me that the feelings I'd picked up about this sponsor—dark, decaying, quietly but unmistakably malicious—were things that mapped pretty well towards the Midnight Court.

"Okay. So what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, actually. I don't have anything really actionable yet. I just thought I'd keep you apprised of recent findings as a courtesy. Have a good night."

I blinked at that, and before I could think of how to respond, the line went dead.

"As a courtesy," I said. "Huh. Well then."

"Is he not normally courteous?" Saori asked me.

"Sure isn't that polite to Audgrim. Not sure beyond that." I wasn't sure what to make of Jack. He had a way of making me feel off-balance while talking to him, like I couldn't quite get a grasp on him.

"You trust him?"

"Weirdly enough," I said, "I think so? Kind of, at least. He's got a decent reputation, and it's...I got a good look at his magic a while ago. A clear impression of his signature. It felt very...vibrant, very alive. I'm sure he's capable of turning me into mulch without real hesitation, you don't get that kind of power by being gentle, but I don't get much of a scheming, manipulative sort of vibe from him." I shrugged. "Not really sure how to explain."

"Eh, I think I get it," Saori said. "I've known some people like that. Didn't like some of them. Didn't trust them an inch. But I understood them, maybe even respected them."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, that seems pretty much accurate. I don't trust Jack to be a good person, but I trust him to be the person he is."

What did that say about me, I wondered? I had trusted Saori enough after maybe fifteen minutes of conversation to entrust my life to her driving skills and sincerity. I trusted Jack Tar in some ways on the basis of meeting him once and a brief phone call. I felt less trust for Audgrim, Derek, or Maddie than I did for either of these virtual strangers, and after Melissa and Caleb, they were the three closest friends I had in this city, a city I had lived in for the past fifteen years. I felt like that probably suggested things both about my relationship to trust and the people in my life, and I wasn't sure I liked what it said about either one.

I didn't finish eating. I had no appetite after that call. We went to bed early, and while I fell asleep quickly, my dreams were nothing like soft.

The next morning came too early. The nightmares had been vague, formless things, darkness and fog and sourceless anxiety, terrible certainty that something awful was lurking just out of sight, disjointed images of knives and blood, laughter and screaming and howling wolves that sounded like thunder. I actually woke Saori up with it; I wasn't thrashing *too* much,

but it was enough, especially when there were also occasional bursts of electricity arcing off of me.

She looked concerned, when I woke up enough to process my surroundings. I was shaky. Not the worst nightmare I'd had, but that wasn't saying much.

"You alright?" she asked me.

I wasn't really up to language yet. I tended to get like that when stressed or overwhelmed; I still knew the words, still knew what I meant, but I couldn't remember how to say them. Even pleasant emotions could do it, and sometimes it doesn't take much, but nightmares were particularly reliable for shutting those functions down. I nodded, smiled a little, hugged her. She didn't seem convinced, but she didn't contradict me.

I went to the bathroom and ran cold water over my face until the lingering shreds of fog and dread had faded and I felt reasonably calm. When I got back out, Saori was sitting on the edge of the bed looking at her phone. Apparently I had not managed to wreck it from the other side of the room. "Bad one?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Had worse. But yeah, not great." My voice was still thin and hoarse, but at least I could talk now.

"Sucks. Anything I can do?"

"You want to go get something to eat? I could use some fresh air."

"Sure," she said. "Sounds good. Not like I have much here to cook with. Even if either of us were good at cooking."

"Hey," I protested. "I can cook."

Saori just looked at me.

"Reasonably well," I amended.

"Kyoko," she said, not unkindly. "You routinely live on frozen burritos and energy drinks, and forget whether you've eaten in the past eight hours. I question your ability to assess this."

I had to admit she had a point there.

Breakfast was good. Nothing of great significance was discussed over the meal, and by the time we finished I'd mostly shaken off the nightmare. We went to a park afterwards rather than back to her place, and having now been there, I could understand why. Even my house felt more lived in and more like a home than that, and I barely used half of it.

"So what do you figure we're doing today?" Saori asked, sounding vaguely curious.

I shrugged, and watched someone walking a dog near the park bench we were sitting at. "Dunno. Seems pretty likely this is Sidhe business of one kind or another, and I'm not any kind of qualified to work with that. Never had much to do with them one way or the other. Seems like a dumb idea to go back to my place until this is resolved, and you already saw the only place I do social things, so not really sure what to suggest."

“Fair.” She was quiet for a few moments. “I remember being much better at this. Company, I mean. It’s been a while.”

I laughed a bit. “Yeah, I feel that. But even if we wanted to go to my old kind of hangout, I don’t know the local gang bars enough to recommend one. And those I do know are all pretty close to my house, so...yeah.”

She nodded. “I’ll work on it. There’s got to be a good one in town, and I haven’t started a bar fight in ages.”

Because of course Saori started bar fights for fun. Hell, I was guessing she started riots for fun.

“Guess just killing time, then,” I said. “I’m kinda regretting not reading more mystery novels or something. Sitting and waiting for the actual investigators to find things for me to look at is kinda maddening.”

“Seriously. I hate waiting.”

“I’ve never been very good at it,” I agreed. “It’s...oddly tiring, I think. The unresolved anticipation becomes exhausting after a while. And it leaves me with too much free time to think about things. I start worrying, or worse, contemplating my life choices.”

Saori shuddered. “Ew, screw that noise. You want to set something on fire to pass time?”

“Are you actually an outright pyromaniac? I’m starting to wonder.”

“Probably!” the kitsune said cheerfully. “Also a kleptomaniac. And a nymphomaniac. Really, I’m just good at things that end in -maniac.”

“Okay, that’s fair. But not right now, I think. If nothing else I’d rather not commit arson where I live; it creates too many problems. We can take a road trip to Ohio for that.”

She looked at me oddly. “I can’t quite tell whether you’re serious.”

I just smiled. She tried for an expression of indignation for all of three seconds before it cracked and she broke down laughing.

This time, it was a text message rather than a call. I appreciated that, really. It was a pleasant change of pace, and I didn’t like phone calls much. A text was...tidier. This one came from the same number Jack had called me on. It read:

Investigation has found something about Steven. He has recently been a regular attendee at the Blackbird Cabaret. Circumstantial. The owner of the Cabaret has possible tie to MC. She will perform Adar Môn Y Mynydd tonight. Does not usually announce details of her performance in advance or sing in Welsh. Attend?

I read it. I read it again. It was...fascinating, in a way. Jack was an increasingly perplexing enigma to me. He was a powerful mage who could easily have wealth and privilege, but chose to live as a vagrant. He spoke in a very casual way with Audgrim, and he knew Audgrim’s mother’s name, used that name casually as well. But he was courteous to me, and spoke fluent Japanese for some reason. And now it turned out that by text he used full sentences, but in ways

that were very terse, reminding me a bit of Andrew's professionally detached tone yesterday. He knew Steven's name off the top of his head, when he hadn't even been there when we found the dead werewolf.

Saori was reading over my shoulder. "Okay," she said. "I know it's a small thing, but who the hell uses a circumflex in a text message?"

"Jack Tar, apparently," I said. "For some reason. He's...something."

"No shit. What's the Blackbird Cabaret?"

"Performing arts venue that opened not that long ago," I said. "It's the newest major social space for the supernatural in the city. Don't know a ton about it. It has a reputation for hosting almost any kind of entertainment imaginable. Everything from concerts and dance performances to acrobats to stage magic. Also real magic, and at least once someone from a local piercing studio being suspended by hooks as part of some kind of neopagan ritual."

Saori blinked at that. "Uh. 'Kay then. And the owner?"

I shrugged. "Again, don't know much. Some girl who goes by Capinera and is apparently a very good singer. Consistent rumors saying she's not fully human, but I don't know anything confidently about her."

"You've never heard her sing?"

"Nope. Never been to the Blackbird Cabaret at all."

"Why not?" Saori sounded perplexed. "It seems like your kind of place."

I sighed. "Looking like you'll find out," I said. I wondered if I actually sounded as tired as I thought, or it was just that I felt that way. Going back to the conversation with Jack, I typed out a quick *I'll be there. Time and address?*

It was inconvenient that I'd started to actually care about this. They didn't even have to persuade me to get me to be an idiot this time.

Chapter Sixteen

I wasn't entirely sure where I had expected the Blackbird Cabaret to be. Definitely was not a largely-disused warehouse complex in Braddock, though. It was deep in the heart of the old industrial district, and had largely died when the steel mills did. Some modestly successful attempts had been made to breathe new life into the borough, but there were still large areas that were practically deserted. We were in one of those, and apparently so was the Blackbird.

I glanced over at Saori. "You're sure this is the address?"

She shrugged. "I mean. I don't know this city worth shit. But it's where Google sent us."

"Huh." I looked at the time. Less than twenty minutes until we were supposed to be meeting Jack. "You mind if we wait a little ways away? Watch to make sure he shows?"

Saori looked at me curiously. "I thought you said you trusted him not to get underhanded."

"Yeah," I agreed. "My read on him says he's the type to just obliterate you fairly rather than get twisty about it. But I'm not always a great judge of character, and something about this feels...very wrong somehow. So I think I'd rather err on the side of caution here."

"Paranoid much?" she asked.

"Actually, no," I said. "Paranoia is a primarily psychotic feature involving delusional thought patterns and usually feelings of persecution and ideas of reference. Pretty sure this is just garden-variety neuroticism and the fact that *someone recently tried to stab me*."

"Okay, that's fair. Alright, let's go find somewhere to sit."

It was slightly challenging to find somewhere that we could sit and watch the designated meeting spot without being immediately obvious. It wasn't like there was a crowd to blend into. Eventually, we ended up just sitting on the asphalt behind a warehouse, about a block away. Saori had brought dice again, and between that and my hoodie it was a reasonably good cover. I was pretty sure we looked like just some local delinquents sitting and gambling.

Saori said that next time she was planning to bring some weed to help sell the disguise. I rather doubted that would be her primary motivation in doing so, but I couldn't deny that it would be effective, and it was better than tobacco any day.

Jack was running late. It was closer to half an hour, and I was a small imaginary fortune down, before anyone approached the meeting point. It was a car I didn't recognize, not that this was saying much with how bad I was at that. It was still enough to make me nervous, but no, it was Jack who got out of the passenger side. After a moment, I recognized the driver as Cassie, and relaxed a bit. Still...odd, and I wasn't sure what she was doing here, but at least it hadn't been a false message, something I'd been considering given how strange some of the details of the text were.

We walked over. Cassie looked deeply relieved as she was getting out of the car. I could

not blame her for that in the slightest. I'd smelled Jack, and her sense of smell was at *least* as acute as mine. I wouldn't want to share a car with him for any appreciable length of time, either.

"Hi," I said as we walked up to them. "You got dragged along too, huh?"

Cassie shrugged. "I know the scents we're looking for better than any of the others. It made sense."

Ah, that did make sense now that she pointed it out. It was the same reason I was here, really. I had the best chance of recognizing the metaphysical traces; she had the best shot at catching a more literal scent. Jack, presumably, was along as muscle in case things went to hell. He wasn't visibly armed, but that really didn't matter to a guy like Jack Tar.

Oh, I was sure he had weapons. And some probably didn't look anything like one; they were just foci, tools he'd enchanted to make it easier to do specific kinds of magic. Maybe some single-use stored spells as well, or other things I wasn't familiar with. He might even be carrying some of them, it's not like I was taking a hard enough look at him right now to pick out the signature traces from something like that.

But even if he didn't have any, he didn't need them. A mage that strong just...did not require tools to wipe the floor with any normal human and a lot of things that weren't. They made things easier, sure. But they weren't *necessary*. I hadn't seen him throw down but I was quite sure of that much just from his reputation in the supernatural community.

"Cool. Where are we going?" Saori asked.

"Couple blocks over. I figured we'd wait a few blocks away, keep an eye on the entrance. I don't expect anyone to start shit here, but this situation is just all kinds of weird and I'd rather err on the side of caution."

Saori was laughing her head off by the time Jack finished. The mage looked a bit confused. I didn't explain that it was almost exactly the same thing I'd said about him less than an hour ago. It would have been...awkward.

"You're the one who knows where we're going," I said instead, shrugging.

"Aight. The dvergr should be here shortly. Drove separately. I figure get as many eyes on this as we can, yeah?"

I frowned at that, just a little. Something seemed...wrong. But I still couldn't pin it down consciously, so I just nodded. "Yeah, I get that. Either of you know anything about this place?"

"Not really," Cassie said. "Came here once because Derek has a crush on a dancer who performs here occasionally. That's about it."

"I got jack shit," said Jack Tar. "Don't think it was open last time I was in Pittsburgh. I know Steven was pals with the owner lately one way or another. And I know this isn't her usual style, people seem pretty clear on that. Normally you know she's singing on a given night but not what songs. Martin said there's a rumor she's some kind of half-fae, and likely leans Midnight if so. But that's it, just hearsay more or less."

I nodded. Yeah, that made sense. I made a mental note to tease Derek ruthlessly later,

but other than that there was nothing useful there.

Audgrim showed up less than five minutes later, looking more dour than usual. He'd managed to shave since I last saw him, at least. I did not greet him, and he had the good grace to look at least *slightly* awkward. I could acknowledge that his stunt earlier had been somewhat useful, and given the inexplicable pressure he was getting from his family, he was probably pretty stressed. But it was still a dick move.

"Door opens in fifteen," Jack said. "Show starts a bit later, just after sundown I think."

"Cool. Let's go." I was grinning again, now. It was the too-wide, not-entirely-friendly grin that made people uncomfortable. I wasn't worried, though. My teeth were hardly the sharpest in this group.

The Blackbird didn't look like much. It looked pretty much the same as the other buildings it shared a lot with. It was an older building, and it was still in the same post-industrial wasteland, part of a warehouse complex that was close to abandoned. There were four buildings advertising that they were for sale, a cider manufacturing company, a pet grooming company, and a gym, all closed for the day.

And then there was the Blackbird Cabaret. The sign was barely noticeable, and there was no exterior ornamentation at all. The few windows were useless, blackout curtains thoroughly obscuring any kind of vision in.

As we got closer, though, any doubt that it was the right place faded. I could feel the resonance around the building. It felt...sad, or perhaps melancholic was the better word. It tasted like blackberries and regret in the back of my throat, like beauty and pain and the place where the two overlapped. It sounded like a soft, gentle lullaby sung to soothe the dying.

There was a small crowd in the parking lot waiting to go inside. I didn't recognize anyone in it at a glance. Most looked pretty normal, human or nearly so, ordinary urban people. Others...didn't, not to me. Oh, they could pass for human at a glance. But one guy moved like he wasn't used to moving on two feet. Another was dressed like this was a Victorian opera, to a degree that was almost comical. There was a woman wearing a domino mask that appeared to be made out of stained glass, and I noted that while the skirt obscured her feet, her gait seemed less like walking than like gliding over the ground.

I didn't try to figure out what any of them were. There was no reason to. I wouldn't be able to identify anyone at a distance with that many different signatures overlapping.

The door opened. People started filtering in. The line moved relatively quickly; it was apparently just a matter of paying the fairly low door fee and going inside. The Blackbird Cabaret didn't do things like tickets. We drifted closer once the line was getting short, and I walked close enough to the building to trail my fingers over the wall.

There was magic here. I was confident of that. The walls hummed under my fingertips, strongly enough that I expected they were actually enchanted rather than just passively soaking in the power of the people who came here. Warding spells, though I'd have to actually examine them to figure out any details. They weren't currently important. The taste of blackberries

strengthened, and there was a hint of blood in it now.

I frowned. This power felt...dark, certainly. There was a distinct feeling of regret in it, but there was also plenty of blood, and some night-blooming flower I couldn't immediately identify. But it didn't smell like decay at all. It didn't feel slick and noxious to my touch. That...had implications. The feeling of wrongness had not gone away.

We paid the person at the door, who appeared to be a human in his early twenties. I actually recognized him; I'd seen him before at Softened Dreams, though I didn't know his name. Past the door, the Blackbird Cabaret was...a far less luxurious space than I'd expected. It looked like she hadn't done much of anything to change the warehouse's layout when she moved in. It was a single large, open room, the only feature a simple stage on the far side of the room. The ceiling was high, lending it a cavernous feeling, and leaving exposed ductwork and steel I-beams visible above us. The floor was bare concrete. I could see one door that appeared to be a small restroom, and there was another door leading to a backstage area, but that was it.

No ornamentation. No furnishings, or seating. Even the kid at the door had been using a small folding table and folding chair rather than any permanent fixture. This building felt almost exactly like the industrial space it had once been. My frown deepened. We went and stood next to one of the walls, watching the last of the audience filtering in.

I was already starting to feel...uncomfortable. There were a lot of people in this room, many of them carrying enough power that I could feel it. So many conflicting signatures was enough to start wearing on me already, filters notwithstanding. Mixing signatures was always prone to unpleasant kinds of energetic dissonance. "This is going to suck," I said, quietly enough that the rest of the audience wouldn't hear.

Cassie gave me a sympathetic smile. She didn't look thrilled herself. It occurred to me, after a moment, that her hearing had to be at least as good as mine. And she could smell all these people as well. It wasn't just magical sensations that could get overstimulating in this environment.

The hoodie was too warm in here. I didn't take it off, actually pulled the hood up over my head. I was fidgeting, antsy and restless. Saori looked at me curiously, then stepped closer and draped an arm over my shoulders. I appreciate that. It was...comforting, in several ways.

Suddenly, Jack stirred. He was looking at the entrance, and I followed his gaze after a moment. It was, I saw, dark outside now, the sun fully set. The last few people were stepping inside currently, and they were all definitely...striking. There was a man with an actual, silk-lined opera cloak, whose movements were subtly wrong, alien, somehow carnivorous. There was a woman whose nail polish was constantly shifting, vivid metallic shades flowing slowly through each other, and her smile was as hungry as the first man's gait. And then, finally, there was someone who looked relatively normal, but distinctly odd. He was wearing a tuxedo ten times too expensive for this place, the same night-black as his hair and cane.

It was the last of these that Jack was focusing on. "What's he doing here?" the druid said, as quiet as I had been.

"Who is it?" Audgrim asked.

"Sidhe," Jack said, softly. "You remember the two we were talking about?" This seemed to be directed at me, so I nodded. "This is one of them, the solitary one. Lives just outside of town."

I frowned. "I thought you said he was a recluse."

"He is," Jack agreed. "I don't know why he's here. From what I know, he very rarely leaves his home, not without a hell of a good reason."

I nodded, looking more closely. I didn't know how Jack recognized the Sidhe, but I was willing to trust his assessment. And now that I looked closer, the man did seem...off. He felt as predatory as the other two, in some way I couldn't pin down, but he didn't seem to be doing anything out of the ordinary. He was standing at the edge of the crowd, against the wall near the door much as we were against the wall to the side of the room. His hands, in black silk gloves, were folded over each other atop his cane. His expression, even if I'd been closer, would have been hard to read.

This was out of place. My spine itched, and it wasn't from the energy of the wards against my back. The feeling of *wrongness* still hadn't faded, and now it sharpened. I needed to see something. "Wait here," I murmured, and started sidling through the crowd. I had Saori's hand to pull her along, though, and Cassie could read my body language enough to see I wanted her to follow as well. Or perhaps she, like me, just thought that this was odd, and she wanted to check whether he smelled like what we were hunting.

It made it easier, in a way, that the split was along gender lines. Three girls can move through a crowded event space naturally in a way that we couldn't if it had been, say, Andrew here. The bathroom was relatively close to where we wanted to be, and I tried to make it look like I just needed to use it before the show started. Which, I thought, should be in just a few minutes.

We got closer. Saori was unsurprisingly good at this, once she knew what I had in mind; she was quiet, but visibly affectionate, making it look like she was tugging me along by the hand, smiling playfully over her shoulder at me once. Cassie was also a better actress than I would have guessed, looking very much like she was anxious and just didn't want to wait for us out among the crowd alone. Then again, the anxiety might have been genuine.

Saori glanced at me. I nodded. She slipped into the bathroom, and left me to wait outside. It was natural that I'd mill around slightly, and that Cassie would follow. That was enough to get me a clear look at the Sidhe, and from much closer up.

From the looks of things, I needn't have bothered with the act. He was...not watching me. Not watching the crowd at all. His eyes were fixed on the empty stage, and they were distant. There was some emotion in them that I didn't recognize, perhaps didn't have a name for. He was still in a way that humans aren't, not fidgeting or shifting his weight, barely breathing; I didn't think he was even blinking.

Out of place. I needed to know more, needed to see more. I looked back to make sure that Audgrim and Jack were still there; it took a moment to find them in the crowd, but they were, and they were looking in my direction. As close to safety as I was going to find currently. I took a deep breath and then dropped my filters, let the world rush in.

It always hit me like a drug, the sudden, massive rush of sensation hitting all at once and at high intensity. Most of the time it was intense, pleasurable, the sensations vivid and wonderful. Occasionally, as when I'd seen the corpses of Chris and Steven, it was hellishly unpleasant.

This wasn't exactly either of those. It wasn't unpleasant. It wasn't the vile, noxious feeling that magic had left behind. It was just...so much. I was managing to only lower them partially and it was still overpowering, a kaleidoscopic flood so intense and so chaotic that it was overwhelming to be around. I had to stop walking, and Cassie had to physically steady me or I would have fallen.

When I was younger, these senses had driven me genuinely, deeply insane. When Pepper said I was a madwoman, or when I told Saori that my mental connections were loose and the metaphorical gears of my mind were stripped, these things weren't jokes. They weren't hyperbole. Before I'd learned to filter this awareness out somewhat, living in one of the most crowded cities in the world had been overwhelming. Combined with other factors, it was enough to break things in my head. I spent a few years so far off the deep end that I'd never entirely come back.

Learning to maintain those filters had been an extreme relief. As much as I disliked opting into blindness, it was a godsend to be able to. Moments like this reminded me why.

Too many auras, too much noise, too many different, clashing signatures. I could smell blackberries and wolf and lavender, and also blood and lemons and honey and gasoline and stone and freshly cut grass, all at once, all vivid, oversaturated, realer than real. I could see the shimmering feeling of human magic, because enough of these people were human enough that there was a cloud of that, but also veins of black that crawled across my vision like lightning, and a low crimson hunger emanating from the man in the opera cloak. I could hear a rushing sound in my ears, though that might have been from my own heartbeat, and I could hear a soft murmuring like waves, and a second murmuring like whispering voices just barely above the threshold of hearing, and something like the buzzing of wasps, and something else like the wind howling above a lonely glacier.

I managed to focus my attention enough to pick out the Sidhe specifically. He smelled like blood in the dark and leaves in the spring, nothing like rot at all. He looked dark, but it was a natural darkness, the endless dark of a moonless night. There was power in him, *deep* power, a river made of shadows and pain and a laughter that was low and bitter and bloodstained, the current so strong that it threatened to pull me in and drown me.

I forced myself to look away, which was a Herculean task in that moment. I struggled to put the filters fully back up, shook my head trying to clear it. It wasn't working.

I didn't try to go back to where we had been standing. I was pretty sure I'd fall if I tried to walk. I blinked a few times, still feeling confused, overloaded. Something was so very wrong. Why was he *here*? There was a reason, had to be, things like this didn't happen for no reason, *nothing* involving someone that powerful happened without a reason.

I realized that Saori was standing beside me now. She was all but holding me up, in fact. I wasn't sure when that had started. "You alright?" she asked me, low and urgent.

“Yes. No. I don’t know, I don’t...this is wrong, why, why are we, is he, something smells wrong, why are we *here*?”

“Kyoko, you’re scaring me a bit. Do you need to go outside?”

Before I could answer, the mood in the crowd shifted, sharpened, focused. Everyone was looking the same direction, and I knew what that meant, but I couldn’t keep myself from looking as well.

Capinera was a pale woman, with night-black hair and sad, deep blue eyes that I shouldn’t have been able to see clearly from so far away. She was taller than me, and slender. She was smiling, and the smile was sad too, and I whimpered when I saw it, when I felt that melancholic blackberry-and-night magic. I was swaying on my feet. I blinked, shook my head again. I felt lightheaded, dizzy. Saori was saying something, but I didn’t hear it. I was staring at the stage, everyone was. A hush fell over the room, an anticipation sharp enough to cut glass.

Capinera started to sing. It was Welsh; it was the song we’d heard about, that everyone had heard about, and why, why had we heard, why had anyone heard? It didn’t matter. Her voice was sweetness and pain and silver fire, and it was full of longing, a wild, melancholic ache. I didn’t know the language, but I didn’t need to. Her voice was so sharp, and the emotion in it was so stark, so pure it hurt.

Around me, I could feel people feeling it. We were all feeling the same emotion, in that moment, the same wild longing, a hole in my soul that I didn’t know how to fill. We all felt that fierce homesickness, a longing for a home that perhaps we had never actually known, nostalgia for a better time that never truly happened.

It was the same emotion in the song, and it was the same emotion in the Sidhe’s eyes. Now that I had the context, now that it was hitting me at such high intensity, from so many directions all at once, I could name it. It was *hiraeth*, a Welsh concept that didn’t quite exist in English, but we all still knew how to experience it, how to *feel* that profound, wild longing.

It was too much. The filters I’d been struggling to put back into place required thought, and normally that thought was so familiar as to be reflexive, something I had thought so much that now it could almost think itself. But right now, I couldn’t, I was too transported by the song and by the feeling of the room around me.

The barriers fell. The world poured in, a room full of magic and full of a single aching need. Capinera’s voice was silver and lightning and sweet, broken-hearted regret as she sang an ancient ballade about a lover left behind, sending a bird out to her distant beloved with the news that she would die before the season’s end. I didn’t know the words, but I understood it. In that moment, I understood everything in the world.

I felt my knees give out. I fell against Saori, and I could smell fox and spice and smoke and blood and leaves and lilacs and memories that cut like claws. My vision faded out into storm, and the world went away.

Chapter Seventeen

Waking up was slow. It was hard. Normally I woke up quickly, and neither a deep sleep nor a nightmare was enough to change that. This...was like trying to force my way through a thick fluid. It was hard, it was somehow painful. When I did snap back to awareness, I still felt dazed, my thoughts blunted by a thick fog.

I was in a bed, I thought. It was soft. The sheets felt like satin. I could smell something sweet and floral. It took a little bit to work my way up to opening my eyes, but when I did I found the lighting was soft as well, and there were some rugs breaking up the monotony of the concrete floor. I was in a twin-size bed, and the room also had a simple wooden chair, a small refrigerator, and a camp stove; not a lot else.

Capinera was sitting on the chair, across the room from me. Not a large room, but it meant there was enough space to not feel threatening. She was quietly reading a book. I wasn't entirely sure how I recognized her immediately, given that I'd only seen her once, for a few seconds. Maybe just because those seconds had been so intensely burned into my brain. She looked calm, peaceful even, though there was a sheathed rapier leaning against the wall next to her.

I wasn't terribly worried by that. It seemed more likely that she was keeping a vigil in case someone tried to attack me while I was unconscious than anything. The sense of total, nigh-omniscient understanding had been a transient thing, but I remembered enough to be confident Capinera was not a threat to me.

"Hi," I said. It hurt a little; my throat was dry. I realized, abruptly, that it was not the only thing that hurt. My back was sore, and my right hand hurt where I'd hit my knuckles on the concrete. Felt like I'd bitten my lip, too. At least my head didn't hurt; Saori must have reacted quickly enough to keep me from cracking my skull on the floor. That was good.

Capinera looked up, and then tucked a bookmark in the book and set it aside. "Hello. Kyoko, yes?" Her voice, I noticed absently, was lovely, not terribly surprising given the quality of her singing. It was also very soft, gentle almost.

That dispelled any lingering anxiety I might have had. She knew my name, which I really only saw a handful of ways she'd have learned that, and most of them were reassuring rather than the inverse. She said it right, too, even extending the first "o" to a second count. Most English native speakers I'd met didn't even notice me doing that; the idea of extending syllables to change meaning just didn't feature in that language. My friends picked it up with practice, and unsurprisingly Saori did not struggle at all, but it wasn't common.

"Yeah. Do you have some water?"

"Yes, one moment." She went to the fridge in the corner, and took out a bottle of water. She walked over and handed it to me rather than toss it, and I noted that the tamper-proof cap was intact. Might have been coincidence, and I didn't really feel worried about her poisoning me anyway, but it was further reassurance all the same.

I sipped at it. It felt good. I was starting to feel less dazed, as well, which was even better. "Was I out long?"

"About six hours. It's a little after three in the morning." She walked back to her chair and sat down again.

I winced. Longer than usual. That, along with other things, was enough to give me a distinctly bad feeling about this seizure. "Did I go tonic-clonic?" Capinera looked blank, so I clarified, "Convulsions."

"Ah," she said. "Yes. Fairly severe ones. I was concerned, but your friends seemed confident that this was a known thing and all you needed was rest."

"Friends" seemed a bit of an overstatement, but I didn't comment on it. "Did they leave?"

"Yes. They seemed to be in a great hurry. One, Saori I believe she said her name was, stuck around long enough to explain that much to me, but they all seemed...very urgent."

That somehow did not surprise me. "Sorry for the disruption. Did they ask you to keep an eye on me while they were gone?"

Capinera nodded. "It's fine. And yes. She seemed concerned that you would be attacked."

This, too, did not surprise me. I was getting the impression that this was probably one of the safer places they could have left me, at the moment. But the fact that they had *known* that, along with the frantic hurry she was describing, meant I had to ask the question I'd been avoiding. "Did I...say anything? During the seizure, I mean." I sounded like this wouldn't surprise me either, but also, at least to myself, like I really, really wanted to be surprised.

"Yes. Though I don't know what you said. Does this happen often?"

I laughed a little, though it didn't sound very happy. "Seizures? More often than I'd like. Talking during? No, not often at all. This is the fourth time, and based on the last three, it's...." What did I say there? Disturbing? Terrifying? Extremely ominous? Eventually, I settled on, "Concerning."

Capinera nodded. "Do you think something bad has happened, then?"

"No. Going to happen." I paused. "The first time this happened was four days before my mother died."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want to talk about it?"

Ordinarily, the answer to that would have been a very curt "no." But something about the current moment shifted that. Maybe it was the recent events making me feel a strange kind of intimacy with Capinera, or maybe I was just suddenly very anxious and needed to talk. Regardless, what I said was, "Actually, I think I might. Is that okay?"

"Of course." She sounded like she meant it, too.

"I was born on the spring equinox," I said. "Thirty-five years ago. I don't expect you are familiar enough with recent Japanese history to know the significance." Most people didn't, I'd found. Even people who were old enough to have heard about it when it happened didn't

immediately put two and two together, for the most part.

"No, almost nothing. I was mostly raised in the Otherside."

I nodded. That made sense. I was pretty sure Capinera was partly mortal, not wholly inhuman like Saori was. But just like there were half-bloods such as myself who were born and raised entirely on earth, I expected there were others who were...not. "Twenty-seven years ago," I said, "also on the spring equinox, a doomsday cult called Aum Shinrikyo carried out an attack in Tokyo using sarin." She looked confused, and I realized she probably didn't know much about modern human weapons, so I clarified, "Sarin is a chemical weapon, a particularly dangerous toxin."

Capinera wasn't an idiot. She could see where I was going with this. "Was your mother killed in the attack?" she asked. Her voice was soft by default, it seemed, but at the moment her tone was particularly gentle.

"I've never quite been sure," I said. I shrugged. "Officially, no. Sarin is extremely dangerous, and Aum had a lot of the stuff. But they were kind of incompetent, and they didn't have anything like an effective distribution mechanism. It made a lot of people sick, and a lot of people were permanently injured, but only about a dozen died in the immediate aftermath of the attack. She wasn't one of them. But she was hit by a car and died the same day, and she was most likely on one of the trains that was targeted. And her travel plan didn't even call for her to be anywhere near where she died, she was supposed to be boarding another train leaving the city."

"So there was definitely *something* wrong, then."

I sighed. "Yeah. Nerve agents can do some really strange things to people, and I don't know how they affect raiju at all. My best guess is that she was sick and confused, possibly hallucinating, and wandered into traffic. But I don't really know."

Capinera nodded. "That makes sense. It sounds very difficult, the uncertainty I mean. I think it would leave me questioning a lot of things."

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Yeah, I tend to agree. Anyway. I'd had a few seizures before this. But the one a few days before this happened was...different. The earlier ones were mostly during a fever, which is relatively normal in human children. I don't remember them well, but they were normal. This was...well, there was no provoking circumstance, to start with; it just sort of happened. And some of the things I said were...disturbing. I don't remember talking, but I heard a bit about it. Didn't say much and it sounded like incoherent ranting. But some of the details, in hindsight, were..." I trailed off, trying to think of how to explain.

"Prophetic?" Capinera asked.

I shook my head. "No, not exactly. Prophecy as such is impossible as I understand it. Oracular, maybe, is the right word. With the context of what I know now, it seems like I might have been describing some things about the attack. I mean, the cult had been stockpiling this stuff, and they'd used similar chemicals to kill people before this on a smaller scale. I don't think I saw the future, but it feels very much like I was describing things about the present."

She nodded. "Right, that makes sense. The difference between precognition and

prescience. One can infer a great deal about the future, with enough information, even if certainty and direct observation is impossible.”

“Yeah. Exactly.” I paused. “You can see why I’m nervous, I expect.”

“Yes. I can.” Capinera thought for a moment. “Though your friends did seem to be acting on whatever you told them. Perhaps they will be able to do something.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Actually, though, do you know who all was involved?”

“I only spoke with Saori,” she said. “But I believe it was her, a werewolf, a human sorcerer, a dwarf, and one of the Sidhe who all left in a great hurry.”

I let out a sigh of relief. They’d taken the Sidhe with them, then. I wasn’t sure at all what I’d said to get them to do so, but I remembered enough to be pretty sure that was important. “Good. Oh, also, question. I’m told you don’t often sing in Welsh, is that correct?”

A sort of darkness passed over Capinera’s features at this. She seemed...melancholic, bleak, regretful, and contemplative, all at once. “No. Not anymore. Mostly English and Italian, occasionally other languages.”

“Would you mind telling me why tonight was an exception?” It was a sincere question. This was...clearly not a topic she was entirely comfortable with.

“No, not at all. Someone had specifically requested that I perform this song tonight. A werewolf, I believe his name was...Stefan? Something like that.” Capinera shrugged. “I rarely use the language, but I sometimes take requests from people to help offset the cost of the building, and he seemed to think it was important.”

I was sure I looked at least a bit stricken. I was sure she noticed, too. But she didn’t say anything. A request for that very particular song. That explained so much. I wasn’t sure why Steven had been the one requesting it, but the rest of it tied together very neatly, and I supposed it made some sense.

As I had observed several times now, these attacks seemed almost to be going out of their way to make people hate the attacker as much as possible. And people would have found the connections eventually. A wolf abducted in a way that made the werewolves painfully aware of their inability to do anything about it, another tortured to death. A mage killed with magic and left in a very public place. They hadn’t killed any of the dvergar that I knew of, but given the nature of the dvergar what they did was almost worse; dwarves did not have a reputation for taking insults to their competence well, to put it mildly.

It hadn’t occurred to me to ask why. Now that I did, it felt somewhat obvious. Anger leads people to make rash choices, to act impulsively. It impairs critical thinking, disrupts communication.

I looked for my phone, found it, along with my other belongings, on a small table next to the bed. No messages, which in a way was a good thing. It suggested that nothing had gone so disastrously wrong that I was hearing about it. I sent Saori a text to say that I was okay, and drank some more water.

Capinera seemed lost in thought. “Do you need to get some sleep?” I asked.

She shook her head. "No, not yet. I don't sleep much."

"Alright. Thank you." What was I thanking her for, I wondered? I wasn't quite sure. Letting me stay here? Sitting up watching to make sure nobody murdered me? Letting me talk about things? Probably all of the above, I thought, but it was sort of hard to tell.

Regardless, she smiled, and I only then realized that she hadn't previously. Her teeth were sharp, significantly sharper than human normal. "It's no trouble. You should rest. No one will attack you here."

"How do you know?" I asked. I was pretty sure I knew the answer, but I was curious what she would say.

"Because if they try, I will kill them," Capinera said simply. She didn't say it like a threat; if anything, she sounded sad. I was pretty sure she'd be sad while she did it, too. "And I expect they know that."

"You sound very confident."

"I have killed many things," she said, in the same soft tone, the same shadow in her eyes. Not a boast at all. "And this place is well-protected. There are certainly still people who could overcome me easily; I am not one of the great powers of the world by any stretch of the imagination. From what Saori said, it's very possible that the people who want to hurt you would be capable of doing so. But from what she said, they would not do so easily or without cost. It would be a foolish waste of resources. I think they will wait for another time."

I tended to agree. I could still feel the wards in the wall humming at my back. And the sad, quiet certainty in Capinera's voice was...telling. That rapier was well-worn.

"Thank you," I said again, and then laid back down and tried to sleep. Somewhat to my surprise, it worked. My dreams were full of blackberries and echoing voices, singing about regret and loneliness and lost homes. Not sweet dreams, but they were soft ones in their way, and there was a comfort in that.

Chapter Eighteen

Waking up the next time was much more pleasant. I didn't appear to have been moved, though the room was a little different. Capinera had laid a blanket on the floor in the corner, and was lying down asleep. I felt a little bad about putting her out of her bed, but she did seem to be able to sleep like that. A fox was curled up in that bed next to me, also asleep. Kitsune seemed to be unlike werewolves in this, and unlike me for that matter. Saori looked exactly like an ordinary red fox, with red-orange fur, a white tip on her tail, nothing unusual at all. She only had the one tail, too, suggesting she was young and fairly limited in her power; kitsune grew more as they aged. It was only context that told me who this was, that and the feeling of smoke-laughter-fox-spice in her aura.

More surprising to me was the person sitting in the chair. There were a lot of people whom I could have imagined that being, under the circumstances, but Andrew would have been a ways down the list. The werewolf was doing something on his phone, and he still seemed tense, but it was a different tension now, hungry and eager.

"Hey," I said, quietly so as not to wake the sleepers. "How'd it go?"

He looked up, and set his phone down. "Pretty well," he said, at similar volume. "You want the details now?"

"Yeah," I said. "But let's step out for it. Don't want to wake Capinera."

I did wake Saori, though. Andrew hadn't been there for some of the things I wanted to know about. The kitsune woke up much the same way as a fox that she did in skin; physically languid, stretching and pressing her head into my hand to solicit ear scratches, but mentally alert immediately.

"You mind waking up and chatting?" I asked her quietly. "Sounds like some things happened last night I should hear about."

Rather than answer overtly, she just walked over to the corner where she'd left her clothes, and changed back to human form to put them on. Like mine, her shapeshifting was instant and painless, the only sensation a sort of paresthesia. Her whole body tingled, from what she'd said, like returning sensation to a limb after it had been without circulation for a while.

I almost felt bad for doing this in front of Andrew. I'd seen werewolves changing. It was slow, messy, and apparently every bit as painful as it looked. Flaunting how comparatively effortless our experience was seemed a bit rude.

Saori got dressed quickly. She had no particular evidence of embarrassment about doing so in front of him. Shapeshifters of any kind, I had found, tended to get over any taboos about nudity they might have had pretty fast. I generally remained bipedal enough to change while wearing clothing, but that was decidedly unusual.

I grabbed my stuff while she got dressed, putting the hoodie on. I doubted it was cold enough out to need it, but something about it felt comforting at the moment. Andrew was on

his phone again, presumably finishing whatever he'd been doing. Capinera did not stir as we left the room.

"Alright," I said once the three of us were outside the Blackbird Cabaret. It was late morning, and the weather was nice, overcast and a little breezy without being actually cold. "So, uh, fill me in?"

"How much do you remember?" Saori asked.

I shrugged. "Getting here is fine. I remember going inside, but things started getting really intense at that point, and my memories are...vivid but disjointed. I remember getting a clear look at a Sidhe noble, not recommending that by the way. And then by the end of the first line of the song, everything was insane and I think I collapsed."

"Yeah, pretty much," Saori said. "You got really weird, I could barely understand you. Cassie said that it sounded like you were having a stroke; you kinda made sense, like I could make out the words and sort of get the meaning, but it was disjointed. You staggered towards the Sidhe a little, then fell down. At first, that was all; you were just lying there, twitching a bit but you seemed fine."

I nodded. That mostly fit with what I'd experienced. "What next?"

Saori shifted her weight a bit, looking uncomfortable. "After maybe thirty seconds, you got...weird. The twitching got a lot more intense, convulsive. Cassie said to keep you from hitting your head, but otherwise not try to stop you."

Apparently Cassie knew what she was doing, because that was the right advice. I made a mental note to thank the werewolf later. Honestly, she'd handled this whole situation well enough that I was starting to feel distinctly impressed by her. I also recalled that she had been the one waiting at Mike's house with Andrew when I first got dragged into their part of this mess. I suspected she, too, had the kind of power and experience that carried weight.

There was a long pause before Saori continued. I didn't like that. "Jack felt some kind of resonance as this started. I felt it too, but not as clearly; he's better with that kind of thing. He said it felt strange, and very strong; I think he was actually kinda scared. Then you started talking, and this part of it was...really fucking creepy, honestly."

I nodded again. "Yeah, that's what I've been told. Hasn't happened many times at all, but...yeah."

"Right," the kitsune said. "Well, you were kinda babbling nonstop for about five minutes, it was very stream-of-consciousness. You were fading between English, Japanese, German, Icelandic, and Welsh without pausing, just kinda switching mid-sentence. At least one other language none of us could recognize, too, and it seemed like you were saying different things in each."

I was fluent in English and Japanese, and I knew a very small amount of German. The others were completely foreign to me. I added speaking in tongues to the list of things to worry about later. I had an actual written list of those which I'd add it to soon, but for now a mental note was enough. "Could you understand what I was saying?"

She shrugged. "Sorta? Between us, yeah, mostly. Audgrim got the Icelandic, and Cassie was able to understand the German part. Jack and I got the Japanese. Welsh...I don't know what you said, but it brought that Sidhe lord over real quick, and he *definitely* understood it. It was a little incoherent, though. Really hard to tell what some of it meant."

"Do you have any examples?"

"Yeah, one sec. Cassie took notes." Saori fished in her pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. "Alright, here we go. In English you were mostly asking questions, things like 'Why are we here?' and 'When is now not like tomorrow?', or at one point 'What is the purpose of weeping?'"

I blinked at that. Saori must have noticed, because she grinned a little. "Yeah, uh, like I said, you got *really* fucking weird. Okay. Then in Japanese you kept mentioning storms, you mentioned falling petals repeatedly, and there was a lot of stuff about revenge. You also mentioned 'the black moon ascendant' and 'a song from the dying' twice each, and the holiness of scavengers once. In Icelandic it was bloody axes, wolves howling at dusk, black fires, and some guy named Amleth. That freaked Audgrim right the hell out, which was kinda funny. German was entirely about hunting. And then Welsh we didn't get the translation, and there was one that nobody even recognized the language, so...yeah."

I absorbed that for a moment. "Well then. That...wow."

"Yup. And then, uh, this was the part that pushed it from 'freaky' to 'scary'. See, the thing is, Capinera was singing this entire time. Apparently it was a longer version of the song than normal or something, I don't know, but she was still singing. I don't think most of the people there even realized this was happening; you were surprisingly quiet, and we were at the back of the room. Don't think anyone else heard you, just us and the fae. But then she finished the song."

Saori paused, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Hell, even *Andrew* looked uncomfortable, and he hadn't even been there. I really did not think I was going to like this.

"Almost exactly as the song finished," Saori said eventually, "you stopped convulsing. And I don't know if it was just that the song was over and they weren't fixated on it or what, but that's when practically everyone noticed that we were back there freaking out, and the whole room turned to look. And then you sat up, totally casual. It seemed like you were wide awake, eyes were open, you looked at the crowd in a really strange way, I don't know how to describe it. Then you said, and this part is an exact quote, uh. 'If you were not all here tonight, you would all be somewhere else, wouldn't you? Maybe you would have been better off doing that instead.' Totally clear voice, silent room, everyone heard you. And then you fainted again."

I was correct. I did not like this at all. "Fuck shit," I said. "That's. Uh. Wow. Okay then. I assume that's why you were in a hurry?"

Saori shrugged. "Kind of? I mean, like I said, the other stuff you were saying got a reaction. Audgrim was freaking out, and the Sidhe was...I don't think I ever want to see a Sidhe lord that kind of angry again. And then Jack was still spooked by whatever he felt when this was starting. So things were already pretty up there, I think they only stuck around in case you said more things they would find important. Soon as you were done they were out the door."

Crowd was leaving too; I don't really know why. I mean, the show was supposed to be going on for hours still. I guess you freaked them out too at the end. I stuck around to explain because I drive fast enough to catch those losers any day of the week."

I had no difficulty believing that. But I was still just...slightly stunned. "Um. Okay. And then?"

Andrew cleared his throat. "That's where I come in. This fae, from what Jack told me, is known for being in his home a lot. And between the various things you said, I think he concluded very strongly that he should be there again, posthaste. Cassie called me and told me there was an emergency as soon as you started talking, and his place is out in the forest. I *know* this forest. And I'm pretty fast on four legs. So I ran out there, the kitsune drives like a maniac, and I don't know how the fae traveled but it was pretty damn fast too, so the three of us all got there around the same time."

"What happened?" The tension in my spine was deeply uncomfortable.

"We found them," Andrew said simply. "Group of four people, in the middle of breaking into the place. It was a mess; this guy's manor is a fucking fortress. They'd already gotten through the defenses, we caught them on the way out. Three of them bolted, and apparently they already had an Otherside portal open and waiting, because they got out of there before we could catch up. The fourth...well. I'm with Saori on this one. If I never see a Sidhe that pissed again, I will be very happy. I don't know what he did, but I think the largest piece of this girl afterwards was a finger."

I let out a heavy breath. "Oh thank fuck," I said. "You might have been in time. I really, really hope you were in time."

Saori looked at me oddly again. "In time for what?" she asked. "And how did you even know this shit?"

"I don't know," I said, and I was pretty sure I did sound as exhausted as I felt this time, because for a moment the kitsune seemed concerned. "I don't...look, I don't know how this works. But this is only the fourth time this has happened to me. The like...oracular, talking while seizing stuff, I mean. And the last three...did not go so great."

"What do you mean?" Andrew sounded worried now.

I shrugged. "First was four days before the sarin attack in Tokyo a few decades ago. Second was about eight hours before an earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean that killed a few hundred thousand people. By the third I was living in a small town in New York, and by this point I'd figured out that I should probably take this shit seriously. Fortunately, the guy who basically owns the town knows me, and he knew better than to ignore this. So he actually *was* on time to prevent some vampire from killing a couple people and starting a conflict between him and a different vampire a few hours' drive away."

They were staring at me. Andrew, in particular, seemed to be suddenly looking at me in a very different way. "Small town in New York," he said. "Wait a second. You mean Ashland?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

“That was *you*?”

“I take it you heard about that,” I said dryly.

He was still staring. “You basically stopped a small war from breaking out between one of the stronger werewolves on the continent and a vampire scary enough to rule the city of Albany with an iron fist. Of course I heard about it. I don’t think there are many werewolves in this region who *didn’t* hear about it when that happened. No names associated, but when some girl has a prophetic insight and keeps that from happening, it’s the kind of story that circulates.” He shook his head. “Jesus. This...shit. Not liking the idea that this is something similar to that.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Pretty much. It’s kinda...I don’t know the rules. Couldn’t even guess at why those things prompted this shit when others didn’t. It’s not always actionable or local. And the third would have been bad, but it wouldn’t have been, like, global news or anything. So it’s not scale. The time delay doesn’t seem consistent. The third and then this one I could theoretically have known about without the oracular bullshit, but the first two were totally outside my understanding. All I’ve really figured out is that it’s probably not a good idea to ignore this kind of thing.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Saori said. “Note to self, Kyoko collapses and starts babbling insanity, pay attention. ’Kay.”

I laughed a bit at that. “Yeah, uh. Didn’t think to tell you about it, sorry. I figured there were good odds I’d end up having a seizure or whatever the hell these episodes are, don’t know if there’s even a word for it. Concerts can be rough on me, usually just unpleasant, sometimes worse, but. Yeah. Didn’t expect this.”

“It’s fine, not your fault.” Saori hugged me tight enough that I squeaked. She giggled.

“What do you think we were interrupting?” Andrew asked me. “I mean, we know to a degree. Cassie and I both recognized the scent, it was definitely the same crew we’ve been dealing with. But that’s all I’ve really got.”

“I don’t know exactly, but it’s....” I frowned. Most of the stuff I’d apparently been ranting about was out of my understanding. But I’d put enough together that even if I’d been sane, I would have been telling them to get the hell out to that faerie’s estate. “The Sidhe. You said he was an actual lord?”

“Yeah.” Saori sounded...spooked. “High ranking with Midnight. I don’t know their hierarchy or details or anything, but he’s the kind of Sidhe that tells other nobility to sit down and shut up.”

I shivered, and nodded. I hadn’t ever interacted with the Sidhe, certainly not with highly placed members of the Courts. But I’d read my fairy tales. I’d heard stories from people in the supernatural community about things they had done. The fae in general scared me a bit, and the Sidhe were their upper caste, the kind of faerie that did things like curse someone’s entire bloodline to the *n*th generation, or put someone into a coma for a hundred years. Someone who was considered scary even by their upper ranks was...distressing to think too hard about.

“Right,” I said. “So, uh, I don’t know motives or anything, I don’t know details. But

when I think about it, it's a bit...you said the manor was a fortress. And he deleted one of these assholes in a couple seconds, yes? How do you think they'd have done trying to get into that place if he were there?"

Saori went very quiet for a moment. "I think some of them might have lived long enough to regret it," she said after that pause.

"Pretty much," I agreed. "And he hardly ever leaves. I don't know why they wanted in there, but I can tell you they wanted him gone. And I don't know shit about him, but like, think about it. He showed up to a performance by this half-fae virtuoso—pretty sure she is, haven't asked for details but I'm reasonably confident—performing an ancient song in Welsh. A song that was announced in advance, and that she would not normally sing at all."

"It was bait," Andrew said quietly. "For him. And for us too, I suppose. Like you were saying at the end, we'd all have been somewhere else otherwise, and instead everyone's attention was here."

"Right. And you know who asked her to sing that song, specifically, last night, also specifically? Steven. One of yours." I paused. "I don't know why the Sidhe came. But my guess is that he's old enough to have been around when that song was first written, and it matters to him, enough that when he heard about this, he had to show up, he *had* to."

"Oh fuck," Saori said. Her eyes were wide. "Oh, that's. Not great."

"It would have meant war," Andrew said simply. His eyes in that moment were so much older than his body would ever look. I'd gotten good at recognizing it in people, the distance, the weight of years. I was willing to bet he'd seen more than one century, just from that look, that moment. "The Sidhe place high value on artistry. To take a song that means that much to him, and twist it into a weapon?"

"Worse," Saori said grimly. "They manipulated someone he respected into doing so. He vouched for Capinera, was willing to stake his own honor on her being trustworthy. I don't know why, but...the fae don't do that lightly. That's why we felt it was safe to leave you here."

"So he respects her enough to ask her why she was singing it. It would have meant war," Andrew said again. "Against a nobleman of the Midnight Court. The sorcerers would have gotten what they wanted from his home, and set him against us in the process."

"Yeah," I said quietly. "That's my conclusion, too."

"We *were* in time for that much, though," Saori said. She was grinning like a lunatic, and the grim, slightly frightened look in her eyes had been replaced by a wild, vicious glee. "He asked me to tell you, actually. He wants to talk to you, tomorrow. The phrasing he used was that he wanted to thank you for preventing him from making a grave mistake. Whatever the hell you told him, it was convincing, and he was calm enough to talk to us after this happened. Killed one of the bastards for us, too."

I realized I was grinning too. "Yeah," I said. "I think I'm willing to call that a win. Partial win, at minimum. Dunno what they got away with, but I'm pretty fucking sure they didn't want him to be this pissed at *them* about this stunt. You said you got a scent off them, too, yeah?"

Andrew wasn't grinning. He was showing teeth, but not even a vanilla human would have mistaken that look for a smile. "Yes, we did. Cassie, Bryan, and Robert are out checking other locations now that we have a clear sample. Jack, last I knew, was doing some kind of inspection of the magic they used out there. Don't know what the dwarf is doing. Not perfect, but I'm feeling a hell of a lot better about things than I was this time yesterday."

I smiled, and I hugged Saori, and I tried to pretend I wasn't still scared as hell. I wasn't sure how convincing it was, but I felt I should at least make the effort.

Chapter Nineteen

Andrew left, at that point. He was currently a very busy wolf; now that they had a clear scent sample from these mages, it was going to be much more likely that they could follow the trail, and they had a lot of sites to check. Honestly, the fact that he'd taken time to keep watch and give me a status update was kind of surprising.

I sat in the parking lot of the Blackbird Cabaret for a few minutes with Saori. We didn't really say much, but it still felt very soothing, somehow. The air was cool enough that the partial sunlight actually felt nice, and I had a lot of stuff to absorb. So much had happened while I was unconscious. It was strange to think about the fact that I was most of the reason for that when I didn't know anything about it.

It felt unfair, in a way. I could do just about the closest thing to actual prophecy that was possible. Last night had been actual Oracle of Delphi shit, knowledge I shouldn't have had, languages I didn't speak. But I was entirely reliant on someone else to tell me what my visions had actually *been*.

"Sorry for scaring you," I said eventually. "I should at least have told you about the seizure risk."

Saori was cuddled up against my side with her head on my shoulder. "Why didn't you?" she asked me, not agreeing or disagreeing. Her tone was mostly just curious.

I sighed. "I guess just because it's a sore spot. Because I like concerts, you know? I love music, love the intensity of the moment."

"But it's overstimulating?"

"That," I said, "and also there's an element of...well, I get some amount of emotional resonance from people, right? Not a ton usually, but there's an awareness of that. Even ordinary people say that the experience of a good concert is moving. I've heard people describe it as almost a spiritual experience, the intensity of the experience feeling like an altered state of consciousness in itself."

"Ah," she said, and curled in closer against me. "A room full of people all having very similar, intense feelings."

"Yeah. And then also, it's a bit...well, I've mentioned the synesthesia. But I don't think in much depth. Basically, sensations cascade into each other, and sound is the one that gets that the most. Music becomes touch, becomes color. Your laughter is golden, incidentally, and flickery. It's nice."

"It sounds beautiful," Saori murmured into my chest. "But it sounds like too much to hold all at once. I think I understand. Sore because it would be so nice but you don't get to have it."

I sighed, and stroked her hair gently. "Yeah. That's exactly it. I don't...I mean, I've always been this way, for as long as I can remember. I don't know what it'd be like to live

without these experiences, and I don't think I want to. I love having these sensations available. But there are times, and there are ways, that it's...frustrating. This is one of the bigger ones. And I guess I just didn't feel up to explaining that. Sorry, it wasn't very fair to you."

"It's alright. It was exciting." Saori was grinning now. "You should have seen the look on the werewolf's face. And then when you started ranting in German it was even better, you said something like 'but deep down, the prey wants to be caught, and craves the sanctuary it will find within the wolf's teeth' and just. Her expression was *priceless*. I'll try and get a picture next time."

"You seem confident there will be a next time," I said dryly.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I'm planning on sticking around. And it seems like this happens when there's a catastrophe, so I think with me on hand there's pretty good odds. Maybe I'll be able to get a video, even."

I had to laugh at that. And, in a weird way, it was thoughtful of her. Hadn't I just been wishing I didn't have to rely on secondhand accounts for this? Hell, if there were a video we could probably even figure out whatever the mystery language was that I was babbling in.

We sat like that for maybe another ten minutes before someone called me.

"The wolf said you're up, yeah?" Jack said before I even got to be rude at him for calling me.

"If I wasn't before," I said dryly, "you'd have woken me. So yes."

"Yeah, fair. You have some free time? I'd like to talk."

"You're already talking, so great job, you're self-actualizing like crazy today."

"Cute, but I don't mean a phone call." The druid sounded...I wasn't sure what to call it. Not worried, not anxious. Concerned, maybe. "You have time to take a walk?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "I'm still at the Blackbird, so."

"Aight. I'll be there in twenty. Try not to do anything stupid without me." The line went dead without further comment.

Saori was laughing. "Because that wasn't ominous at all," she said.

I had to laugh as well at that point. "Yeah, seriously. I do not understand that guy."

"Ditto. What do you think he wants?"

I frowned. "Hard to say, honestly. There are a lot of possible things, and he's really hard for me to figure out. I think something important though."

"That's not great," Saori said. "Guy like that thinks something's important and you don't know what it is, that's spooky as hell."

I laughed. "Yeah." Then I paused. "Actually. That's a really good point."

She pulled away enough to look at me. "Huh?"

"Oh, just...that gave me a thought," I said. "At first it seemed like this whole thing was,

you know, it was weird and bad, but kinda random and not a huge deal. But at this point, it's looking a lot bigger than it did. We've got someone carrying out major ritual magic, there's a scary Sidhe thing going on."

"Hm," Saori said. "I think I see where you're going there. If people like *that* think something's important and you don't know what it is, you start running for cover."

"Yup." I frowned. "Actually, on that note. You said that you met Chris because a mutual acquaintance recommended you to him, right?"

"Yeah. Chris was good at a lot of things, but he wasn't anything like sneaky. He could hide objects, obviously given his profession, but hiding himself? Ha. This job called for some inspectors or something to not know he was there at all, so. Yeah."

I nodded. It made sense. I didn't really know what Saori's skillset was like, but in the folklore, kitsune were tricksters, shapeshifters, and generally sly as hell. "Yeah, that tracks. You think you could find the person who introduced you?"

Saori considered for a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah. I'd have to go in person, though."

"That's fine. I think it'd be a good idea, if you're up for it. Might be nothing, but I kinda...feel a lot less inclined to write things off as random weirdness than I did a week ago, you know?"

"Yeah. I think I do." Her voice was quiet, but there was a dark, hungry kind of anger in it. "It'll take me a while, though. Won't be back to drive you around for half a day or so I think, roughly." She didn't actually say that she was expecting someone to try and kill me, but it wasn't hard to tell what she was getting at.

"Relax," I said dryly. "I'll be behind the wards here and then I'll have Jack Tar with me. I highly doubt they're going to commit the kind of resources they'd need to kill me anyway when they're already down a member and have other plans to work on."

"Alright," she said, reluctantly unwrapping herself from me. "But if you die while I'm gone, I will find your ghost and make you regret it."

"Thanks, that means a lot to me. See you in a bit."

Saori got up. I watched her drive away, and then I went back inside.

Capinera was awake by now. She really didn't sleep much; she had to have been awake almost until dawn, and it wasn't even noon yet. She couldn't have gotten much more than four hours. Idly, I wondered whether she didn't need more than that, or just couldn't get it.

Regardless, she was up, sweeping the floor of the main room. I wandered over and sat on the stage to watch her work. The only furnishings in the building seemed to be in her living quarters backstage, but the edge of the stage was comfortable enough, just high enough that my feet didn't quite reach the ground.

"Thank you again," I said.

She stopped sweeping, set the broom aside, and joined me, sitting a short distance away. "It's no trouble at all," she said.

I nodded. "This is a nice place," I told her. "I hadn't been before this. I've heard good things, though."

Capinera smiled. Her teeth were sharp, but narrow, resembling fangs or even needles. Not so much that most people would notice immediately, but enough to be distinctive. "Thank you. I've tried to make it a good thing for people."

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Getting that impression." I was quiet for a few moments. "You have a nice name. It's Italian, yes? It's the word for blackcap in that language."

Her smile was a smaller thing now, not showing teeth. It was the kind of smile that might mean anything at all. "You're well-read."

"I like to read, and I have a lot of free time," I said dryly. I was quiet for a few more moments, trying to phrase what I wanted to say next. Capinera seemed content to wait. She was still smiling, just a little, but her eyes were sapphire pools that currently had no sparkle in them at all.

"Blackcaps sing very sweetly," I said at last. "A lovely songbird. But black is also a color of mourning in Europe. And you are, I think, not entirely human, any more than I am. And known to the Sidhe, as well."

"These things are true," she acknowledged. The smile wasn't there anymore. She inclined her head slightly, a fencer acknowledging a touch.

"I'm not saying this as a threat," I said. "To be clear. More just...letting you know I've inferred these things. I'm well-read, but I'm not that unusual, and this is fairly straightforward inductive reasoning. If I can put it together, others may as well."

She smiled again. This one was more open, and seemed amused. "I think you overestimate how much most people think about these things. But, also, the name is not meant to conceal. The things you have inferred are...not secrets, not really." She looked at me, seeming curious now. "Why do you mention it?"

I shrugged. "You have been kind. And it...you let me talk about things, last night. It seems like there might be things you need to talk about, too."

Capinera was quiet for long enough that I wasn't sure she was going to respond. Eventually, though, she did. "You're not wrong. On either topic. It seems you've already guessed this, but to confirm, yes, my father was a redcap. And yes, I was raised largely among his Court."

I nodded. That was what I'd been getting at, though I'd felt like outright stating it would have been rude. Redcaps...were not a type of fae that I would want to be associated with. When your defining trait in the folklore is meeting people on the road, pretending to be just a fellow traveler, and then suddenly murdering them and dyeing your hat in their blood, it's not going to win you many friends.

"I've never been involved with the Sidhe before last night," I said after a moment. "So

my knowledge is fairly limited. But that sounds like it would be hard.”

She shrugged. “In some ways. Yes. I lacked for little. My education was very good. I was accorded a fair amount of respect, far more than most half-blooded people. My father is highly regarded within the Midnight Court, you see, and my godmother even moreso.”

I didn’t make a joke about her having a faerie godmother. It wasn’t a laughing matter. When that kind of thing actually happens, it generally doesn’t go like Cinderella. When it’s someone who has high rank among the Unseelie, it’s even worse.

“But those things rarely come for free,” I said quietly.

Capinera smiled a little, and nodded. “No. Almost never. My mother’s arrangement with Clíodhna was largely her own price to bear, but there were still...consequences.”

I winced. Clíodhna was a scary enough name that I’d heard her mentioned even without ever interacting with the Courts. The queen of banshees, in the old stories. “There are always consequences,” I said. “And you have killed many things.” She’d said as much to me, last night, and I believed her.

“Yes. That portion of my education was more my father’s responsibility. I learned to fight, and to kill, and I did these things. At first for study, and then for pleasure or on his orders. When he wished someone dead, I was his assassin. When he had no such need, I entertained myself dueling people.” She sounded sad, and the words had the dark color of blackberries, a deep feeling of regret woven through them.

I nodded. I’d expected something more or less of the sort. That rapier, which I noted was currently on the stage where Capinera could reach it easily, had seen a lot of use. “That lifestyle is hard, at times,” I said quietly. “My life was...not the same, but for a time it had some of the same qualities. It was draining after a while.”

“Yes.” Capinera smiled a little, and it was interesting, because it was still sad, but there was a kind of happiness in it, a sweetness. I hadn’t met very many people who could experience happiness and sorrow at the same time. Some, but few. “I lived that way for a long while; it’s hard to say how long. Time is...strange, with the Otherside. It always and only flows one direction, but the relative rate between domains is very inconsistent. But it was decades, I think.”

I nodded. “What’s it like over there?” I asked, more out of idle curiosity than anything. “I’ve never been.”

She shrugged. “It’s not as different as you would think, in many ways. More varied, more intense I think, but not that different underneath. Honestly, I think the mortal world is stranger than most Otherside domains. The vast majority of the humans I meet are...so blind to the world, and so certain their blindness is clarity. The irony is that their researchers are actually quite intelligent, and the scientific method would be an excellent tool for studying magic—were they not so certain in their flawed starting axioms.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I guess that’s true.” It had never really occurred to me to think about it like that. But now that I did...I mean, there was one world like this, and thousands out in the Otherside. Maybe my world only seemed normal to me because I’d never left it. Certainly when

she put it that way the fact that most of the people I saw on the street were utterly clueless about large portions of reality *was* kind of weird.

“Why’d you come here, then? It sounds like you had...a lot of other places you could have gone.”

Capinera shrugged again. “Mm, there were a few reasons. Probably the biggest is that my father has relatively little influence or power here. He didn’t take my departure kindly.”

I nodded. “And you’re in one of the most inhospitable areas to him, here,” I noted. “Right in the middle of the old steel mills, the area where that industry used to be such a big deal.”

“Yes. Clíodhna recommended the city to me on that basis. It is...uncomfortable, but I’m not so sensitive to iron that I cannot tolerate it. He is.”

“The prices we pay for our sanctuaries,” I said quietly. I glanced at my phone. It was just about time to go out and meet Jack, I thought. I looked back to Capinera. “Thank you again. And thank you for talking with me. Your perspective is...insightful.”

“It is no trouble,” she said again. “And thank you for talking to me as well, Kyoko; this was appreciated. You are very welcome here.”

I smiled a little, though I suspected mine also had sorrow and joy mingled within it, and I left. She sat on the stage to watch me go, with an old rapier she hadn’t left behind with her old life, still in easy reach.

Chapter Twenty

Jack Tar might have smelled slightly better today. It was hard to tell whether it was that, or I'd acclimated somewhat. He at least wasn't smoking, which was a good start. He was sitting on the ground in the parking lot when I opened the door, and glanced back at me when I did.

"Ey, there you are. Was about to call you again." He pushed himself to his feet, and stretched like his back hurt. "Where you want to go?"

I paused. "Wasn't this your idea?"

"Well, yes," he said. "But I don't really have a destination in mind. Just want to talk, and I find that walking helps me think. It's the movement, you know? Helps with working through ideas."

I could understand that. "Cool. Uh, the river sounds nice, I guess."

"Awesome." He started walking, moving at a fairly relaxed pace. I followed. It was quiet for maybe a minute before he eventually said, "So, about last night. I've been thinking about things a bit."

"An awful habit," I said. "Terrible for your health."

He snorted. "Yeah, let's be real, my health's a lost cause." He was quiet for a moment, then said, "You said some interesting things. Don't know what all of it meant, and I think that's probably not an accident."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure they told you about the language stuff. Think about it. Questions in the one language we all understood. Icelandic you mentioned Amleth, which incidentally I don't know if you've looked into that, but it's very relevant. Some guy in an old saga who fakes insanity to cover for clever plans, lures all his enemies into one place, traps them inside and sets it on fire. Audgrim got that reference immediately, and I doubt anyone else knew the name at all."

"Huh." I considered that. It made...some amount of sense, I thought. Sure, Jack could look the name up after the fact, but it wouldn't have registered in the moment. Apparently the Welsh had been specifically convincing to the Sidhe, too. "You think, what, I was ranting in cultural metaphors?"

"To a degree," Jack said. "But not entirely. In Japanese, it was...talking about storms when you've got influence from a yokai of the storm, sure. Falling petals too, very cultural. Transience and all that. Even vengeance and death songs I could go there. But there were two other elements that don't fit that pattern. One, the black moon, that's not a symbol that I'm familiar with in Japanese. But the kitsune fucking flinched when she heard it. And it also has obvious relevance that anyone could have parsed. Tomorrow night is the new moon."

I frowned. "Well, that's ominous. Probably something big going on tomorrow, then."

“Yup. And then the other bit was a comment in Japanese about sacred jackals that I *know* isn’t a cultural motif, because it’s referring to a specific thing that happened to me about a decade back.” Jack shrugged. “I don’t think it’s cultural. I think you were saying things to specific people in languages they knew.”

It took me almost a block to process that, and it was...unsettling was putting it mildly, for a whole host of reasons. Jack seemed happy to just walk while I thought through the various implications. I’d already had speaking in tongues on my mental checklist. Now I added “why was I talking to people in this really odd, specific sort of way,” “how did I even know about Jack Tar’s life events circa ten years ago,” and “wait, if I was talking to specific people, what the *hell* was going on with the language no one present knew”.

I actually just pulled my phone out and wrote a note about this. I was too likely to forget something, otherwise, with this much on my plate and everything going on. I used to be embarrassed about needing to do things like that, and I guess on some level I still was. But I’d long since been forced to admit that trying to pretend my personal limitations weren’t there didn’t make anything better.

“Okay,” I said once I’d thought that through and written it down to consider later. “That’s...a lot. As far as practical things, though, we’ve got a timeline now. Tomorrow. Probably around dusk, if I mentioned that in Icelandic.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “We do. And another thing on that note. The ritual site you found, I went out and took a look at it. Not my kind of work, but I *can* at least confirm that the structure is set up for geomancy, channeling ley lines and such.”

“Right. But not aligned correctly, as I understand it.”

Jack waved a hand dismissively. “Sure, but that got me thinking. Just ’cause it doesn’t work there doesn’t mean that it doesn’t *work*. There are lots of ley lines around here, and some of them are pretty big. I don’t think this exact structure is aligned to much of anything, but there are elements in it that could fit together with slight adjustment.”

It suddenly dawned on me what he was getting at. “You think it was tuned for somewhere else?”

“I think it could be adjusted to fit somewhere else pretty easily. And between a couple of local kids and this lunatic druid I know who lives in the hills northeast of the city I think it should be easy enough to get a map together of the local lines that could be relevant.” Jack shrugged. “We’ve got a specific time when something is going down. I’m hoping I can get where. Maybe run the map by some of the wolves; they know the forest a hell of a lot better than my kids.”

I grinned. “Yeah, no shit. Alright, yeah, I think I follow. Worth a shot if nothing else.”

“About what I figure.” We turned and started out onto one of the bridges, one I hadn’t used much. I glanced out at the river, the sunlight playing over the endlessly moving water. It was easier this time, between me not moving so quickly and the lighting being simpler. I still looked away after just a moment.

We walked for a little while like that. I didn’t know what else Jack had to say, but he

didn't seem inclined to stop moving yet, so I assumed there was something.

I was not disappointed. Halfway across the river, he said, "So, there's one other thing. And this one is maybe a little personal, so feel free to tell me to fuck off if you'd rather not talk about it."

"I always feel free to tell you that," I said dryly. "But I'll keep it in mind."

He grinned. "Yeah, well. Thing is, you're a bit of an enigma to me. Far as I can tell, you've got a quicker read on magic patterns than just about anyone I've met. That fair to say?"

"I don't know who all you've met, but it seems likely, yeah."

He was quiet for a few steps before saying, in a somewhat delicate tone, "Raiju are not renowned for their acute senses. A bit, sure. They might feel a working here and there, recognize someone occasionally, smell the current in the wires, yeah. But they're not exactly famous visionaries."

My smile felt very tight, suddenly. "No. They are not." It was a thought I'd had myself on numerous occasions. And sure, folklore got things wrong all the time; there seemed to generally be some kind of seed of truth in it, but ultimately it had been passed down for hundreds or thousands of years by imperfect means. But I hadn't found anything to contradict this portion. Raiju did not have a reputation for this, nor had the one full raiju I had knowingly spoken to seemed to have the same trait.

"Not oracles, either," Jack continued. "And that's the part that I wanted to talk to you about. Because I was there last night, no? And it was very interesting to watch."

"So I am told."

"I think I recognized it. Not exactly, and hell if I know *why* it happened. But I recognized it a bit. Thought you might want to know."

My grin still felt tight, but in a very different way. *Did* I want to know? I mean...it was a question I'd asked myself so very many times. And if one of the more powerful, experienced mages of the modern era said he recognized it, there was a good chance he was right. But...there was nothing like being an unintentional visionary to teach you that sometimes ignorance really, truly was bliss.

I knew what I would ultimately say, though. My obsession with understanding things was too intense for me to pass on this, and I was self-aware enough to realize that. There seemed to be little point in agonizing about it when I knew that there was only ever one answer I could give.

"Hit me."

"Not my thing, but thanks for the offer. Aight, well, this isn't a kind of magic I'm an expert in, so keep that in mind. That said, how much do you know about shamanism?"

I shrugged. "Basics, nothing very specific."

"Okay. Well, there's like a million variations on the idea, the word gets applied to a wide range of traditions. The guy I watched doing his thing was drawing on Mongolian practice, but

some things are consistent.” Jack glanced over at me. “I’m just gonna list some common themes and then you can tell me what you think.”

I nodded.

“Great. So, spirits are beings which exist but do not have corporeal form, that much is just established as fact; it’s a separate mode of existence which is more about concepts and ideas than the physical world. Shamans generally specialize in working with the spiritual realm. That talent does exist pretty much everywhere, it’s not a common one but it happens. The term is also used to refer to some specific cultural traditions that developed that art more extensively. With me so far?”

“Yeah.” That part I did know, at least in the most basic sense.

“Good. Now, traditionally, this often involves a trance, an altered state of consciousness in which direct interaction with spirits and energy is more readily possible. How someone gets there varies, but music is really common, drumming and singing especially; the guy I knew said that the rhythm became a part of his body and helped to pull him away from himself. This state of trance, often ecstatic but not always, is commonly characterized as involving the creation of an internal experience distinct and separate from the external world, and the guy I knew said that mismatch made interacting with said world very...challenging. But his magical senses were very acute while he was like that, very precise. Ringing any bells?”

I had stopped walking at some point. Jack was just standing there with a smirk that said he knew the answer. “Son of a bitch,” I said. “That’s...I mean, it’s not exactly how I’d describe it, but....”

“But the experience is extremely individual,” he finished when I trailed off. “Yeah. And when your whole thing happened last night, I caught a bit of the energy going on. Not the same as his deal, quite, but it was pretty damn close.” He shrugged. “You have a lot of the same characteristics I would expect from that general group of practices and specialties.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, though,” I said. I wasn’t exactly disagreeing; he wasn’t exactly wrong. It just...didn’t quite fit together. “What you’re describing is a branch or a class of human magic.”

“And a variety of associated cultural traditions, yeah,” he agreed. “It’s complicated. Words get used in different ways by different people. But yeah, the part I’m talking about is the magic. ‘Shaman’ is commonly used as shorthand within magical circles for anyone who specialized in working with the spiritual realm. Shows up outside those cultures, maybe not as frequently but it does.”

“Sure, whatever,” I said. “The point is that I have practically no human magic at all.” I’d established that pretty clearly by now. My father was human, but most human energy signatures were very weak, and they tended to get washed out by other influences; the shimmering feeling common to human magic was so weak relative to the *raiju* in me that I could barely tell it was there at all. No more than it showed up in Audgrim, or Capinera, or even Melissa. I could see it in them if I tried, but even for me it was a challenge.

“Yup. Like I said, not a perfect match.” Jack shrugged again. “I don’t have an immediate

explanation for you. I don't know that you're doing the same thing. I mean, shit, as far as I can tell he had to work pretty damn hard to get into that trance state, and I'm not sure yours ever *stops*. So it's not identical. But something to think on, no?"

"Yeah," I said, looking out at the river. "Yeah, I think it is. Thanks, I guess."

He shrugged. "No problem." And then he kept walking, and I stayed where I was, watching the water.

I stayed like that for a few minutes. There was too much going on, too many things competing for my attention. The topic of shamanism and spirits didn't seem particularly urgent, but it addressed a question I'd had about myself for such a long time. It was hard to pull myself away from that curiosity, to refocus on the current situation.

But that situation was very clearly urgent. Whatever that vision had been, spiritual bullshit or something else, it seemed really foolish to ignore it. And like Jack said, we had a timeline now. I didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow night. But it was clear at this point that these mages—and their patron, I reminded myself—had a specific plan in mind. Based on their actions thus far, I didn't think that it was going to involve anything good for the rest of us.

Jack was working on where. So, presumably, were the werewolves; they knew the forest as well as the Tribe knew the city. They had a much better chance of tracking these people now, too. Between them, I was pretty sure those two groups were far better suited to the task than I was. I just didn't have that much knowledge of local power structures or potentially important targets. And as for what was actually being done, it seemed like a fairly good bet that the Sidhe lord would know something about that. Getting something from his manor, after all, seemed to have been a pretty major goal. I was also aware that he had specifically asked to talk to me tomorrow. Seemed unlikely to be a coincidence if the new moon was important here.

That, I thought, left me to look at why. And I didn't have much context to work with. Sure, I spent time at Softened Dreams, I hung out with werewolves occasionally, things like that. Derek was the only one I'd spent much time talking to, but I'd met others through him over the years. But I was strictly small-scale, intentionally disengaged from larger contexts, the movers and shakers and the major players who had serious personal power in and of themselves. This was not a small-scale plan.

I was at least decent at critical thinking and inductive reasoning, though. I could do that while other people did more specialized tasks. So I started walking again, and forced myself to focus on the task at hand, rather than vague mystical bullshit that I could look at later.

Who and how were settled enough that I wasn't too worried about them. But reviewing *why*, questions of motive and goal, there were some things that still seemed strange. I'd told Saori that I was a lot less inclined now to think of these actions as random. That hadn't changed. But the attacks on the dvergar still seemed pretty pointless to me. I'd thought information to begin with, but the basis for that didn't apply now. They'd had other reasons to want to examine that funeral home's books, not things they wanted to know, but rather things

they seemed to want *us* to know.

They wanted, I thought, to apply pressure, to push emotions higher. Elsewhere that had involved murders, violence and betrayal. Nothing like that had happened with the dvergar, but then, the pressure on Audgrim wasn't coming from the security company he ran. It was coming from the dwarves he ran it on behalf of.

Which made next steps pretty straightforward. I called Audgrim, and I must have been the one interrupting somebody else for once, because it took him a while to answer. When he did, he sounded terse, like he was forcing a calm he didn't feel.

"This is Audgrim."

"Hey," I said quietly. "I'd like to talk to your family."

Chapter Twenty-One

Audgrim didn't like that very much. I could tell he would rather have told me no flat out. But he couldn't really do so. He just didn't have the position to right now. I'd been accomplishing a great deal for this investigation, and had put myself through several rounds of seriously unpleasant exposure to do so, on top of him using me as bait for information gathering.

I didn't kid myself into thinking that meant he would feel real loyalty towards me. I wasn't that naïve. In my experience, most people are generally only as grateful as they're directly incentivized to be. He would pay back the debt he owed me, sure; that much I felt I could count on. But that was because reputation was everything in our circles, and a reputation as an oathbreaker who reneged on his debts would see him metaphorically and quite possibly literally crucified for it. He was smart enough to know that, to know that the long-term costs outweighed any short-term reward he stood to gain. But I wasn't counting on him actually caring; I wasn't even counting on him being too self-interested to discard the possible gain from my ongoing help. People self-sabotage for stupid reasons all the time.

The reason that I was confident he was going to play along had nothing to do with that, and everything to do with the broader context. There were other groups involved now. Audgrim could afford to piss me off without any repercussion, but when you have Jack Tar, the local werewolf pack, and a pretty scary Sidhe also involved? All of whom had a lot of reason to want this situation dealt with successfully, and direct awareness of both how much I'd been helping and the misery I'd put myself through in order to do so?

I wouldn't need to lift a finger to fuck him over at that point. All I'd have to do was casually mention to one of the other parties involved that I'd had an idea about how to proceed, and he'd refused to cooperate without giving a good reason. As quickly as that, he'd have a lot fewer people around here who wanted to do business with him. And we both knew it.

So while he was clearly pissed that I was trying to go over his head and talk to the people he worked for, he couldn't really outright tell me no. He growled something about how he couldn't promise they'd agree, in a tone that made it pretty obvious he hoped they wouldn't, and that it might take some time before he got a response, then hung up on me.

I sat in a park, and waited. I didn't really have much else to do today, after all. Saori wouldn't be back for a while yet, and I was pretty much free until my meeting tomorrow. So I sat, and enjoyed the weather. Cool, grey, a nice breeze. The tree branches moving in the wind were fascinating, hypnotic in much the same way as reflections of sunlight on the river, and I allowed myself to just drift in that for a while.

It was less than an hour before he called me back. "They'll see you," he said, sounding rather displeased that this was the response. "Immediately. I can give you a ride."

At the moment, I would rather have found my own transportation. But I didn't want to push him on it right now. Just because I had more social capital in this situation didn't mean I could afford to ignore him entirely, and it didn't mean I had to be a bitch about it, either. I gave

him the address, and waited.

He had music playing already when he picked me up, something relatively tolerable that sounded like it had taken too much influence from the 1960's but at least knew how to execute it competently. He said very little on the way, and the tension in his spine hadn't eased any since I last saw him. He hadn't shaved, either.

He was driving slow enough that it was only mildly uncomfortable for me to be aware of the environment, and I was very much watching where we were going, this time. After a while, I said, "Sorry to be so abrupt. Just had some questions for them, and didn't want to make you waste your time playing go-between." He would know that there was more to it than that, I was pretty sure, but presenting it as being out of respect for his time made it less blatant that I didn't want this conversation to be mediated by him. A small olive branch, at best, but I felt it was worth at least trying.

He made a noncommittal sound. And then, a few minutes later, said, "We're here," which was a bit unnecessary given he was already pulling into a parking garage.

Stepping outside was a little strange. Pittsburgh's downtown neighborhood wasn't spectacularly impressive, certainly not compared to Tokyo. You don't grow up in arguably the biggest, busiest metropolitan area in the world without being a little jaded about such things. But I'd been a near-recluse for a long time, now, and I was rarely around even this much of a city center in recent years. The skyscrapers, if they counted as such—I'd never really been clear on the definition there—were imposing, looming over me in a way that made me feel small and nervous, like a scuttling rat among giants.

Audgrim went straight to one of them, of course, and I followed. The security guard knew him—hell, she probably worked for him—and waved us through to the elevator without any questions.

It was a long, silent trip up to the top of the building. At least twenty floors, long enough for the silence to become oppressive. I was starting to wonder whether there was more to this than just him being salty about my request. He seemed agitated, sure, but it didn't feel like the anger was entirely directed at me.

Room 2333 was unlocked. Audgrim followed me in, and closed the door behind us. The *click* of the latch had a strangely ominous feeling to it, and the room wasn't much better. On the surface it was just a large conference room, but it had both a deeply-imbued feeling of leaden-grey dvergr magic and an emotional resonance that felt indefinably nervous.

There was only one person waiting for us, not nearly enough to justify such a large room. She was standing at the far wall, which was made entirely of window, and staring out over the city. She was inhuman in her bearing, so obviously inhuman that even ordinary people would register something off about her. It didn't help that she was wearing a hooded, ankle-length scarlet cloak, one that draped oddly and which to my senses burned with a low, subtle sort of magic.

Audgrim stopped short when he saw her. "Hrafna," he said, sounding like an odd mix of

startled, confused, nervous, and displeased. “They sent you?”

She turned to face us, and while her movements were also subtly inhuman, I didn’t see anything to immediately explain his reaction. She seemed like what my understanding suggested was a typical dvergr: Tall, with a gaunt, severe sort of face, dark hair, dark eyes, pale. She had power hanging over her, a shroud not so different from the cloak, but it wasn’t *that* strong, and she wasn’t carrying any weapons that I could see.

“Yes,” she said. Her voice was slightly clipped, and had a slight, odd accent. There was little to no emotion in it that I could identify. “They did. Are you going to introduce us, brother?”

Ah. That explained some things.

“Of course,” Audgrim said, sounding like he was trying and failing to imitate her dispassionate tone. “Kyoko, this is my half-sister, Hrafna Rauðfeldr. Hrafna, this is Kyoko Sugiyama, a local woman who is assisting with the situation we’ve discussed.”

That explained some more things. I didn’t immediately recognize the name, but I knew enough to recognize it as a byname, a sort of title or nickname granted in recognition of a trait or achievement. Audgrim, notably, did not have such a name; he was just called Eyvindson after his father. Hrafna (and that name I did recognize, the feminine form of “raven”) did. The difference in status was obvious.

“I am familiar,” she said, still in that flat, dispassionate voice. “You requested to speak with us.”

It wasn’t a question, but I answered anyway. “With the dvergar, yes. There are some questions I have regarding the ongoing troubles in this city, which it seemed best to ask directly.”

Something almost like a smile touched Hrafna’s features, briefly. “You may ask. I do not promise I will answer.” She looked at Audgrim, and there was not a smile of any kind in evidence now. “Your services are appreciated. You have a great deal of work to do, I’m sure.”

The dismissal in her tone was very clear, and only barely veiled enough to be polite. Audgrim nodded stiffly, and left the room, closing the door behind himself. Hrafna actually looked more relaxed after he was gone, and that was somewhat telling.

Now that I was here, I wasn’t quite sure where to start. “I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me,” I said, mostly to buy time. It wasn’t quite thanks. That was a common rule with the fae, and one of the few that I was fairly sure applied with the dvergar. Gratitude could be taken to imply debt. The dwarves were very different from the Sidhe, and all those creatures which were associated with them. But a fixation on debt and obligation, along with an inability to tell direct lies or break direct promises, were things that they had in common as I understood it.

“We understand the service you are providing,” Hrafna said, and oh were there a lot of layers in *that* sentiment.

I nodded and sat down. I’d done a fair bit of walking earlier, and I was still sore from last

night's convulsions. Besides, it really didn't matter that it was a more vulnerable position. Hrafna was a full dvergr, and a respected one, and I was sitting pretty much literally in the center of their power locally. Standing or not, if she decided to kill me I wouldn't live long enough to reach the door.

"I'm not entirely sure I do," I said. "Understand, that is. I've got a decent idea of the basics, but there are a lot of things that aren't entirely clear to me. It doesn't seem as simple as an attack on businesses you're invested in. They just aren't that important."

Silence. Hrafna seemed disinclined to waste words. I was fine with that. Silence could be as telling as any answer, sometimes.

"One of your workers was injured," I continued after a brief pause. "And I'm sure you are not without loyalty. But that's ultimately a relatively small thing. And as I understand it, your people were paying significant attention even before that happened. I mean, hell, for that matter, it seems like a pretty small thing by the standards of the persons responsible, too. They've got bigger agendas than that."

I was pretty sure I could have heard a pin drop in that room, and it was carpeted.

"Audgrim screwed something up," I said quietly. That seemed pretty clear to me; there were only so many reasons they would keep him in the dark, why she would have asked him to leave the conversation.

"My brother is not half as clever as he thinks he is." This time Hrafna's voice wasn't quite as dispassionate; I could make out a bit of fondness, a bit of fatigue, and a fair amount of exasperation.

I nodded. "He said that nothing was stolen at the previous locations. I'm inclined to think he's correct, if only because the people responsible are after bigger game than human businesses. But that doesn't mean that nothing of value was gained."

"No," she agreed quietly. "It does not." She was silent for a long moment. I waited; I got the impression she was deciding how much to tell me.

Eventually, she continued. "Some of the mortals whose contracts he manages have requested stronger and more esoteric protections than others. Not all of them have the skill to manage those protections themselves. So, he created a tool to allow one of them to do so without that skill."

It took me a second to figure out what she was saying. When I did, I stared at her, and I'm sure I looked rather shocked. "He gave someone a key to let them get past dvergr warding spells?" I asked, incredulous and feeling like I must have misinterpreted something.

If so, Hrafna did not correct me. "Not half as clever as he thinks," she said again.

"I should fucking say not," I muttered. I couldn't even begin to fathom how stupid that decision had been. Sure, it meant that a normal human could use a supernatural security system without assistance. And I was sure that said human had paid a fortune for that.

But it's not just within mortal society that the dvergar have a reputation as vaultkeepers. And some of the people who *didn't* need assistance with that kind of security used it to protect

things a lot more valuable than cash. A *lot* more valuable. This key probably wasn't able to get through the dvergar's other wards perfectly; I was guessing that the magic in question was probably too individual, too tailored for that. But it was like any other kind of security. Once someone knew how the key *worked*, it became a hell of a lot easier to reverse engineer it.

And he probably still had no idea it had even been taken. How would he, really? Hell, it probably *hadn't* been taken during one of the actual attacks. If you knew that kind of system was in place and being used by someone who couldn't have done so on their own, it was trivial to figure this out. Just hit one place after another until you found one with the right kind of security, and the kind of owner that really shouldn't have been trusted with it. Then you back off, and rob the owner later on without anyone knowing a thing.

Bloody hell, no wonder the dvergar were pissed at Audgrim. Even I could figure out the danger inherent in giving that sort of key to someone who lacked any personal power with which to protect it. And my only real expertise in the field was a basic understanding of information security thanks to some undergraduate-level cryptography classes. If Audgrim had seriously left a security hole that glaring and there was now a chance of someone using it to attack a much more important system, the surprising thing was less that he was being excluded from conversations than that he was even still *alive*.

"This has been enlightening," I said after a few moments. "If there's nothing else, I won't keep you longer."

Hrafna smiled, tight and controlled with no teeth showing, and she said nothing, and watched me leave. Audgrim was nowhere to be seen on the way out of the building.

It was already afternoon; I'd taken longer than I realized, it seemed. I wasn't sure where the time had been lost, but it was fading out towards evening. It was strange to think that this time tomorrow, things would be coming to a head, the mess that had largely dominated my life for the past week or so reaching its conclusion. I still didn't know exactly what was going down tomorrow night, not quite. But at the moment, it seemed very much like that was when the mages who had been doing all this were planning to move on whatever they were actually planning on stealing, the thing that all of this had more or less just been setting up for. And while it wasn't strictly impossible that we'd manage to find and stop them before they could actually move on it, my life hadn't given me much reason to think that things ever went that smoothly for me.

No, I didn't think there was much chance of that at all, really. We weren't getting that lucky. Nor was there much chance of this being resolved without violence. Tomorrow night was going to be bloody. It was feeling pretty inevitable.

But tonight was calm. It was peaceful. The sky was still overcast, but the breeze had died down, and the air was still. Looking around, people were going about their day like nothing was out of the ordinary at all. It felt simultaneously unreal and somehow reassuring, a feeling like things were ultimately going to be okay. Logically, I knew that reassurance was false. Life would go on, sure. But that didn't mean it would go on for me, or for anyone close to me.

But it felt soothing, and I needed that too much in the moment to question whether it

made sense. My life felt like it was spiraling out of control, right now. The calm, stable routine of my life, the predictable pattern it had been in, hadn't been great. The loneliness and the bitterness had been draining and most of my days had been empty. But at least it had been reliable, had been safe. This chaos, even just being involved in things this big to begin with, was...not. I felt lost, and scared, and confused, and even false reassurance was precious right now.

I walked for a little while, and then found a coffee shop. It was a generic chain thing, and decidedly not a coffeehouse (whatever the difference was, I'd really never gotten clear on why Hope felt it mattered which hers was). But it had sugar and caffeine to make up for the sleep I hadn't been getting, and I could watch people go by on the other side of the window. There were voices inside, and it had a feeling of life in it, and it beat nothing.

I stayed there for a while. The sun was setting by the time Saori called me. I answered the phone absently, sipping at some appalling, overpriced concoction that had enough sugar to make the coffee almost palatable.

"Hi," the kitsune said cheerfully. "So, talked to my buddy. The good news is, I've learned some unsettling things that have seriously disturbing implications for the future. The bad news is, I have a terrible sense of humor and a habit of using the good news, bad news format for really bad jokes, so you're going to have to get used to this."

"Cool. I also have good news and bad news. The good news is that I've figured some things out and have a relatively good idea what's going on. The bad news is that I've figured some things out, and have a relatively good idea what's going on. Pick me up downtown?"

Saori laughed in a way that sounded more appropriate to a hyena than a fox, golden and burning and full of hunger, and said she'd be there in five minutes.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Saori had ditched the plastic tub of LEGOs and the ice cream machine she'd had in her car, apparently. They had been replaced by a box filled with dozens of hockey stick blades of various shapes, and a clown mask sitting on the dashboard. Which was....

I knew that it would only encourage her, and the answer would be neither informative nor reassuring. But I had to ask. "Is that mask...autographed?"

"Yup!" she said brightly.

"By whom?"

"The entirety of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra." Saori sounded smug. "The list sorted by instrument is in the glovebox."

I closed my eyes, though for once it was less because cars were overstimulating and more just trying to banish a whole host of mental images all at once. "Why do I ask questions when I know I don't want to know the answers?"

"The hell should I know, I'm not a shrink. So where are we going?"

I thought for a second, and then shrugged. "Back to my house, I guess. Easier to talk there."

"Don't you think they might try and assassinate you there again?" From anyone else, that might have been accompanied with hesitation, or at least said in a tone that implied concern. Saori just sounded excited, and the car was already moving fast enough that I really had to wonder how much aftermarket work she'd had done on it. Sedans were not supposed to have that good of a zero-to-sixty time.

"Eh, kinda doubt it. I guess it's possible, but they have to know now that hiring a dumb kid and telling him to shank me isn't going to work. And I think they're a little busy right now. Plus, I need to water my plants, it's been a while."

"An entirely valid reason to risk disembowelment. Tell you what, since it's urgent, I'll get you there double-time." From how hard she accelerated around the next corner, I wasn't entirely sure she was joking.

"How do you not get pulled over constantly?" I asked. I was morbidly curious at this point. Saori's disregard for traffic laws was so complete I had to sort of admire it, but I didn't expect most traffic cops would agree with me on that.

The kitsune sniffed. "Bitch, please. The implication that a police officer could either drive fast enough to catch me or focus through the enchantments long enough to want to is just insulting."

She put on some music at that point, loud enough that conversation was impractical. I was actually familiar with it this time. Ice Nine Kills was on the more aggressive side for me, but Saori was clearly in a somewhat bloodthirsty mood, and I had to admit that metal music

describing slasher flicks in loving, gory detail was an appropriate soundtrack tonight. Having it be a remix sped up until it sounded like the singer was a little girl happily describing repeatedly stabbing people was a *little* less appropriate, but I'd figured out by now that expecting Saori to behave in an appropriate way was a sucker's bet under any circumstance.

Saori was whistling cheerfully while we walked up to my house. I was pretty sure she had one hand on her knife, but I seemed to have been correct; nobody jumped us, competently or otherwise. I unlocked the door, unlocked the door some more, and we went inside without incident.

I really did feel almost insulted. These people could seriously only manage one assassination attempt for me, and a pitiful one at that? It was disrespectful, really.

I thought that, and then I paused and actually looked at what was running through my head. I wasn't sure how to feel about it. Was I really that casual about violence, that not being attacked more seriously was almost disappointing? It wasn't a wholly unfamiliar pattern of thought; I was quite sure that, say, eighteen years ago when I was running with a Yakuza family, this was an interpretation that I would have found perfectly reasonable. But it was slightly disturbing how easily I fell back into that pattern.

I shook my head, forced myself to focus on the present moment. It felt harder than usual, like I was more disconnected from my immediate surroundings. I wasn't sure what to attribute that to; there were too many possibilities. Regardless, it didn't matter right now. I locked the door again, and went inside.

Contrary to what I'd told Saori, though, I didn't immediately start tending the plants. It was true that I needed to water them, but that wasn't my primary reason for coming back here, nor was it just a need for the familiar environment. My first stop was a small door on the ground floor. Saori was following me, and she was clearly curious, but she didn't say anything.

The basement here was not exactly hidden, and it wasn't me that made it less than obvious. As far as I could tell, the house was just built like this, with the door to the basement stair small and tucked away in a corner looking like a closet. I wasn't sure why, but it wasn't my doing.

The door at the bottom, on the other hand, *was* my addition. It wasn't, like, a vault door or anything. But it was a steel security door, and it was locked as thoroughly as the exterior door. Maybe more so; that was just two tumbler locks, perfectly normal aside from a slightly heavier deadbolt than usual. This had a similar deadbolt, but there was also a heavy combination lock on it. One lock that required an object, one that required a piece of information. Two-factor security was always a good choice for something that you actually cared about.

Saori followed me down the stairway. It was concrete, narrow and a little uneven; this house had been built before things like stair risers were standardized, and it showed. The lights were harsh fluorescents, glaring and lacking any kind of softness.

"Okay," the kitsune said, while I was undoing the locks. "Gotta say, we're sliding back

towards the actually-a-serial-killer creepy now.”

I grinned at her over my shoulder. “Yeah, uh, about that,” I said. And then I pushed the door open, and went inside, and flicked the light on. More fluorescents down here. I didn’t love them, the light spectrum and the humming sound were both prone to grate on my senses, but I didn’t spend much time down in the basement. Much like other disused parts of my house, it was largely storage. It just stored...different things.

Saori paused at the doorway. “Holy shit,” she said, staring. “Wow. That is. A lot.” She was looking at the assortment of weapons in the basement with an expression that verged towards awe.

“There’s a reason we came here,” I said dryly, going in and looking around. I had to admit she had a point. It wasn’t a huge basement, but it was fully converted into an armory and there wasn’t a lot of free room in it. I had dozens of knives in various styles and materials, all carefully arranged and laid out on metal tables. The sheathes were on a separate shelf underneath, because keeping most knives in the sheath is actually not great for them, long-term. There were guns, as well; several pistols of varying calibre, a regular shotgun and one that had the barrel sawed off, a light rifle and a heavier one. The guns were hanging on the wall, with ammunition and various straps and other gear arranged on the table below them. The table running down the middle of the room had a handful of smaller or more niche weapons: energized silver and iron ammunition for when those were necessary, a couple flashbangs, pepper spray, and a large plastic tub filled with a thin grey powder that incorporated as many kinds of anathematic materials and properties as I could fit into one substance.

It was all in working order. I didn’t spend much time down here, but I made a point of coming down twice monthly to do maintenance and upkeep, make sure everything was where it should be and ready for use. The knives were sharp; the guns were oiled and functional. It had been years since I needed these things, and many had never seen use at all, but I was extremely meticulous about keeping them in good condition. Treating my weapons respectfully had been drilled into me pretty deeply back in the day. Old habits die hard.

“How did you even *get* this stuff?” Saori asked me. Her voice was touched with the same near-awe as her face, a kind of respect the kitsune hadn’t previously expressed towards me.

I shrugged. “I’m rich, remember? Just because I don’t live like a violent lunatic anymore doesn’t mean I forgot how.”

“Sure, but seriously, some of this is...you are definitely not supposed to have tear gas, and I think that shotgun is well below the legal length cutoff.”

“I am both surprised that you know those legal codes, and perplexed about what I did to suggest that I care about them,” I said dryly. “I *do* still have a few friends in low places, you know. And the nice thing about having most of my money held by VNC is that if I want to spend some of it on something I’m not supposed to have, all it really takes is a phone call and a slight surcharge.”

“Damn.” The kitsune was leering at this point, and I wasn’t sure whether she was more turned on by me or by the weaponry, but it was kind of flattering either way.

I wandered around the room, picking some things out. "I don't normally carry weapons," I said. "Don't really need them, and they're more headache than they're worth. But it's sounding like tomorrow night you get the chance to indulge your wildest pyromaniac fantasies, and it seemed like a good idea to grab some stuff."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Tomorrow night?"

"Yup!" I said, sounding somewhat alarmingly happy about it. I wasn't sure whether it was an act. "That's one of the things I figured out, or, I mean, mostly Jack did but it was based on my ranting so I think I get partial credit. Anyway, tomorrow night seems likely to be when these assholes are making their move on something important, so. Yeah, pretty much. Not totally sure of where, Jack's working on that too, and still a little hazy on the details of what the plan is. Pretty sure it involves stealing something important from behind security measures that involve the dvergar, though. Also pretty sure Audgrim fucked up and left a serious vulnerability in the defenses that they're exploiting."

"Damn," Saori said again. "Gotta say, next to that, my info suddenly seems a lot less sexy. All I really got was that he was definitely incentivized to recommend me for that job, specifically. I don't know why or by whom, and I'm not actually sure he does either, but it was very much not an accident. Still don't think Chris was actually doing anything big though."

I nodded, and frowned. "Still creepy, though. You think he set you up somehow?"

"Hell if I know. Might have been that, might have just been someone wanting to kick some work my way." Saori shrugged. "I don't really have a good explanation yet."

I nodded. "Something to look into later, then."

"Yeah. I don't think I'd be able to turn anything up by tomorrow." Saori paused, and when she continued, she sounded a little uncomfortable. "Audgrim thought there was a leak. Someone giving intelligence out about you, about things we were doing."

I sighed. "Yeah. He did."

"You think he was right?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. I mean, evidence suggests Audgrim isn't as great at information security as he thinks, if he slipped up and let these people get their hands on a tool for bypassing dvergr wards. And we both agreed his logic was kinda shaky. But..."

"But they did send someone to try and kill you."

"Yeah. They did." I sighed again. "Almost sure that was just some random punk they hired. But they knew enough to send him the right place. And there *has* been some really creepy targeting going on. This group of random human mages knows everything from where werewolves live to which people have contracts with the dvergar to what song some Midnight Court guy is obsessed with. That's uncomfortable. The fact that you apparently got connected to Chris as part of some scheme does not make me feel any better, either."

"Agreed." Saori was quiet for a moment, then said, "Okay, so on that note, are you any good with any of this stuff? Or just into collecting murder implements?"

I laughed. "Not great with a lot of it," I admitted. "I was reasonably good at hand-to-hand,

not expert but I could hold my own. Aim, though, was...less than stellar. I grabbed a pistol and the sawed-off shotgun, but there was really no point in me bringing one of the rifles. I set the guns I did want aside, picked out several knives, and after a moment's thought added a flashbang and two small pouches of powder.

It was a reasonably impressive pile, I thought. I didn't think for a moment it would actually matter. While I was expecting to be in the fighting tomorrow, I was also fully expecting that the people I was with would be pretty fucking scary. If the firepower they were throwing around wasn't enough, I kinda doubted a knife would be enough to tip the scale. But it was comforting, and it was possible it would at least help somewhat.

"Alright, think I'm good. You want anything?"

Saori looked tempted, but she shook her head. "Nah, I've got my own stuff. Not the best time to be learning my way around new toys, you know?"

I nodded, and gathered up my old toys, and we left. I locked the door again, and pretended that the weight of so much violence waiting to happen didn't feel either reassuring or upsetting. I was pretty sure I failed on both counts.

"So it's sounding like stuff is about to get real. Not totally sure, but I don't see any way this ends without people dying."

I wasn't sure why I was talking to the plants again. Nor was I sure why I was lingering in the room full of toxic ones, except that they seemed like the right group to discuss such bloody topics with. Definitely going a little more insane, I thought. Considering my baseline, that was kind of impressive.

But it felt right, so I didn't stop. "I don't really know how to handle that. Emotionally, I mean. I feel like it should bother me somehow, I guess. I mean, I'm almost sure that tomorrow I'm going to be helping to kill some people. That seems like something where feeling some kind of upset would probably be healthy, but I just don't. I'm more distressed by not knowing what they're planning to steal than I am by the fact that we're probably going to try to kill them before they do so."

The plants weren't talking back. But I could no longer pretend that it felt like a wholly one-sided interaction. First it had been feelings of congratulation from the plants next to the bedroom. Here and now, it felt darker, quieter, colder. The emotional resonance I picked up was very faint, and it felt very...primitive, I suppose, was the word. It was like the emotions I could feel in the plants were very basic, fundamental things, like they were stripped down to the most primitive and oldest sort of emotion. They lacked all nuance, and certainly didn't have anything that would require as much forebrain as words.

But they were there. The wolfsbane felt hungry. The belladonna was darker, and it was less eager, more just a sort of acceptance. The autumn crocus had a sort of wild, frenzied laughter in it. And while it was tempting to write this all off as projection, or as feelings that had soaked into a room so deeply associated with death, I just...couldn't. It felt like self-deception to try, like deep down I knew that this was as real as any of the rest of my atypical

perceptions.

It felt like something must have changed in me. But I wasn't sure when, and I wasn't sure why. And I didn't feel any different, not that I could tell. But then again, would I know? Sure, I felt like the same person. But even without magic, I knew more than enough neuroscience to recognize that people could be very blind to themselves changing. Continuity of memory was, to a large extent, a trick the brain played on itself because recognizing just how little about one's self was stable and sacrosanct would be traumatic.

"I'm not bothered," I said again after a moment. "I feel almost relieved, glad that I can be done with this and move on, one way or another. And I *do* feel bothered by how much the actual prospect of helping to kill people doesn't bother me. It feels like it shouldn't be so casual, shouldn't feel so simple."

The skimmia agreed with me. I could tell, because it felt sad. Again, the emotion was very basic, very simple; it didn't have enough nuance to be sorrowful, or regretful, or bitter, or melancholic. It was just sadness, lacking those more detailed elements. That made sense, I supposed, considering they were, after all, just plants. They didn't have much mind to work with, to add that kind of nuanced meaning. Frankly, the fact that I could even feel this much from them had some very strange implications, both philosophical and scientific.

I stood there for a few more minutes, looking out the window into the night. The sun was down, now, and the lights I could see were those of the city. My home had an excellent view of the skyline; it was a large part of why I'd picked this house. I could see the office buildings downtown, towering constructions of glass and steel that burned so very brightly in the night. One of them, I always forgot which, had the spire at the top lit up in bright, vivid colors, forecasting the weather tomorrow in a code I could never quite recall. I could see traffic, rendered by distance into just a blur of light, headlights and streetlights fading together into a single mass.

So many lights out there. Humans had always wanted light, fire to push the shadows back, to keep their world separate from the dark, threatening world around them. So many, and every one of them, directly or indirectly, represented a life, a person. There were more than two million people in the greater metropolitan area of this city, two million lives, each one as rich and complex as mine, each person's hopes and dreams, loves and hates and fears and sorrows, as important to them as mine were to me. It was overwhelming to really think about that, to think about what was actually involved in a city.

It was a strangely poignant thing, looking out at that. It was bizarre to contrast that normalcy with my own life, so far out of control right now, so chaotic and threatening. It felt melancholic, not so far from the dark, calm acceptance that I could feel in the nightshade beside me.

"Yeah," I sighed. "Definitely going further insane. Thanks for chatting, I guess."

They didn't answer. I was glad for that. Actual words, I thought, would be the next milestone in my ongoing mental collapse.

Dinner was a delivery pizza. Saori had flatly vetoed my idea of frozen food, saying she refused to accept hot pockets as a valid choice for a possible last supper. It was a little grim, but I had to admit she had a point. Like I'd told the plants, I was almost sure this was going to end with people dying. But I was very much aware it might be us rather than them.

Dinner probably would have been quiet if it were with someone else. I was guessing a lot of people would have made it awkward and somber. Saori...not so much. Her cheerful disregard for danger and her active enthusiasm about the upcoming violence were too infectious for that, and I found myself grinning along while she told an impressively obscene story about some nun in France a decade ago.

"How do you even drink that much soda?" I asked after she had finished that story. I was vaguely, morbidly curious about that. She had gone through a two liter bottle already and she didn't seem to be slowing down.

"It's actually pretty easy. I drink some, and then I drink some more, and then oh hey here we are."

"Cute," I said dryly, "but not what I mean. I get that you're probably not susceptible to diabetes, but that much sugar is just...how?"

"Trade secret." She smirked at me. and I found myself very aware of the curve of her lips.

"I don't think there's anything else I need to do to get ready for tomorrow," I said. I felt oddly nervous again, like when I first invited her in. There was nothing obviously different about tonight than previous nights; I wouldn't call it a first date or anything, it had none of that context about it. That would be a first time being romantic, and while it was likely inevitable if we both survived long enough, it wasn't this. But the first time throwing ourselves headlong into danger together, I was finding, had a similar sort of butterflies and shivering in it.

"I'm *always* ready to set people on fire, so same."

I laughed again. "I'm going to have to invest in fire retardant clothing at this rate." And then, before the laughter had quite died away, I leaned forward and kissed her.

Saori's mouth tasted sweet; Saori, on an entirely different level, tasted like fox and spice and smoke. I found that the two went well together. When she pulled away from me, just a hair, her voice was husky and golden and *hungry*. "We should get some sleep," she said. "Want to be irresponsible instead?"

I just grinned, and moved closer again.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Do you think you’re supposed to be bringing me?” Saori asked me, as we were getting close to the fae lord’s estate. I wasn’t entirely sure what it meant for something to be an estate, but this definitely seemed to count. We were well outside the urban area by now, on some narrow access road in the forest. “He pretty specifically invited you.”

“Beats me,” I said cheerfully. “But you helped, and it’s not like I could drive out here myself. So I think it’s pretty reasonable.”

“On the list of adjectives I would generally apply to the Sidhe,” she said dryly, “I don’t think ‘reasonable’ even makes the top fifty. But hey, maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Hope so. So, uh, I have to ask. What am I listening to this time?”

“German metal band.” She was grinning.

“With a hurdy-gurdy section.”

“Yup! This song is some weird fairy tale thing about tying a girl’s hair around a tree to make her stay with you. It seemed appropriate.”

I shook my head, vaguely impressed. “Where do you even *find* this shit?”

“Hey now, this group is only mildly obscure. They’re even on youtube. Just wait until you hear the carillon cover of Slipknot I have planned for the drive back.”

I had to laugh a little at that, and looked out the window at the trees going past us. There was an impressive variety represented among them. This region was basically a temperate rainforest, very much like the Pacific Northwest in that way, and outside of the city the forest was lush and verdant and full of life. I liked that about Pittsburgh. It was a different sort of vitality than the constant activity of Tokyo, the massive crowds and sprawling urban landscape, the neon fire of one of the most sleepless cities in the world. But it still felt very *alive*, and I liked that feeling.

It wasn’t much further. I had to admit I was somewhat impressed that Saori had apparently found her way here the first time as quickly as a werewolf in fur or a Sidhe doing whatever he did. I didn’t think I could find my way back to this place, and I’d just seen the route in the daytime.

But she found it, and pulled up out front of what seemed to be a relatively modest manor. Oh, it was big, enough so that the term “manor” was definitely apt. Three stories, and it sprawled a bit. But it wasn’t so extraordinary that even an ordinary human would find it astonishing, particularly out here where land was relatively cheap. There were plenty of moderately-rich people who went for more grandiose dwellings, nevermind someone who had access to serious supernatural power with all that implied. I’d somehow been expecting something more extravagant.

I still felt distinctly nervous, and Saori seemed to agree, a visible thread of tension in her

spine. I glanced at my phone, largely just to delay, and saw that at some point Jack had texted me again. I opened it, vaguely wondering what strange tonal shift he'd produce this time, and found it read:

Locations narrowed to eight likely targets. Three in urban area, none show recent activity. Five outside, cross-reference w/ wwolves rules out two. Three which are known to wolves as significant but not clear why, each a relatively large area. Focusing search further. Status?

I read it and shook my head. I so deeply did not understand Jack Tar that it was kind of fascinating to observe him. Saori, reading over my shoulder because etiquette was something she only understood in the vaguest of terms, was laughing by the end.

"What the hell is his deal?" the kitsune asked. "Like, it's kinda just...when even I'm saying someone's erratic and weird, that's impressive."

"Agreed," I said, and then typed out a quick response to him. *Likely dvergar security; Audgrim likely made a mistake which created a vulnerability. Suspect they're attempting theft tonight, uncertain what target. Meeting MC Sidhe now.*

I wanted to put it off longer. But there was no way out but through, and I was out of reasonable causes to delay. I got out of the car, leaving most of the weapons behind; going into his house loaded down with iron seemed...impolite. And I really wasn't worried about someone breaking into the car out here. I did carry two knives, though, mostly as a security blanket. I'd brought along a cheap plastic-fiberglass knife, and a much more expensive aluminum-alloy dagger with a titanium-carbide coating. Neither had any meaningful amount of iron in them at all.

It was funny, really, how much some things had stuck with me. It had been years since I was involved in this sort of thing on any but the most sporadic basis; the last time I remembered being in a fight of any kind was several years ago, when one of Derek's barbecues turned into a very surreal brawl. Even back when I did get into fights routinely, they were usually pretty tame, rarely even involved weapons at all.

But I'd had a few things drilled into me pretty thoroughly by people who *did* have that more extensive experience and history. There had been a guy named Saito Ryosuke back in Tokyo who had been something of a mentor when I was younger. He was a better person than most of the people I was around back then (not that this was a terribly high bar), more in line with the traditional Yakuza attitudes about protecting his community. He also had some sort of military background that I'd never really heard much about. He'd had a lot to say about the importance of being prepared for things to go to hell, because if you waited until you *knew* things were going to get ugly, you wouldn't have enough time to be ready to handle them. He was largely why I was so meticulous about keeping my little armory in working order.

At the time, I'd been pretty sure that Saito was vanilla human. In hindsight, I was a little less sure. I hadn't had nearly the experience back then that I did now, and it was very possible I'd overlooked some nuance in his signature. If nothing else, he was definitely informed, because when I needed to leave and take some time to think about my life, he was the one who recommended the town of Ashland in rural New York as a good place to find some quiet, some tranquility. And he wasn't wrong, but given that the town was pretty much entirely run by a

werewolf, it was a hell of a coincidence if that were an accident. Jacob Snow had lived in Ashland for over two hundred years now, and even the humans knew who was in charge there. Jacob's comments about knowing the enemy and their vulnerable points were why that armory included things like charged silver, or knives with no metal in them.

The feeling of nervous tension didn't get any lighter as we walked up to the manor's front door. Andrew had said this place was a fortress, and at first I didn't see why. The walls were ordinary wood; there were expansive windows. But as I got closer, I could feel magic humming in the back of my throat, see rippling power laid over those walls. This place was warded, and *heavily* warded at that. As with the Blackbird's wards, I wasn't sure what they would do to someone who tried to break in; analyzing the actual *function* of magic wasn't something I was very skilled at, only identifying what kinds of power had gone towards making it.

But I was pretty sure that if you triggered those protective spells, they were more than strong enough to respond with lethal force. I swallowed hard, and it was hard to convince myself to reach for the silver door knocker. There was no doorbell; I was quite sure that this house didn't even have electricity. There was none at all out here, and the lack of that background hum of the storm in the wires was slightly uncomfortable to me.

I rapped on the door. Less than ten seconds later it opened, revealing what looked like a petite human girl wearing a black satin ribbon around her neck, a friendly smile, and not a whole lot else. I wasn't sure whether she was actually human. I couldn't feel her magic, not terribly surprising when it had the energy of the wards drowning it out.

Saori was leering, which the girl didn't seem to care about. I swallowed again. "Um. Hi. We're, uh, here to talk to the boss?"

Her smile widened slightly. She dipped her head in a polite nod, and while she said nothing, she stepped away to let us through the door. The wards didn't try to stop us, though stepping across the threshold still felt intense, a sort of cold, prickling sensation across my entire body. Not unpleasant, but...intense. The girl closed the door behind us, and then started into the house. She still hadn't said a word.

I was feeling more than a little freaked by this point. I followed her, but I was very much out of my depth. The house was very nice, though tastefully so, understated artistry rather than ostentatious display. I tried to focus on that rather than the fact that I was following a naked girl into the lair of a terrifying, inhuman creature.

"That tattoo is nice," Saori said, not trying to keep her voice down. "Very tribal. Must have hurt like hell though, right on the tailbone like that."

I really wasn't sure what was worse, that everyone I knew was insane, or that I was pretty sure our silent escort put a little more sway into her step at that, as though to flaunt the ink that Saori was ogling.

She led us to a staircase, and then up to the third floor, all in silence. I didn't look too hard at the house around us, outside our immediate vicinity. I wasn't sure I wanted to see this place too clearly. The wards were strongest on the exterior walls, but the whole building hummed with power, and it wasn't just the color of the wood or the dim lighting that made this

place feel shadowy. Much like its master, the resonance of this place was...not evil, but dark, dangerous, and *old*.

On the third floor our guide opened a door without knocking, and gestured for us to go in. I tried not to shiver at the way she was smiling.

The room we had been shown to was surprisingly ordinary. It seemed like a small, simple study, with desk, chairs, and shelves all of a dark wood that I thought probably only looked like mahogany. There were books on the shelves, all of them old; I was guessing most of those books had never been produced with a printing press, let alone modern technology. The Sidhe lord from before was standing at the window, looking out at the trees. He was dressed a little less formally today, but then, that wasn't saying much.

"Lady Kyoko of the Mountain of Cedars," he said, turning to face us and bowing slightly. "An honor to meet you. I am called Cerdinen, of the Unseelie Court. Please, come in."

Wow. I'd been called a lot of things, but that was a new one. Granted Sugiyama meant cedar mountain, but still, just...wow. I bowed in return, a little more deeply than he had, and stepped into the room, and sat in one of the chairs. It was more comfortable than it looked. "The honor is mine," I said.

He looked past me to Saori; the bow was very slightly more shallow this time. "And Mistress Saori, of the Shadowed Flame. You, too, are welcome in my home."

I didn't know what the hell that title was supposed to mean, but it was obvious that Saori did; her nod was very tight, this time, and she seemed suddenly a great deal more tense as she took one of the other chairs. "You are too kind," she said stiffly.

There was a lot of subtext in that interaction that I was sure I wasn't following. I wasn't even sure what the tone was; Saori seemed less than thrilled, but beyond that, I couldn't read it at all.

When she then proceeded to say, "You have excellent taste in servants," and smirk, on the other hand, it wasn't hard to figure out the implications at all.

Cerdinen looked very much like he was only with difficulty restraining a smile. "You'll have to forgive Miss Anemone; I'm afraid she's a bit of a traditionalist."

"Hey, I'm not complaining," Saori said, with a wide, shameless grin. "I tend to think I should be greeted at the door by tattooed nudists more often."

I had to work not to actually facepalm. Not for the first time, I found myself wondering how she wasn't actually dead yet.

"I'll be sure to pass along your compliment. So, Lady Kyoko, you have done me a significant service," Cerdinen said, sitting down across the desk from us. The desk itself was empty and polished to a degree that suggested clinical OCD, or would in a human, at least. It might be totally normal for the Sidhe for all I knew. "I am glad to have the opportunity to thank you in person."

I tried not to stare at him. Cerdinen had basically just outright admitted that he owed me, completely without prompting. That...was a pretty damn significant gesture from what I

knew of the fae. They placed immense importance on debts, held them almost sacred. “I...am glad that I was able to be of assistance,” I said after a moment. “Though I don’t entirely know what I was assisting with. I’ve got a general idea, but I’m missing a lot of details, and a lot of the ones I do have are still just supposition.”

Cerdinen did smile now, just a little. “I suppose, then, that it is in all our best interests that you know a little more clearly. Are you familiar with Gram?”

“Um. I mean, as a unit of measurement, yes,” I said. “But as a proper noun, no, not that I recall.”

He nodded as though this did not surprise him. “It is not a famous blade in this era. Not Excalibur, or Tyrfinnr; even Naegling might be more widely known among mortals. Gram is not so clearly remembered as those swords.”

“But it was a peer to them?” I guessed.

“Yes.” Cerdinen’s voice was quiet now, almost hushed. “In the sagas of Völsung, the bloody conflict between his family and the king Siggeir began when the All-Father came unannounced to the wedding of Siggeir and Völsung’s daughter Signý. He thrust a blade into the guardian tree of Völsung’s hall, saying that it was a gift for whoever could remove it. Only in Sigmund’s hand did it come free, and it was greed for the sword that drove Siggeir to war. When Sigmund eventually killed Siggeir, it was with Gram in his hand. The blade shattered with his death, but was reforged by the dvergr Regin, and it was with Gram that Sigmund’s son Sigurd killed the dragon Fáfnir.”

I was starting to get a bad feeling about this story. “Reforged by one of the dvergar,” I repeated slowly. “And now someone seems to be planning to steal from the dvergar here. Are they planning to steal this sword?”

Cerdinen was smiling again, just a tiny bit, though it didn’t look very happy. “Not exactly. But as is so often the case, mortal historians had...pieces of the truth that they were trying to make sense of, and the result may not be false, but it’s not a full understanding of events. Gram, itself, is not the object of this hunt. But much as Siggeir so deeply wanted that sword, there will always be mortals who hunger for weapons not meant for their hands.”

Saori was actually the one who caught on first. “Oh, shit,” the kitsune said. “There’s another one, isn’t there? Another guardian tree.”

Cerdinen smiled and said nothing. I was also silent, but I sure as hell wasn’t smiling. I was looking at a lord of the Midnight Court who smelled like leaves and growing things. I was thinking about a ritual diagram laid out around a tree spirit, one strong enough to bind a lesser dragon if it were aligned correctly. I was thinking about a sword strong enough to spark a war, one in the same weight class as freaking Excalibur.

“What,” I said, after a long, aching pause, “was stolen from your home, when these mages attacked? If I may ask.”

“You may,” he said, and now Cerdinen wasn’t smiling either, and there was a cold, frightening sort of anger under the surface of his voice. “They took a tool, a sickle, also not meant for such hands as theirs. Used properly, it guides the forest. It is the wildfire that prunes

the weak and leaves the strong stronger. Twisted against its purpose, as seems more likely their intention, it is an instrument of coercion.”

I really hate it when I’m right about things.

“I see,” I said slowly. “And such an instrument might well be able to, for example, convince a guardian tree to release a weapon even when it really shouldn’t.”

“It is possible. Yes.”

I frowned, thinking. A tree powerful enough to turn a sword into something you write sagas about would have protections. I was guessing it would also be associated with a *much* scarier tree spirit than some random tree growing near my house. Had that ritual been, at least in part, a practice run to confirm that they could get it to work? It seemed likely. Probably not the only goal, but it sure didn’t seem like an accident.

“Okay,” I said at last. “So, uh. No offense, but this is seeming like it might be a little bit outside my weight class. Don’t suppose there’s any chance you could do something now that you know they’re trying to pull this stunt?”

Cerdinen’s expression didn’t change a bit, but that feeling of icy, distant anger sharpened. “No. I cannot directly act on the tree or in matters associated with it. Interfering with these things is forbidden to all who are of the Courts. The thieves will not be so foolish as to overstep in a way that would permit my action.”

I nodded, somewhat glum but not surprised. I got the impression that if Cerdinen *were* able to actually do anything to them, I’d have been hearing about their plans posthumously. And the Sidhe were rather infamous for being constrained by various oaths. He’d been able to obliterate one when he caught them breaking into his house, sure, but that wasn’t the same as going on the offensive.

“Well then,” I said. “Think that clears up a lot of the details I was missing. Again, glad I was able to...prevent some misunderstandings.”

“Yes,” Cerdinen said, very quietly. “You were.” His eyes were distant now, and there was a complex blend of emotions in them that I was not equipped to parse out, that perhaps only someone as old as he was could truly understand. “I will not forget that.”

Saori and I were quiet as we left. There seemed nothing else to say, and I did *not* want to risk losing the goodwill I’d earned with him by pushing for more when he was clearly not in the mood for further conversation. We did not see Anemone on the way out, nor anyone else, and the manor was cold, and dark, and silent. The door locked itself behind us.

Outside, we just sat in Saori’s car for a few minutes. I was feeling a little dazed, overwhelmed by just how far over my head I had gotten in just a few days.

“Well then,” I said eventually. “That explains some things.”

“Yeah, seriously. Ugh. This is so ridiculous.”

I sighed. “Kind of is, isn’t it? I get that it’s important, and I sure as hell don’t love the idea

of giving some ultrapowerful sword to these assholes, but just. Ugh.”

Saori laughed. “Yeah. I have to admit, though, it’s kind of funny at the same time. All this over some, like, magic tree or something. Hard to believe it’s all to get at a freaking plant.”

I laughed too, but the sound was strained. There was something bugging me about that, about what she’d just said, something that felt wrong.

And then I realized what it was, and the laughter died away in a heartbeat. I was vaguely surprised at how steady my hands were as I grabbed my phone and dredged up the number I was looking for. Saori was looking at me curiously now, but she was quiet, perhaps recognizing the sudden urgency in my movements.

Maddie took a while to answer, and when she did she didn’t sound happy. “Kyoko? The hell are you calling me this early for?”

I didn’t point out that it was past noon, partly because it would be hypocritical and mostly to avoid pissing her off. “Hey, sorry, kind of important, had a question for you. Do you remember how you were asking me about using magic to grow plants a while ago?”

“Sure.”

“You said a friend had been asking you about it,” I said. “Do you happen to remember who that was?”

“Yeah. Some guy with the Tribe named Martin, hasn’t been in town long I don’t think. Why?”

“I’ll tell you later,” I said, feeling a cold, quiet sort of anger building somewhere deep inside of me. “Thanks, Maddie. This is really helpful.”

“Uh. Sure, no problem.” She hung up without saying goodbye, which was fine with me; I wasn’t in a mood for social niceties.

Jack answered much more quickly. “What’s up?” The druid sounded like he was in a hurry.

“I have bad news and good news,” I said. My tone was calm, almost cheerful; I could hear myself almost like the words were happening independently of me, like I was an observer in my own body. That kind of dissociation never presaged good things with me. “The bad news is that Audgrim was right about there being a leak. One of the Tribe is actually a traitor who has been helping to kill people, participating in torture and lycanthropic sacrifice, manipulating events to try and turn us against each other, and generally being kind of a dick. The *good* news is that I can tell you exactly who it is.”

I was grinning again. It was wide, and feral, and a little bit insane. Saori had started driving again by the time I finished explaining things to Jack, and it turned out she actually hadn’t been kidding about that carillon cover of Slipknot. I usually wasn’t a fan of their work, but I had to admit that listening to someone screaming “Wait and Bleed” over a cacophony of bells was the right mood for the moment, and I was singing along almost as enthusiastically and badly as Saori.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Martin. The guy who was so casual, so relaxed and unobtrusive that I had forgotten he was even present, the one time we met. He had felt peaceful, even. When I found him sitting next to Chris's dead body, there wasn't even a flicker of concern that he was a threat. And I'd basically forgotten him entirely since then.

But he was the one who had been pestering Maddie about magic and plants and how they intersected. He was the one who had known that Saori was in contact with Chris and where to find her, and why she had been briefly implicated in his murder. Now that I thought about it, he was also the person who had told Jack that Capinera was linked to the Midnight Court. Which wasn't false, but it sure as hell was misleading.

It was always the quiet ones you had to watch out for. Someone who was loud and aggressive was usually someone who felt the need to prove something. They were insecure on some level. In my experience, really dangerous people tended not to make threats at all. They didn't use fancy titles or dramatic pseudonyms. They didn't get aggressive. It was just...understood by all parties what they could do to you if you gave them a reason to, without them needing to say a word.

Similarly, someone who was quiet and unobtrusive often understood the value of subtlety. They knew that being underestimated was a potentially very powerful thing. Martin, I thought, was one of those people. My guess was that his associate, whichever of these mages got off on necrosis and murder, probably felt a bit dismissive of Martin. But all of the violence combined, so far, had done less real damage to us than Martin had by being calm and unobtrusive and offering a few quiet pieces of advice. He hadn't even lied, not that I could tell. He'd just given us a few selective, poisoned bits of truth, and it had very nearly been enough to spell absolute disaster.

It was always the quiet ones.

Jack Tar was practically vibrating with restrained emotion and energy when we got back to Pittsburgh. It was subtle, though; the only signs were a slightly faster tempo to his words, a tension in his gait, and a slight feeling of mingled anger and excitement in his tone and his aura.

Jack, I reflected, was a great example of that earlier observation. The druid hadn't made any threats around me. Where Saori gleefully talked about her incendiary life goals as applied to the mages, and Andrew had mentioned ripping their hearts out, Jack hadn't said anything of the sort. He didn't need to. Everyone already knew that it would go badly for someone when they had done this much to upset him.

"Aight, so, you were definitely right," he said without preamble, in the parking lot of a small drugstore. It seemed a bit of a random meeting point, but that was Jack Tar for you. "Bastard was a plant, showed up a month or two before this all started. I love the Tribe, but these kids are kinda stupid in that way, they'll take basically anybody. Guessing he's the one

who snagged that werewolf, probably did some other shit, not quite sure.”

I nodded. Pretty much what I’d expected; the calm feeling I got from Martin was distinctive. It fit very neatly with the peaceful, soothing magic I’d felt where Mike was abducted without any anxiety in him at all. “Where is he now?”

“At a certain funeral home,” Jack said with a loose grin. “It seemed appropriate, and I don’t know any cleaners around here to take care of the body. You have great timing, by the way. Pretty sure we got him right before he was going to leave the city for the show tonight.”

I nodded again. At this point, it was a given that if we caught one of these people they weren’t going to survive the experience. Not after all the things they’d done. “You get any information out of him first?”

Jack grimaced at that. “Very little,” he admitted. “He didn’t want to come quietly, and it’s not like any of us are great interrogators to begin with. We know there are at least four of them still active, maybe more, but not sure of much else. Pretty sure he was fishing for the details we put together about local points of interest, and unfortunately he did send those on before we got there.”

“So we basically did the legwork for them, in terms of finding the target.” Saori sounded displeased.

“Does seem that way,” Jack said. “Did you get anything from the Sidhe?” I hadn’t taken the time to give him much of an update about that yet, I realized. It had seemed somewhat more urgent to take out their mole, and apparently the timing was close enough to suggest I’d been correct.

“A bit, yeah,” I said. “Pretty sure we’re looking for a guardian tree, whatever that is. It’ll have a weapon in it that seems to be what they’re trying to find. Oh, and the Sidhe are apparently forbidden to interact with it at all, so not getting direct help there.”

“Guardian tree,” Jack said, sounding thoughtful. “Narrows things down a bit more. We already had it down to three possible locations. One of them is just completely wrong, it’s an island. Basically no trees on it at all. And one of the others I’m about ninety-five percent sure is out, no sign of activity and the ley lines don’t actually have the right kind of energy for that binding ritual. Last one is some grove in the forest. The werewolves have a serious taboo against going near the place, but don’t really know why.”

“Sounds like that’s it, then,” I said. “How hard is it to get to?”

“Not great,” Jack said, shrugging. “No access road, and none of the established hiking trails go near it. Going to be an overland hike to get there from the nearest road, and the terrain is a bit rough. We also don’t have an exact location, it’s a pretty big chunk of forest and I’m not sure where the tree would be within that area.”

Saori groaned. “This is going to suck so hard.”

I was inclined to agree with her. At least four mages in a dense forest, plus anyone else they brought along, possibly including a strong, inhuman patron of unknown nature. They were probably already out there, too, so we were attacking into prepared ground. They’d had

someone spying on us enough to know our capabilities better than we knew theirs. We didn't even have the advantage of local expertise with the terrain, given that the werewolves shunned the area. I was not a brilliant military strategist, but even I could see that this was a tactical nightmare.

"Yeah," Jack said quietly. "I think it probably is. Don't have a ton of time to work with, either." He looked at the sky, where the sun was by this point starting to drop noticeably. Not dusk yet by any means, but it was solidly into the afternoon, and September was late enough in the year that sunsets came fairly early.

"Better get started, then," I said.

"Yeah. I'll start calling people, see who all we can get on board with this. I figure meet at the nearest access road and go in from there as a group. You both coming along?"

I hesitated, then sighed. I really wished I hadn't started to actually care about this. Going into that forest tonight was stupid verging on suicidal, but I couldn't make myself opt out. It was too personal now, in too many ways. If nothing else, Saori was already nodding vigorously, and I didn't like the idea of the kitsune getting killed out there. I'd only known her a short time, but like I'd told her, I just didn't have enough local social bonds to take any of them lightly.

"Yeah," I said, somewhat reluctantly. "I'll be there."

Jack looked at me, and there was something in his eyes that wasn't quite pity. Closer to empathy, but mingled with sorrow, pride, and a delicate pathos. It was very nearly as complex and layered as the emotions I'd seen in Cerdinen, very nearly as poignant as those woven into the Blackbird Cabaret.

I got the impression that he knew exactly what had just been running through my head. I also got the impression that Jack Tar had thought those things himself at one point, and that while he was somehow proud of me for stepping up, he also felt regret about it, a sorrow at seeing me take this step.

But all he said was, "Alright then. We'll be taking separate cars. You two riding together?"

I nodded. It seemed like a fairly natural choice, and it wasn't like I wanted to be in a car with Audgrim right now. Or with Jack for that matter, though for entirely different reasons; he still smelled terrible.

"Aight. I'll text you the details about the access road we're using. Not sure who all else will be coming along, going to ask around a bit. I'm guessing it'll be about an hour before everyone's prepped and we head out. I'll keep you updated."

"Thanks, Jack," I said, feeling very tired, and not just because I'd been getting shit sleep lately. "See you there."

He smiled a little, and walked away.

An hour was an awkward interval of time. It wasn't long enough to actually *do* much. I

couldn't do a lot to prepare in that time, even if there were preparations I could make. Which, really, there weren't any that I could think of. I already had my weapons picked out. The closest thing I had to armor was a reinforced leather jacket and pants, the kind serious bikers wore to mitigate road burn. Those were also already in Saori's car. I couldn't really think of anything else to do, definitely not that I could get done in that time frame.

But at the same time it was too long to be pleasant. I felt sick, felt small and lost and scared. An hour was a long time to wait. Waiting had too much room in it for thinking.

We ended up going to some café I didn't know and eating. I didn't eat a whole lot, between anxiety being hell on my appetite and knowing that I was about to be running around in the forest in the middle of a battle. That wasn't the kind of situation where you wanted a full stomach. But you also didn't want to be hypoglycemic, so I made myself eat at least a bit, and got fluids and caffeine. After a few minutes sitting in a park, we just gave up and went out to the meeting point ahead of schedule. It was probably stupid, but I couldn't take another forty minutes of sitting around waiting for the signal to leave.

It was a pretty ragtag collection of people out in the woods. I didn't have a reason to use that word often, and I was savoring this one, if only because it was better than thinking about the implications. As groups of people to trust with my life went, I had to admit this was...less than inspiring. There were some people who were individually very dangerous, sure, but I still really didn't love what I was seeing.

We were the first ones out at the random spot on the access road where we were meeting up, so we got to watch them arrive, and they got to listen to Saori's idea of pre-fight music while they were getting out of their vehicles and getting ready. That was worth showing up early all on its own, really. Seeing the expression on Andrew's face when the werewolf found her playing a power metal song about how we were the wildest wolves of the pack and leading the storm was priceless. A moment later, as the other werewolves started getting out of their two vans, the music switched to a song that wove a few gentle interludes into the middle of significantly heavier metal. I was pretty sure I was the only one who could parse the screaming well enough to realize that the song was about how every moment slipping past was a precious thing you never got back. In context, she was transparently complaining about the wolves being late, and I needed most of the song to get my laughter under control.

The werewolves were the first after us, showing up in two large unmarked vans. Andrew was driving one, Cassie was in the other, and there were two others in skin that I didn't know. The cargo area of each van, meanwhile, was packed with a heap of fur and teeth and hunger. Half a dozen in each, at a guess, so it was sixteen werewolves total. Not the entire pack, only about half of it, but it was still a lot of wolf.

Audgrim showed up next, along with half a dozen humans who looked like a cross between security guards and a paramilitary force. Audgrim himself was wearing actual metal armor, and he had a literal sword belted on, though he was at least also carrying a pistol. There were no full dvergar with him, but that wasn't really very surprising; all things considered, I highly doubted he had the standing to ask for any of them to be here, at the moment.

Jack was right behind him, riding in a car with two other people. One I knew, a sorcerer named Richard who was associated with the Tribe. He was good company, as long as you could overlook the fact that he was completely, sincerely insane. The guy talked to and about fire like it was a living person he was friends with. The other was some woman I didn't recognize at all who burned with gleaming, shivering human magic.

The problem, I reflected idly as people were getting out, stretching, and grabbing various weapons out of various cars, was not exactly that they were incompetent. Far from it; all of the people I actually knew here were quite good at what they did. The problem was that each group *was* very clearly its own individual group. They were keeping a distance from each other, eyeing each other warily. There was zero coordination between them.

Not that I could throw stones, I supposed. I didn't even get out of Saori's car until all of these people had shown up.

A few people split off to do strategy things. It was pretty much who I'd expect: Audgrim, Andrew, Cassie, Jack. The woman who was in the car with Jack also went, and one of the other werewolves in skin, whose name I didn't know. Saori and I drifted over to join them.

"I don't love the terrain," Audgrim was saying, looking out at the forest. "How far are we talking here?"

"At least a mile, maybe up to three," Jack said. "Hard to pin down from here. It'll be a mix of tracking the mages in and following the ley lines on the ground, I think, to find the target."

"Not great. You have any other mages showing up?"

Jack shrugged. "Not sure. This isn't their kind of fight, not most of them. The Tribe are very urban in their focus, and most of them aren't fighters at all, not really. Clueless mages who are out of their element aren't a great idea."

"We have two others coming, I think," the woman said. "Not mages, but possibly useful. They should be here very soon."

"Not enough," Audgrim muttered. "Kyoko. Are you coming with?"

I started, not having expected to actually be involved in the conversation, and then nodded. "Yeah. Think so."

He nodded, sighed. "Wish we had more information. Andrew, do you think any of your people could do some scouting, see what's going on out there?"

The three werewolves looked at each other. Cassie shrugged; the guy whose name I didn't know nodded. Andrew looked back to Audgrim and nodded as well. "Yeah, maybe. Risky, we don't know how good their surveillance is, but it's possible. Be good if we had someone else out too, don't know that any of us can identify much in the way of magic."

Jack grunted. "Yeah. None of us are all that sneaky, though. Hm. Saori, think you could help the wolves with that?"

The kitsune glanced at me, then nodded. "Yeah, that shouldn't be a problem."

“Good. Tell Anderson I want him out there too. He’s ex-Special Forces, he should be able to get some other details.” Audgrim looked back out at the forest, while Saori and the werewolf whose name I still didn’t know peeled off and went to look for Audgrim’s person. I felt uncomfortably exposed, once she was gone, nervous and isolated.

“How long until dusk, do you think?” Jack asked. One hand was toying with what looked like a tire iron hanging from his belt. It figured that someone like Jack Tar wouldn’t use the traditional wands and staves as his magical foci.

Andrew shrugged. “Depends on what you think of as dusk. One to two hours, I’d estimate. New moon tonight, too.” He grimaced. “We won’t be at peak performance. Bad timing for us.”

That hadn’t occurred to me until he said as much. And I wasn’t sure it was intentional on the part of the mages we were here hunting. It seemed like the lunar phase might just be helpful for their ritual. Bad either way, though. I didn’t know why werewolves were beholden to the moon any more than I knew why they were vulnerable to silver. It’s not like actual wolves give a shit about it. But they were, and the new moon wasn’t going to be good for them.

Audgrim sighed. “Yeah. Give it twenty or thirty minutes for the scouts to work, then. I’ve got some topo maps of the area too, let me grab those and we can review them.”

I drifted away from the conversation at that point. I was well aware that turning a topographical map into tactical data was outside my skillset. Somewhat to my surprise, Cassie was stepping away as well, and she wasn’t going over to join the scouts. She wandered off towards the edge of the forest instead, away from any of the others.

On impulse, I followed her. The werewolf stopped at the edge of the trees, far enough down the road that even the werewolves were out of earshot. I didn’t think that was a coincidence, and from how she glanced over her shoulder at me, I was pretty sure I knew why.

“Hey,” I said quietly as I walked up beside her. “Thanks for the help the other day. From what Saori said, you handled it pretty well when I went into that seizure.”

She glanced at me, with a smile that didn’t show teeth. Baring teeth means something very different to a werewolf than a human. “I have my EMT certification. Tonic-clonic seizures were included. Though maybe not quite like that one.”

I laughed a bit. “Yeah. Sounds like. I get the impression you might want to chat about that.”

“What gives you that idea?” She didn’t actually confirm or deny it; she just sounded curious.

I shrugged. “Eh, a lot of little things. You’re not in fur, which, I mean, neither are a few of the others. But Andrew is carrying weapons, and I get the impression he might be going in on two feet. You’re dressed like you’re going to be shifting shortly, though, so why not before you got here? You also seem to be the best tracker in the city, as far as I can tell, so it’s noteworthy that you’re not going in with the scouts. And I noticed that you’re the one who thought quickly enough to take notes about what I was saying during that episode. But the portion you actually understood, in German, those notes are very vague about that section. The

other languages I heard specific phrases, and all I heard about that was that it was about hunting. That's an interesting discrepancy to me."

"You're observant." Cassie said that like it was very high praise. "And you're not wrong. I do want to talk to you about what you were saying. Because it was...I mean, yes, the stuff you said in German was about hunting. But some of the details were concerning to me."

I nodded. Pretty much what I'd been expecting. "How so?"

"It's a little hard to explain." The werewolf was quiet for a moment, apparently trying to phrase something. When she did continue, her voice was a little slower, hesitant. "Some of it doesn't translate very well. You were talking about...mm, about desperation. About the meaning of hunger and what it drives someone to do."

I didn't like that much. "There are a lot of ways to read that one."

"Yeah. I don't like it; it feels...ominous. Similarly, when you said something about the prey wanting to be caught, the tone was just...odd, there was too much of that feeling of desperation in it again. You mentioned hunting accidents twice, and again, the tone was odd, it wasn't *quite* how I would expect someone to talk about that."

I was quiet for a moment. "There have been a lot of people," I said eventually, "who were assassinated using a hunting accident as the cover."

"Yes. There have. And that's why the notes were vague." Cassie sounded distant as she said that, and her eyes were slightly haunted. It made me think about Jack, and how I'd apparently alluded to a story from his past. It made me wonder if this was personal for Cassie. "I don't know if any of that's actually meaningful, or what you were getting at with it, not really. But it seemed like it might be worth mentioning."

I sighed. "Guess we'll find out. Thanks for letting me know, I appreciate it. If that's all, I'll get out of your way."

She was pulling the sundress off by that point, and I was turning away. I had very little issue with nudity; it just didn't register for me in the same way that it did for most people. But watching werewolves change always felt...really uncomfortable to me, on several levels.

It was a very, very unpleasant process, from what every werewolf I'd known had said. It took anywhere from five to fifteen minutes, during which time you could visibly see their body changing. There were bones snapping and moving around under the skin, there were moments where the skin tore and you could see muscles shifting underneath, the general body plan was changing in ways that were often asymmetric and disturbing.

So on one level it was uncomfortable for pretty much anyone to watch. It was a slow, messy, violent process. Bodily fluids got everywhere, there was often some whimpering or snarling involved, and it was an unsettling kind of intimate. Even other werewolves didn't usually like to watch each other changing.

For me, there was also another element, a sort of guilt about how good I had it. I could float between a fully human shape and the more bestial raiju form instantly, with no pain or effort at all. When I was in fur, I still had the ability to use tools, to use language with only

slight difficulty.

And sure, I didn't have all the same advantages either. I didn't seem to be able to reach a fully lupine state, and two legs will never be as fast as four, all else being equal. I didn't have quite as rapid of healing, or quite as much strength. But then, I also had lightning in my veins, wasn't susceptible to silver, and wasn't chained to the moon's cycle. I'd felt something sort of similar occasionally, a euphoric excitement and need to be moving when the moon was full. But it was nowhere remotely close to the same kind of compulsion. So it sort of evened out, even without considering their hellishly painful form of shapeshifting.

I didn't like watching werewolves change. I didn't like changing in front of them, either. It seemed rude to remind them that they had a worse experience of changing forms than any other shapeshifter I was familiar with, by a wide margin.

I could hear Cassie whimpering as I went back to where we'd left the others.

Chapter Twenty-Five

While I was talking with Cassie, the last few people had arrived. One was a woman on a motorcycle I recognized from *Softened Dreams*, but hadn't ever spoken with. I wasn't sure what she was; her magic smelled cold, like snow and wind and the polar night where the sun doesn't rise for weeks and the only light is that of stars and aurora. Definitely not human, but no clue what she actually was.

The last to arrive was a bit more of a surprise. I wasn't sure what I was expecting there, but it definitely wasn't Melissa driving a beat-up old jeep. The fact that she had Capinera in the passenger seat was really just icing on the cake.

I walked over to where they were getting out and grabbing their stuff. "What are you doing out here?" I asked. I was legitimately confused by their presence; I just wouldn't have expected to see either of them out here, wasn't sure who would have even asked them.

Capinera smiled, though it mostly just looked sad. "Lord Cerdinen contacted me. He seemed to think that you were planning something dangerous. It appears he was correct." She looked over to where the others were already prepped and waiting. It looked almost like a picnic, at sufficient distance. But that appearance would fall apart under even a cursory examination. Andrew was the only werewolf still on two feet, confirming my suspicion that he was going to stay that way; he had what looked like modern body armor, though, and a heavy machete, at least one gun. Audgrim in his medieval kit was even more obvious, and his employees looked scary right now, hard men and women with a lot more weaponry than security guards were supposed to carry. Richard was watching the flame of a lighter in a disturbingly intense sort of way.

I supposed I wasn't much better. I still had a fair bit of my stuff in Saori's car, but I was carrying several visible knives, and the shotgun wasn't one that anyone would mistake for a hunting tool.

I sighed. "Why would you want to be here if you know this is dangerous and foolish, though?"

"Because all that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good people do nothing," Capinera said. Her eyes were dark, and her voice was gentle. "And I have killed many things."

I sighed again, and looked at Melissa, who was watching the scene with a strange sort of smile. "I don't suppose you're staying out of things?" I asked hopefully. I didn't think there was much chance of that, but a girl could dream.

"Nope! Definitely not." Her voice, like her smile, was so bright and cheerful that it was a little unsettling. You're not supposed to be that kind of cheerful while anticipating bloody violence. Even the people who *like* bloody violence tend to have a darker tone about them, their joy something savage and bloodthirsty. Melissa just sounded cheerful, and there was no sign of what might be beneath that.

"You do realize this is insane, right?"

"Yes," she said patiently. "But one of my friends is already dead, and a few others are going out there tonight. I would rather you came back." Huh. She'd been friends with Chris, then? It wouldn't have occurred to me.

I nodded, though reluctantly. "Alright then. I'll grab some earplugs for you."

Capinera looked at me curiously. "Do you usually bring earplugs to fights?"

"I bring earplugs almost everywhere," I said dryly. "But yes, also for this specifically. You said that your father was mostly responsible for your education at violence, which suggests to me he wasn't responsible for other things. And if you learned to sing from a banshee, then yes, I'd like to have some earplugs on hand tonight."

She smiled. "Wise. Yes. I'm not a banshee; my song doesn't directly harm anyone. But I am very good at inspiring emotion, and that is a weapon in itself."

"Yeah, got that impression," I said. I remembered very clearly how when Capinera had been singing, every person there was so focused on her and on the emotion in her song that most of them hadn't even noticed me having a tonic-clonic seizure in the same room. "I might be particularly susceptible to that, incidentally. Something to be aware of."

She nodded, and started getting what looked like dark metallic armor out of the vehicle. I turned away. This had already felt stupid, but it was starting to feel *wrong* as well. Capinera had wanted to leave this life behind her. Melissa was broken on a fundamental level, and I was well aware of just how bad tonight might be for her, how it might interact with her existing traumas. Dragging those two into this mess felt deeply wrong, even if they were volunteering.

But Capinera was presumably good at what she did. And while I didn't think Melissa was actually an experienced fighter, I knew some of what she could do thanks to Serket's influence on her bloodline. The scorpion goddess was not someone to antagonize lightly. And we were not in a position to refuse help offered, right now. I didn't even try.

I turned and walked away. I got a phone call as I did, and answered without looking, grateful for the distraction. That gratitude evaporated almost immediately, though. Caleb was the last person I wanted to be talking to right now. Possibly literally.

"Hey, Kyoko. How's it going?" He sounded stressed, and tired, and he sounded very old. Human lives were such a brief flame, a candle with a very short wick. We were almost the same age, but he was into middle age and I was barely more than a child by the standards of raiju. And those of most of the other people here, for that matter.

I sighed. "It's going. You?"

"I've been worse. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

He was, but I had no idea how to explain that. How could I describe the things he was interrupting in a way that would make sense to him? It wasn't even just that he was human. Even if I stripped out all the supernatural elements, this wasn't an event he could understand. Caleb was sheltered; he'd never been in a physical fight that I was aware of, never seen someone die. How on earth could I explain what I was about to be doing?

I didn't know what to say, how to explain that he was interrupting at a terribly awkward time. And it wasn't like there was anything for me to be doing right at the moment. "I'll have to go in a few minutes," I said, after an awkwardly long pause. "But not immediately. What's up?"

"Oh, not a lot. I'm just a little worried about you, I guess. Haven't heard much from you recently."

I sighed. Of course he was checking in on me. I'd probably missed another message from him in the past few days. Caleb was the type to fret. This would all be so much easier, in many ways, if he were an asshole. But the same qualities that made him a good friend were at this point making it hard to stay friends with him at all. "I've been busy. Haven't had a lot of free time lately." I wasn't sure if I was lying.

"I figured. Anything I can help with?"

I laughed, though it came out very bitter. "No. I don't think so."

"Kyoko, you don't sound great. Are you sure you're okay?"

I thought about Melissa, a broken girl with wounds too deep for healing who was about to risk her life, largely because of me. I thought about the fact that I was planning to help kill people in a few minutes. I remembered a guy who tried to stab me on the street, and how little I'd cared. I'd beaten the shit out of him, made a point of terrifying him, and then handed him off to someone else like a package delivered to the wrong address. I didn't know what had happened after that, hadn't bothered checking what Audgrim ended up doing with him. And I remembered, too, old times, visits I'd paid to people who owed money to an organized crime family. The bloodbath that had marked the end of my time in Japan.

The silence had dragged on too long. And when I looked over to the forest, I saw that the scouts were filtering out of the trees. My break was over.

"No," I said quietly. "I'm not sure I've ever been okay."

And then I hung up, and I went to join the monsters I called friends.

"Okay, so what are we looking at here?" Audgrim said, once the werewolf had finished changing back to skin to report his part of the reconnaissance. Pack empathy was handy, but it wasn't words, and we needed a little more detail for this. The change was slower than usual, and looked especially painful. It probably was; my understanding was that changing too many times in a short window made the experience worse.

"Well, it's definitely the right place," Saori said. "And they brought troops. Forest is crawling with constructs. They aren't too bright and this model doesn't look too tough, but there are a lot of them in there."

I grimaced at that. It wasn't wholly unexpected. Constructs—artificial beings animated with magic and given just enough mind to carry out basic orders—were a popular choice of minion as I understood it. They weren't people, and they weren't bright enough to do anything complicated or make decisions. But they were cheap, disposable, and you didn't have to worry about their loyalty in the slightest.

Not unexpected. But it complicated things.

"That's going to be an issue," Andrew said. "We can probably take them, but the numbers might be a problem, especially in rough terrain like this. If they come at us from behind while we're already fighting, it'll go badly for us."

"Yeah." Jack sounded slightly grim. "How many humans, do you know?"

The werewolf shrugged. "Between me and the army guy we got at least eight different sets of tracks. Might be missing some; we had to be pretty cautious to not get caught and get back on time."

"Not all of them are mages, though," Saori noted. "We got an actual look at one of them, and he's probably a mercenary. Had a couple of talismans, but I don't think any power of his own. Thought about taking him out but didn't want to risk alerting them yet."

"That's the right call, yeah," Andrew said. "So, bunch of constructs, at least four or five humans supervising them, and at least four mages. Not ideal. Robert, did you pick up the nonhuman scent we found before?"

"No," the other werewolf, whose name was apparently Robert, replied. "Not even a little bit."

Audgrim nodded. "Hopefully they're not here in person, then. Your wolves got a good sample of some of the mages, right? Think they can follow that?"

"Yeah, definitely." Andrew was showing teeth, but that wasn't a smile. "And that trail probably leads to the tree. Lot better odds than searching this whole area of forest."

"My thought exactly." Audgrim was quiet for a moment, considering. "We'll have to move pretty quick. I think we're going to want to have my people hanging back to keep the constructs from flanking us. They aren't up for the main event anyway; they're good, but they aren't soldiers."

"Some of the wolves too," Andrew agreed. "They have better mobility. Might want one of the mages with that group in case they run into something more in that area."

Jack nodded. "Alice is probably best for that. She's a wizard, much better at prepared work and defense than rapid aggression. And from what I hear Rebecca is pretty mobile, too, more of a hit-and-run girl. She'll be more useful there as well."

Audgrim nodded, decisively. "Sounds like a plan. Let's get moving."

It was a relatively large group of us leading the attack, and oddly enough, almost everyone I actually knew was in it. Derek had solicited some ear scratches and a hug before going to join the rear guard, but pretty much everyone else I knew was coming with the main force. Melissa had no weapons, and probably needed none, though I'd made sure she at least had a knife on her. Capinera and Audgrim looked both threatening and absurd, wrapped in metal armor and carrying actual swords. Andrew was there, as were Cassie and two other wolves in fur I didn't recognize. Jack was carrying the tire iron I'd noticed before, and his posture made it very clear it was a deadly weapon in his hands. Richard's eyes were full of fire.

And Saori....

I stared at the kitsune. "Is that armor?"

She grinned at me. "Yep," she said, sounding a bit smug. "Scale armor with kevlar lining. Custom made." She pulled the helmet on. It had a vaguely demonic visage, and like the rest of her kit, it had a very samurai look to it. She even had a wakizashi belted on, though at least she was also carrying a light rifle and what looked suspiciously like grenades.

I rolled my eyes at her. "You people are insane." I stuck close by her as we started out into the forest, though, and I had to admit the presence of so many extremely armed people was comforting right now.

As we'd been warned, it was a pretty dense forest. Pittsburgh's environment is practically a temperate rainforest, and the vegetation in this area was thick. There were no established trails, and we were left with little beyond game paths to work with. The wolves were in front to catch the scent of the mages, but Andrew and Audgrim were following directly behind, mostly so they could cut the bushes back where that was needed. It made it quicker for the rest of us following them.

There was no longer any effort being made for stealth. There was no point, not with this many people. This was an open assault now, not an infiltration of any kind. I felt nervous, agitated; I kept checking and rechecking that I had the various knives, that they were clear and I could draw them quickly. The shotgun I had slung across my chest on a heavy nylon strap; its weight was unfamiliar, a constant reminder of what we were doing. I was vaguely glad that I wasn't human, that the raiju blood lent me so much strength and endurance beyond what a human of my build would have. This would have been exhausting otherwise, a heavy load and a long hike through rough terrain. As it was, it was mostly just tedious, and the leather was too warm. I couldn't fathom how the people in armor were tolerating it.

We were quiet as we walked. Nobody wanted to talk right now; it was too important that we hear anyone approaching. The wolves had apparently found the scent they were looking for easily, because their movement had become very purposeful, and I could read the anticipation in how they held themselves. Lupine ears and tails are very expressive, once you learn to pay attention to them. Cassie in particular I noticed. She was smaller than a lot of werewolves, lean and quick, making her easy to recognize. And she was *eager*, was hungry for this.

Occasionally, I got a glimpse of the peripheral escorts. A wolf would be visible through the trees, for just a moment. I spotted one of Audgrim's people, waiting patiently on a nearby hill where she had good sight lines. The motorcyclist who smelled like a glacier, whose name was Rebecca from what Jack had said, dropped in on us twice to report. Even without the frozen feeling of her signature, I'd have known she wasn't human now. She moved through the trees too gracefully, a long, loping stride that reminded me of the wolves. They'd found two small groups of constructs, she said, and destroyed both. No sign of humans, but our presence was definitely not a secret. No magical defenses so far.

Minutes ticked past. The tension built. And then, suddenly, the wolves stopped. So did the rest of us, for obvious reasons. After a moment, Andrew murmured, "Company ahead. At

least two mercenaries, at least a dozen constructs. Looks like they're hoping for an ambush. I am inclined to disappoint them."

"Yes," Audgrim said simply, and then we were moving again, but it wasn't even pretending to be a normal hike now. It was a bunch of armed lunatics about to intentionally spring an ambush.

It was finally showtime.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I was not prepared for what came next.

In some ways, I had been overconfident, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that my opinion of myself had been lower than was warranted. It was true that I had been around violence a lot of times. It was true that there were periods of my life where it felt normal. It was even true that some of those fights had escalated far enough that I'd seen people getting killed.

But what I was discovering now was that those had been, well, *fights*. Many had been pretty much just brawls between vanilla humans. Some had involved other creatures—werewolves a few times, Audgrim and once another dvergr, mages—but they were still relatively small in scale. They had been solidly something you would call a fight.

What I discovered now was that this had not remotely prepared me for what I had to imagine counted as a small battle, or at the very least a skirmish.

The wolves in fur had already peeled off to the sides, using their much greater mobility to flank the group planning to ambush us. It was Jack in the lead now, with Richard on one side and Melissa on the other. I didn't love that, but I had to admit the reasoning was sound. The mages were scary people, but they didn't *look* scary to a human. Jack looked like a random homeless guy. Richard looked like someone really should have known better than to let him out of the psych ward, but not in a way that was threatening. Melissa was a very ordinary-looking girl as well, and showed zero signs of worry about the upcoming ambush.

It was, I thought absently, convenient. When you want to avoid giving away the fact that you know about an ambush, not having the capacity for a normal fear response is less bug than feature.

They looked harmless. We were counting on that to keep the mercenaries from responding quickly enough. They would want to catch someone more valuable in the ambush zone before they lost the advantage of surprise. It worked, too; they were a fair ways forward, and the rest of us had started moving, before anything happened.

And then things started happening very, very quickly.

The first few seconds of the ambush were a chaotic, confusing mess. The first sign I had that anything was happening was the sound of gunfire, a quick chattering burst that was so loud it hurt even through the earplugs I'd brought. I knew enough to be worried about that; it suggested both automatic weapons and the discipline to use them in careful, aimed ways rather than spray-and-pray fire. Both suggested these mercenaries were serious, competent fighters.

At least one bullet glanced off of Audgrim's armor as he was moving up. Another burst, I was pretty sure, hit Jack and just...stopped. His coat looked like nothing much, but that fabric had to have been reinforced with magic so heavily that it was better armor than what Audgrim was wearing.

Jack was turning towards a stand of trees to the right. For no other reason than that, as the group moved forward and carried me along, I focused towards the left side of the path. I saw a flood of constructs bursting out of the trees there, at least ten of the things. They were the size of a human, and roughly the same shape, but that was where the resemblance stopped. Their bodies were made of some blocky grey material I didn't recognize, their heads existed only to hold wide mouths full of shark-like teeth, and their arms ended in large claws. They were created for violence, and it showed; they couldn't do anything else with that body plan.

They were surging forward. I had grabbed the shotgun already without really noticing it. Saori was next to me, and she'd gone for the wakizashi rather than the gun, perhaps thinking the close range made that the smarter choice. She was laughing, and it sounded like golden flame and madness. There was someone screaming out in the trees, where the werewolves were running amok.

The constructs reached us in a wave, chaotic and clumsy. Saori moved out into their midst, and while she was also chaotic, she was anything but clumsy. The kitsune was quicker and more agile than any human I'd ever seen, and she was dancing in the middle of the fight. I had no other description. Her footwork made the act a dance, and her laughter made it a celebration. She slipped between the claws of the constructs, letting their attacks miss by a hair while she retaliated with quick, light slashes.

One of the constructs was in front of me now. My aim was better than I'd expected, and the shotgun was not a terribly light firearm. The shot mostly all hit the construct, and there was enough momentum to knock it back. But not, I realized, to do much else. Wounds that would kill a human meant nothing to the constructs. They didn't bleed; they didn't, couldn't, care. And so almost as soon as it hit the ground, that construct was back up.

Saori had the right idea. She was able to take limbs off with two or three quick slashes, and once removed from the main body, they were inanimate. I was snarling as I dropped the shotgun, letting it fall back to my chest, reached for a knife. I saw fur on my hand as I did, saw sparks of emerald electricity within it. Another burst of gunfire was almost deafening, but I had no idea where it was aimed; someone could have shot me and I wouldn't have even known until I was on the ground bleeding. Behind me, an enormously loud crashing noise drowned it out entirely, deafening me.

The construct was back up and coming at me. It might have been a different one; it was hard to tell. I was not nearly as graceful or as skilled as Saori, but they were clumsy and had no real intellect to speak of. I managed to duck under its claws, inside its reach, and the knife I'd grabbed was one of my largest, a heavy steel Bowie knife that was more than up to the task.

I stabbed the construct harder than I'd quite meant to, frantic in the moment. The knife went clear through its torso. Though that might have just been the nature of the thing I was stabbing; they seemed to have very little internal structure. There were no bones that I could tell, no differentiated tissue at all, just a solid mass of something a little softer than wood. I stepped forward and pushed, lifting it off the ground and slashing it open as I tossed it back. It didn't stand back up. Apparently cutting it open from the midpoint to the edge of its torso was enough damage to disrupt the enchantment on it.

I didn't see any more constructs still up. There was no more gunfire, either. The skirmish had only lasted a handful of seconds. I was breathing hard, more from reaction than exertion, and my hearing was still shot. I took a moment to catch my breath, looking around at the aftermath.

It was hard to tell how many constructs we'd just put down. Most of them were in pieces, which made it hard to count. I thought close to twenty. And there were at least a few humans dead as well. Cassie was jogging out of the copse of trees I'd been facing, and there was a *lot* of blood on her fur, most concentrated on her muzzle and face. And in the other direction, it was...I wasn't sure what had happened. But there was a whole stand of trees that had been crushed to the ground, their trunks splintered, and I could see a whole lot of shimmering human magic in the air.

I didn't know the exact mechanism involved. But I was pretty sure Jack had brought down that entire cluster of trees on top of someone and I highly doubted they were lucky enough to survive the experience. I gulped a little, and reminded myself not to piss him off.

On the whole, I thought, we'd done fairly well in that exchange. One of the wolves was limping, and Melissa appeared to have taken a glancing hit from one of the claws, barely enough to draw blood. I could see the traces of anxiety in her posture now, but she was still grinning, so the fear hadn't reached the kind of extreme state that she could actually recognize. Nobody else seemed to have been injured at all.

We started moving again almost immediately. The skirmish had only even delayed us by a few moments. No one seemed terribly stressed. Hell, I was pretty sure that Cassie, Richard, and Saori were all more relaxed than they had been before.

The latter dropped back to walk next to me as we got moving. "Hey there," the kitsune said, quietly so as not to get in the way of hearing anything coming. My hearing was starting to recover, enough at least to understand her, and I could hear the grin in her voice. "You did pretty good there."

I snorted. "I took one construct out. You killed, what, eight of them?"

"Six," she corrected. "Andrew got the other four on that side. But I'm a violent lunatic, remember? Not the best benchmark. You stayed calm, you responded in an effective way, and you contributed to the fight. I'd say you did pretty good."

I was still dubious about that. My performance had been enough that I was an asset rather than a liability, but when I compared it to what our heavy hitters were capable of, it was unimpressive at best. Saori had taken down half a dozen of the constructs, Cassie seemed to have killed at least one person in just a few seconds, and Jack was a force of nature. Hell, even Richard looked to have incinerated at least four or five constructs with tight, precise bursts of flame. Next to that, it was hard to see why I was even here.

But it wasn't worth arguing, and we needed to be quiet. So I just forced a smile, and said, "Thanks. I'll try to keep up better next time."

Saori laughed, but she wasn't done. "You doing alright? Lot of noise and movement back there. Don't want you getting overloaded."

"It's fine," I said, somewhat stiffly. And then, because she seemed to be sincerely concerned, I elaborated a bit. "Violence doesn't seem to affect me that way. I don't know why, but it doesn't."

That was true. I didn't even feel overstimulated after this skirmish. Dissociated, and I definitely had some adrenaline going still, but there was none of the sick, overwhelmed feeling of sensory overload. I'd been in fights under worse circumstances, and it had never been a problem, never pushed me towards a seizure. If anything, it might have done the opposite; there had been one brawl in a club with seriously unfortunate taste in lighting, and I'd come out of it less sick than I started.

I didn't know the rules, but I could track patterns. I wasn't sure I liked the implications of this one. Maybe Saori could pick up on that, because she nodded, and she didn't ask further. She stuck close to me, though, and that was a comfort of sorts.

Over the next half-hour or so, there were two more skirmishes. Both were as quick and efficient as the first. The second encounter barely even counted; we spotted them well in advance, and they only had ten constructs total. A small group consisting of Saori, Capinera, a few of the werewolves, and Rebecca swept through them in a preemptive strike, and the rest of us never even got involved. Most of the constructs were on the ground in pieces, either neatly severed by Saori's wakizashi or ragged where they were ripped apart by the wolves. There were two humans with that group, and both were dead now, very dead. The first guy appeared to have taken a rapier through the heart without having had enough time to get a shot off. The latter...well, Cassie had more blood on her, and there was a lot more on the ground, most of it frozen into creepy red ice on the grass. But the body was nowhere to be found.

I quietly made a note not to piss off either Capinera or Rebecca, either. The first still seemed sad and quietly resolute, but she hadn't hesitated a moment before killing that guy, and it only *took* her a moment. The latter felt like snow and death and hunger, and while I didn't know what she was or what she'd done, I was impressed by it regardless. She went back to the rear guard after that, and I saw her occasionally, a pale, cold shadow drifting through the trees. I felt both more and less safe, knowing she was out there, knowing what she could do.

That was, I thought, a sentiment I had about too many of the people around me right now. I'd known these were dangerous people, sure. But it's one thing to know that, and another thing to *see* it.

The third skirmish was a little messier, but not a lot. They had more constructs this time, a lot more, and we couldn't count on the mobile attackers to get through that many before they could retaliate. So it was a frontal assault, and it was messy. I ended up in the front line again, but this time I had at least slightly more idea what to expect, and I managed it better. I didn't bother trying to shoot the constructs, just slammed into them with a knife and more pent-up aggression than I'd realized I was carrying.

I ended up fighting with Andrew on one side of me and Saori on the other, and I was at this point every bit as savage as either of them. I truly would not have guessed that I had this much aggression and frustration built up. Now that I was in a position where I could express it, though, it was hard to deny. It felt *good* to have a problem that I could resolve so simply, and in

my own way I was reveling in it as much as Saori was.

The first construct that came at me that time was so slow, so clumsy. Even by human standards it was clumsy, and there was very little about me that was human in that moment. I slipped to the side around its claws, pulled it off balance with one hand, and then hit it with the other. It was not really very different from how I'd taken down the human before, the one who attacked me with a cheap knife on the street near my house.

Except this time I had a knife in my own hand, and no reason to hold back. The strike was very smooth, with good form and momentum. I stabbed it *hard* around where the stomach would be on a human, lifting it a few inches from the ground and tossing it back into two others. This time I followed up on the strike, moving up to attack the two that I'd just knocked off balance. It felt like I had all the time in the world as I stepped around one of them and slashed at its neck, and that slash literally decapitated it, the knife sticking into its opposite shoulder afterwards. Decapitation seemed to be enough to destroy them.

The angle was bad, though, and as it fell I had no leverage; its weight dragged the knife out of my hand. I didn't care. I stepped over it as it was still falling, as the third construct was just starting to get its balance back, and I lunged at that one too. I was unarmed, but I was so much more than human, and it was so much less. I got inside its effective reach before it could bring its claws to bear, pressed up tight against it.

I had other knives, but in the heat of the moment, I didn't reach for any of them. I just lunged forward and bit at the construct's throat. My teeth were not as sharp as a werewolf's, perhaps, and my jaws were not as strong, did not open as wide. But I was a beast of the storm in that moment, and they were sharp enough and strong enough to do the job. I ripped its throat out and rode it down to the ground, landing in a tangled pile of limbs. I kept tearing at its throat until it stopped moving. It didn't take long.

The skirmish was over by the time I stood back up. There had been thirty or so constructs, and I had to wonder how the mages could afford so many, how they'd transported them all here. Constructs were a favorite tool of the supernatural world because they were cheap and easy, sure, and these seemed particularly fragile, cheaply made. But even cheap constructs added up. We'd taken down over fifty of the things now. I could hear howling in the woods around us, as well, and from the set of Cassie's ears I knew what it meant. The wolves and the gunmen who were pacing us had found another group as well, and they had dealt with it.

So many. A hundred constructs, a dozen mercenaries at least. Everything about this screamed that it was a scale well beyond my ability to fully understand, that the mages responsible had serious resources to throw at this operation. It felt surreal, so wildly out of proportion to the small, innocuous attacks that they'd opened with.

Saori walked up to me while I was standing back up and collecting my knife. She was laughing, and she sounded delighted, eager. "Seriously, you're hot when you're messy," she told me, and I got the distinct impression that if she were not wearing a helmet the kitsune would be kissing me to feel my teeth with her tongue.

Should I feel bad about what I'd just done? I didn't really think so. These constructs were

nothing like people, not even anything like animals. They had no identity, no mind at all. There was no blood, just a taste like wet cardboard in my mouth. It would be like getting upset about killing tofu. I'd literally encountered computer programs I would feel more guilt about terminating than these things, and they weren't even particularly advanced programs.

And besides, Saori had been shooting. I could smell it on her, the residue of the gunpowder. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she hadn't been shooting the constructs, and the mercenaries behind them had gone down very quickly this time. The kitsune was hardly in a position to judge, even if this were something to feel guilt over.

And so I just grinned at her, with bits of grey construct-material stuck in my teeth. "Told you I'd do better the next time," I said.

"You did," she agreed, laughing. "And you did."

The grin faded. We kept moving. There was a lot of forest still to go.

It was inevitable that the run of good luck we'd had would break. I was already waiting for it. We'd gotten three good fights in a row. I was aware that the people around me were dangerous, and aware as well that the people and constructs we were fighting were essentially just cannon fodder. It wasn't meaningful, really, that we'd been winning so far.

Still, three good fights in a row was three more than my life had taught me to expect, and I was already waiting for things to go wrong. Some of the others were, too; I could see the tense anticipation in Andrew's spine, smell a sort of cold anxiety hanging around Jack, feel calm, quiet dread in Audgrim's aura. Cassie and Saori were still very obviously reveling in the violence, and Capinera's sad, detached calm hadn't budged. Many of us, though, were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And yet when it did we were still caught completely off guard. Maybe the last few skirmishes had been so easy that we'd gotten complacent. Maybe it was that we were excited. The wolves were at this point sure that we were not only on the right trail, but also just a short ways away from our targets, the scent quite fresh now. Or hell, maybe it was just that this was a much more clever ploy, and we weren't expecting cleverness from these people.

Regardless, we didn't see it coming. The first warning any of us had was when constructs started to burst out of the ground under our feet. They must have dug themselves in and then waited for us to walk over them, perfectly patient. It wasn't like they needed to breathe, and while they were mindless, they could follow commands.

There were only around fifteen of them, but this time they were the ones who had the advantage of surprise and position. People were shouting, stumbling and falling. Constructs were reaching up to drag them down to the waiting claws and teeth below. Here, the lack of coordination between us was much more telling. There was no organized response, no immediate and disciplined adjustment to the situation. It was just chaos.

I managed to keep my feet, as did a few others. Saori was too graceful to be tripped so easily, the wolves had four feet, and while Andrew did go down, that didn't work out so great for the constructs who pulled him down to the ground. In that tight melee, the werewolf's

sheer strength was terrifying, and he wasted no time at all before starting to dismember the constructs under him.

But Audgrim, Melissa, the mages, and one of the werewolves were down and struggling to get back up. Capinera was able to recover more quickly, but she'd lost the rapier. It was chaos. I danced away from the nearest construct before it could rip my legs open, but I didn't have a good angle to counterattack. I kicked one of them away hard enough to wreck its arm, and put a knife into another, but it was a chaotic mess and I couldn't do much.

And right about then was when the mercenaries, who must have been waiting for this, opened fire on us. I had to admit I was somewhat impressed; they'd somehow managed to avoid detection by the wolves, and that was hard as hell to do. Some small part of me found the time to respect them for that.

The rest of me was already dropping to the ground, intentionally. Standing up made me a really attractive target right about now, and I was pretty sure my reinforced leather jacket would not be up to stopping rifle rounds. So I went down in a violent, frenetic whirl. There were maybe five to seven constructs still active. In my first ten seconds on the ground, I lost two knives, at least one of which was broken beyond repair; sprained my left wrist; and disabled three constructs. I thought that was pretty good, all things considered.

Bullets were still flying, though. Saori was returning fire, and I was pretty sure I'd heard a man scream, so she was doing it fairly well. I could smell a lot of blood, and burning flesh. I realized I was at the edge of the melee, and pushed myself to my feet again, looking around. I was disoriented, struggling to keep up with what was going on. Abruptly, I saw one of the gunmen, a human who looked to be about thirty and very serious. He wasn't far from me at all. He saw me at the same time, and started to bring his rifle around to shoot me.

I lunged for him. He was disciplined, but I was terrifying, a bloody, nightmarish blend of wolf and woman with lightning dancing in my fur. He flinched, just the tiniest bit, before he got the shot off.

I was already falling to the side by then, and between that and the flinch, he missed. Not by enough for comfort, but he missed. And my feint had achieved what I wanted it to: For just a moment, all of his attention had been focused on me.

Capinera stepped up behind him in that moment and shoved him. He stumbled forward, off balance, and a hand reached up from the ground to grab his wrist. After a moment, I recognized it as Melissa's, and I had just enough time to both feel protective fury welling up inside me, and feel kinda sorry for him.

Melissa was still smiling, but it didn't look happy now. This had finally gotten through to her, though I suspected she still wouldn't be able to tell whether she was frightened, angry, or both. And she wasn't carrying a weapon, but she didn't really need one, either.

Melissa was a sweet girl. I considered her a dear friend, and I both trusted and cared about her deeply. But I knew what she was capable of. The venom in her blood was more diluted than the storm in mine, but that fact was a little deceptive. Because Serket was a *much* stronger source than a rajju, and even dilute, that heritage was enough to be kind of terrifying. Melissa could be very scary when she wanted to. Or, on occasion, even when she

didn't.

As she grabbed his wrist, I felt a sudden surge of power, a magic that burned like venom on my fingertips and tasted like taking a bite out of a habanero, old and harsh and *strong*. And the man's skin under her fingers started to blister and peel. He tried to straighten up again, but his legs were already starting to lose muscle control, and he fell. Within just a few seconds, he was largely paralyzed aside from occasional convulsions.

I wasn't entirely sure what Melissa did to people. The convulsions and paralysis had a strong resemblance to deathstalker venom, which made sense for the scion of a scorpion goddess. But the local blistering didn't resemble scorpion venom much at all, and I was quite sure this wasn't actually mediated by a toxin; it was closer to the magically-induced necrosis used by one of the mages we were here hunting. I'd also only seen her do this trick twice before, so it wasn't as though I'd studied the effects.

But I was pretty sure that guy wasn't going to be getting back up.

The fight seemed to be over now. There were a couple constructs still moving, but they'd all lost multiple limbs, and Andrew was going around finishing them off. He finished off the paralyzed man as well, which I was grateful for. Slowly suffocating while paralyzed was an awful way to die. I stood up again and looked around, taking stock and figuring out what had happened.

It looked like there had been four humans involved, all of them mercenaries. We still hadn't seen any mages, which troubled me. Of those four, one went down when Melissa grabbed him, and a second looked to have caught a couple of rounds from Saori's rifle in the face. The last two...were really only visible as charred skeletons, lying in the middle of a patch of smoldering vegetation. Richard had blasted them pretty hard, and was now sitting at the edge of the smoldering area talking to the flames. In a drier forest, we'd have to worry about the fire spreading, but I wasn't too concerned here; it would be easy enough to smother it before it could get out of control, once we talked Richard into letting us.

The victory this time hadn't been without cost, though. Richard himself had taken a heavy slash to the shoulder, and while he wasn't dead, he was definitely bleeding. One of the wolves had taken two rounds to the torso, and they weren't healing right. Charged silver ammunition, I was pretty sure, which meant they weren't getting better any time soon. They might live, werewolves were pretty tough, but they were done for today. Another wolf wasn't as lucky; she'd gotten tagged in the throat at least once with silver, and she was already dead. Melissa had fallen badly and broken her wrist, and there was a long, nasty laceration on her thigh from one of the constructs.

I went and sat next to her while people were regrouping. "Heya, honeybee," I said gently. "Are you alright?"

Obviously, the answer was no, given that she was seriously injured. But that wasn't the question I was asking, and Melissa knew that. She considered for a few moments, and then, in a rather hesitant tone, said, "I'm not sure. I think probably not. But not quite sure. I feel a bit blurry."

I nodded. It was to be expected. This was a very stressful situation for her, and she'd

probably been having rolling flashbacks for the past hour, even before she was injured. Honestly, the fact that she was still in touch with reality enough to have a conversation was a testament to the intense effort she'd made to heal from what happened to her. Eight years ago, shortly after we rescued her from that monster, she wouldn't have been able to last fifteen minutes under this kind of stress before the flashbacks lapsed into hallucinatory hellscape.

Still, it meant she was also done for today. Even aside from the wounds, if she was starting to lapse into that state bringing her along would be extremely stupid. When Melissa lost track of what was real, she was a danger to herself and everyone around her. It was just the reality of her situation.

"You did really well back there," I said, still in that gentle tone. "I'm sorry you had to do that, but you did a really good job of keeping me safe. Thank you."

She was beaming at that. It was touching to see such overt pride and happiness from her, and also a little sad. Melissa's emotional displays were so much clearer, and her emotions so much easier for her to actually *feel*, when she was stressed almost to the breaking point like this. She shouldn't have to suffer so much for that, shouldn't have to push herself to the edge to just feel proud of doing something well.

"Your leg looks a little nasty, though," I continued. "Is it okay if I take a look at it and maybe bandage it for you?"

She hesitated at that. It wasn't an easy question for her, I knew. And I wasn't by any stretch of the imagination a great medic. I had bandages in my bag, sure, but I was certain there were at least a couple people here who could do a better job. They might be able to set the broken wrist, for example, which I couldn't. She just couldn't let them. Melissa's issues with touch were so extreme that even just letting someone she trusted give her basic medical care was a strain; a stranger was out of the question, especially right now.

"I think so?" she said after a long pause. Then, slightly more firmly, "I think so. It would be a good idea."

"Thanks. I'm proud of you." I dug out what few medical supplies I had, and started to look at the cut. It wasn't a terrible one, all things considered. Nasty, painful, and bloody, but it hadn't clipped any major vessels and it wasn't as deep as I'd initially feared. And Melissa was pretty hardy. I was guessing she'd be fine. I still took the time to disinfect it and bandage her up, as gently as I could. Some of the others were discussing how to proceed now, but I tuned it out. We were far outside my area of expertise now, and I knew I had no real idea what to do.

So I did what I could. I patched my friend up as best I could within our respective limitations, and then sat on the grass next to her. After a few moments, Saori came and sat with us, and Capinera was standing not far away. I was guessing neither of them had much relevant expertise, either.

So we waited. I looked at the dead wolf in the grass, and felt an odd kind of detached sadness. I wondered whether I would recognize her human form, whether we'd seen each other before today. I was sure it wasn't someone I actually *knew*, but we might have passed each other like ships in the night at some point. She hadn't reverted to human form upon death, that wasn't how it worked. Lycanthropy wasn't a curse that you could break to reveal a human

underneath. It was more of a blueprint, an alternative magical signature that overwrote the human one and reshaped the person to suit, and that kind of restructuring couldn't be reverted. Some of the myths had werewolves returning to their natural form upon death, but that just wasn't how it worked; this was as much her natural form as the other would be.

I'd never met her. Now I never would. That was just how things were.

I sat in the grass, holding Saori's hand for comfort, wishing I could offer the same comfort to Melissa on my other side. Wishing that time really did heal all wounds, and that there weren't some stains too deep to ever really come clean. I watched the sunset paint the sky with bloody gold, and listened to the mournful howling of wolves.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was a smaller group, now, that was pushing on through the forest. One of the wolves was dead, and as I understood it the escorts watching our collective back had also suffered losses, a wolf to a silver bullet and two of Audgrim's people to constructs. Richard's shoulder was cut badly, and also dislocated. He had to retreat; there was just no point in dragging him onward, he'd get killed without accomplishing much. Similarly, Melissa was in no state to be fighting, and while the wolf who took two silver bullets in the chest was still alive, they'd be lucky to stay that way even with treatment and rest.

So, we were down people. Losing Richard, in particular, was an issue; the pyromancer was our biggest single threat after Jack, I was pretty sure. At least against groups. I wouldn't bet on him in single combat against, say, Andrew or Capinera, but when it came to wiping out whole swathes of people in an instant, it was hard to beat fire magic. It was going to be harder to get through the swarms of constructs without him.

Andrew and Cassie conferred briefly, then had another two wolves join us. That left the rear guard rather sparse, particularly given that the group of wounded needed an escort to get out of the forest safely. Audgrim had wanted to have them chance it, arguing that Richard was still capable of defending them and most of the constructs behind us were already destroyed. Then he saw the wolves, Jack, Capinera, and me all just staring at him in a very unimpressed way. He knew better than to keep pushing at that point.

So, there were two more wolves with us, both in fur. I recognized one but didn't know her name. Several other werewolves, two of Audgrim's thugs, and the Tribe wizard—her name was Alice, I remembered suddenly—were all retreating as well. They would probably have needed to anyway, most of them. My understanding was that they'd run into a group where both of the humans supervising the constructs were minor mages, and while Alice had dealt with that, it hadn't come free.

I was almost glad for that. I'd been getting increasingly creeped out by how much magic wasn't being thrown at us. Those two were still mercenaries, almost certainly; Alice said they were nowhere near strong enough to be the ringleaders, and the wolves didn't recognize their scent. But it was at least confirmation that not *all* of the magic out here was concentrated at the tree.

So, overall, it was a smaller group pushing on. We were almost there, the wolves were certain of that from how fresh the scent was now. But the cannon fodder had done their job. We'd lost some people, and more than that, the ones who were still present were tired. We'd been hiking through the forest with intermittent fighting for an hour now, and that was exhausting. I could feel the fatigue in my back and shoulders. Jack hadn't thrown any punches quite as hard as that first blast that took out a whole stand of trees at once, but he'd still been doing some heavy lifting, and it showed. He looked strained. I'd sprained my wrist fairly badly, all of the werewolves had minor but noticeable injuries, Audgrim was tired, and Saori was getting worn out from all the hiking. We found one more group of constructs as we went, and

while the kitsune was still dancing through the melee and reveling in the violence, she wasn't quite as quick or graceful now. Some of the constructs actually connected, and she had to rely on the armor to stop the claws.

This was, I thought, probably all that the mages had been expecting. They'd thrown a hundred and fifty constructs and at least a dozen trained, well-equipped human mercenaries at us. And all they'd even been trying to do was slow us down and wear us out a bit. Both the resources and the callous disdain for the lives of their employees this plan implied were disturbing to me.

The sun was out of sight and we were walking in the dim, grey forest twilight when I felt magic and stopped. The wolves and Jack stopped too, and we were all turning to face the same direction. We were walking next to a hill; up ahead, that hill became a cliff face, impassable. But I could see a small opening in the rock, likely leading into a pocket canyon. And from that opening, I could feel corrupted human magic. After a few moments, I also heard voices from inside, faint but noticeable.

"We're here," Andrew said. It wasn't necessary, but I guess sometimes there are things that someone has to say even though everyone already knows. "Get ready."

I dropped my backpack with some relief. I was glad I'd brought it. The medical supplies had been handy, the water had been helpful in this heat, and while I hadn't needed the wilderness survival gear, it was good to have on hand. But I was tired, and it was heavy, and it would just get in the way now.

All around me, people were drawing weapons. Audgrim and Capinera had their swords drawn, his a shorter, heavier blade that looked capable of both slashing and thrusting. It sort of fit their respective looks in general. Her armor was some matte black material, flexible and form-fitting; her weapon was a silvery rapier, light and long. In her own way, Capinera was as much a dancer on the battlefield as Saori, though of a very different kind. The kitsune seemed to favor baiting enemies into overextending and punishing them for it a piece at a time. It was skillful, graceful, and more than a little cruel. Capinera was similarly graceful but her fights were over in mere moments.

Audgrim looked nothing like a dancer. He looked like a large man in heavy steel armor (I truly couldn't imagine how he'd managed this hike in that) with a sword.

Andrew had what looked like a heavy machete in one hand and a comparably heavy pistol in the other. Jack was holding that tire iron and he was wreathed in magic, a thick aura of shimmering not-light and petrol fumes that was almost painful to be around.

I wasn't sure what to do, personally. Several of my knives had been lost or broken, which wasn't unexpected. There was a reason I'd brought a bunch of them. When you hit things as hard as I do, breaking knives is not a novel experience. I still had a few; there was the aluminum-alloy dagger, a cheap plastic-fiberglass knife, and a steel kerambit. But I didn't really expect any of them to matter here. I highly doubted a knife was going to turn the tide in this fight, and I really didn't know what I was doing against serious mages. The only time I'd seen one in combat before today was while rescuing Melissa, and I hadn't been paying any attention to him at the time.

So I just shrugged, and followed them into the canyon. It was a tight fit, forcing us to walk single-file, and I couldn't see anything past the back of Jack's head while we were moving through that passage. Once we were through and able to spread out, though, I was greeted by a seriously disturbing scene.

It was a pocket canyon, as I'd guessed. Cliff face on either side, rocky ground with a bit of grass between. There was a single tree at the far end, maybe twenty yards from me or a little more, and it was immediately obvious it was the one we were all here for. It was an apple tree, with golden bark and silver leaves, and not as large as I'd imagined. I could see the hilt of a blade protruding from the tree, though no details at this distance.

As expected, there was a large ritual focus already laid out around the tree. I couldn't make out details of that either; it was getting dark, and the magic was a muddled, powerful morass. There was too much magic in this canyon for me to get a read on any single signature. But I could feel that the ritual focus was humming with power, an enormous amount of magic being funneled into it.

It wasn't complete, though. I could feel that very clearly. The target, a tall, golden humanoid figure standing next to the tree, was motionless, sure. But she wasn't actually *bound* yet. And I could see, as well, that the sacrifice was not yet complete. They were going to be using both blood sacrifice and geomancy to fuel this, I was certain, and they hadn't actually killed the former yet. It was stretched out on the ground, looking like a strange hybrid of tree and wolf. It also looked awful, sick and weak. But it wasn't dead yet.

When I saw that, some absent part of me noted that I now understood the reason the coven had bound a tree spirit near my house. Sure, it had been a way to point us towards the Sidhe, trying to instigate a war there. And it had been practice for this, as well. But it had also gotten them a captive tree spirit that was unable to fight back. Someone bound to nature or to Faerie, the VNC consultant had said. Like to bind like. I expected sacrificing one tree spirit to bind another was about as good a sympathetic link as you could get.

And then, finally, there were the mages themselves. There were five of them, in that little canyon, all human, all stinking of rot and death and power. No constructs here, no hired guns. I wasn't sure why, but I was glad. It made things...tidier. I didn't have the time to get any more detailed impression of them than that. By this point, they knew we were here, and they were turning to face us, and the fight was on.

The first few moments were insanely intense, overwhelming really. Saori opened with her rifle, taking precise, measured shots much as the mercenaries had. I was confident her aim was a lot better than mine. The bullets did exactly what I expected, which is to say, jack shit. Her aim was good, but they struck invisible barriers inches from the mages and deflected off, or hit casual clothing that stopped them dead.

I knew very little about serious combat magic, had never seen it used. But I knew a few things. One of them was that mages tended to have put a lot of time and energy into preparation before the violence ever started. It was just necessary in order for human mages to function effectively. Another was that if you were getting ready for a fight in this world, being able to deal with guns was, like, the first thing you worked on. Of course these guys could

bounce bullets off of kinetic barriers or otherwise protect themselves.

They were less able to deal with Jack Tar's opening move.

I hadn't actually seen him throwing any big punches. The biggest had been out of my line of sight, and since then he'd been holding back, conserving his energy. Now I saw what he had been saving that energy *for*. He forced power through the tire iron he used as a focus, an aid to help him shape a specific kind of magic. In this case, it was clearly designed for managing kinetic force. And he put so much power into that spell that just being around it was actually painful for me.

I could tell that the mage he threw that blast of raw force at did something to disrupt it. It was impressively quick thinking, really; the spell only took a second or two to reach him, and he was already working to disrupt it somehow. He also had a barrier already active designed to divert that kind of energy, one strong enough to laugh at bullets.

Because of those factors, Jack's spell only hit hard enough to pick the mage up and throw him fifteen feet through the air. He hit the wall of the canyon hard enough to break bones, and while I didn't think he was dead, it sure as hell took him out of the fight for a few moments.

Tired, far from his places of power, through multiple kinds of magical defenses, Jack Tar was still capable of that. There were *reasons* people were scared of him.

The rest of us were moving forward. Guns were clearly useless, and I didn't even try to use mine. I just moved forward at a fast jog, and found to my surprise that the aluminum-carbide dagger was in my hand. Saori had given up on shooting, and was also closing distance, as were Audgrim and the werewolves. None of us were really able to do much at range. Capinera was already halfway to the nearest of the mages.

Before we could get there, the retaliation came, and holy shit did I suddenly understand why the people I'd talked to about battle magic were so nervous about it. Jack had taken one of them out of the fight for the moment, but that left four of them still up. That was very bad news for us.

I wasn't sure what the first did; the spell felt like a spiderweb, and I could sense both the power and malice in it, but I didn't know what it did. I could see the effects, though. Cassie and both of the other wolves in fur suddenly went from charging full-tilt at the enemy to rolling on the ground in agony. No visible injury, but the pain was obviously incapacitating them. A second gestured slightly, mouth moving to shape a word I couldn't hear with a rush of shimmering power, and suddenly there were festering, necrotic sores opening on Andrew's exposed skin.

That was bad. Werewolves were supposed to resist both bodily alteration and mental magic. It was in their nature that these things were hard to use on them. If they were all getting taken out that easily, it meant very bad things for the rest of us.

A third did something much more obvious. Her gesture was more expansive, and she was holding a wand of some kind that literally glowed from how much power she was pushing through it. The effect was obvious, too, a fireball suddenly exploding out of nowhere, catching Saori, Capinera, and Andrew in the blast radius. It smelled awful, rot and corruption and

scorched hair and burning rubber, and I had no idea if any of that smell was real.

Nor did I particularly care, because the fourth was looking my direction, and he looked *pissed*. I noted that he was holding a sickle, presumably the Sidhe artifact they'd stolen. The next thing I knew, a blast of force much like Jack's hit me head-on.

It hurt. The world was spinning, and I had no idea what was going on, and then I hit the rock wall behind me. That hurt more, much more, agony blossoming all through my body. I fell, and for a moment I was just lying on the ground dazed, watching the fight continue around me.

The fireball had done relatively little. Andrew was scorched, but the necrosis had been the more damaging attack by far. The other two appeared to be completely unharmed by the flame. As I watched, Saori suddenly pivoted away from the pyromancer towards the mentalist, the one who had taken all of the fur-form werewolves out at once.

It was not a surprise that Saori would use fire. I mean, at this point, I'd have to be an idiot to find that startling. But I hadn't really put much thought into *how* she went about incinerating her enemies, and on some level I'd expecting her to use magic.

Pulling out an incendiary grenade and lobbing it in the mage's direction, less so. The barrier stopped it from actually hitting him, but it went off at his feet in a burst of flame that looked absolutely hellish. I could only see it for a moment before the mage was enveloped in a cloud of dark smoke, which made vision impossible, though in a strange way, not so much completely obscured as rendered dark and scrambled. But from what I could see, the fire was clinging to him like napalm, refusing to go out.

The werewolves were standing up, because apparently this mage was a wimp who let a little thing like immolation break his concentration. A loud crash suggested that Jack had just brought a substantial amount of the cliff down onto the poor bastard he'd focused on. It occurred to me that I should probably get up before I experienced a similar fate, so I tried that.

It hurt. A lot. The sprained wrist was all but forgotten now, meaningless by comparison. It hurt to move, to breathe. Several cracked ribs at least, I was guessing, and I'd be lucky if there weren't serious internal bleeding. My whole left arm hurt and was hard to move. I managed to stand and stumble away from the cliff, but the pain was almost blinding. I felt dizzy, dissociated and disoriented. Everything felt strangely dreamlike.

Saori's incendiary grenade had been horrifically effective, but it had also drawn attention. The same guy who'd slammed me against the rock now caught her with the same sort of attack. The kitsune was fast, but she wasn't fast enough to dodge that, and it picked her up and threw her back *hard*. She hit the canyon wall and crumpled, and she wasn't getting up right away.

Audgrim, Andrew, and Cassie had all closed on the guy with a thing for necrosis, but they weren't having much effect. The kinetic barrier was more than up to the task of bouncing swords and teeth, even driven by the inhuman strength of a werewolf or the craftsmanship of dvergr blacksmiths. He was falling back a bit under the onslaught, but they weren't even getting close to actually hurting him. Cassie fell again, and this time it was obvious why, because there was no way her forelegs were capable of functioning now. It looked like she'd

lost control of them, and then a mix of some direct effect of the spell and her own momentum had dislocated both of them at the shoulder. One of the other wolves burst into flame and collapsed.

I realized I was stumbling forward, which seemed kind of stupid given how scary these people were and how little I had that could do anything to them. But then I, like everyone else present, paused what I was doing, because Capinera had started singing.

I didn't know what she was singing, didn't understand the words. It might not have been *words* at all. It didn't matter in the slightest. She had so much raw emotion in that song that language would have just gotten in the way. I was on the other side of the canyon, with earplugs in, and not the target she was aiming for, and it *still* made me want to bawl my eyes out.

The pyromancer, who was clearly the person she was focused on, had it much worse. I thought she probably did start crying. She definitely was not able to maintain much focus, and it didn't seem like defense was her strongest suit anyway; fire wasn't really suited to that. Capinera, still singing, stepped up to her, and the songbird's rapier flicked out once. Just once. The mage fell.

A moment later, so did Capinera. I wasn't sure what had happened, who had hit her with what. There was so much magic moving around that I couldn't track any of it at all at this point. She wasn't visibly injured, but she was unconscious, I thought. Maybe the mentalist had managed to focus through the pain and tag her with something.

Things were not looking great. Not terrible, but not great. Saori was dead or incapacitated, Andrew was severely injured, Cassie was incapacitated. One of the other two wolves was dead or too badly burned to function. I was badly injured, even if I'd been able to do anything here to begin with.

At the same time, though, the enemy wasn't doing a whole lot better. Jack had done a lot of damage with that opening attack, and then finished that mage off without the rest of us even being involved. The mentalist had gotten that spell off to drop Capinera, but that was all he was going to manage; I could just barely see him collapsing in flames through the smoke from Saori's grenade. The pyromancer was dead. The witch who specialized in making people rot before they died was still up, but he was getting pressed pretty hard, and I thought he was tiring. The kinetic barrier was still holding up against Audgrim and Andrew, but he wasn't counterattacking now, and he was giving up ground fast.

That really only left the one who seemed to be their ringleader, the guy who was holding the sickle. I wasn't sure quite what his deal was, but he seemed to be good with basic forces, kinetic energy, raw magical energy flow and manipulation. His magic was more abstract than the others, from how it tasted, less visceral. And unfortunately, I was the closest person to him.

I couldn't take another direct hit. I was certain of that. The first had been brutal, and I didn't think he'd even been trying that hard. A second would kill me. But at the same time, I could feel him drawing a lot of magic in, a whole lot of energy going towards some working. I wasn't sure what it would do, but I was sure that letting him finish would be very, very bad.

I was still stumbling forward. I felt like a passenger in my own body, an observer. I didn't have any weapons that could actually hurt him, and I thought it was probably stupid verging on suicidal that I was approaching him right now.

Then I realized that Saori had the right idea. Hell, so did Capinera, if I'd been thinking clearly enough to see what they had in common. These mages were terrifyingly strong, but mages needed preparation to function effectively. They weren't idiots; they would be prepared for a wide range of attacks. But nobody could be prepared for *everything*. Things like incendiary grenades, or the song of a banshee-lite, were unexpected or abstract enough to work.

I didn't like using flashbang grenades. They were a risky weapon at best for me. My senses were so acute that they would generally be far more painful to me than to whatever I was fighting, and the best I could hope for was that we would both be incapacitated. But I'd brought one along, just in case, and this was exactly the kind of situation that called for it.

The world went away in a painful flash of light and sound, so disorienting I barely counted as conscious for a few moments. I was able to stay standing, but only just. I could feel more magic moving around, feel a rush of warm air on my face. There didn't seem to be any pain, though, so I was guessing it wasn't me who just got set on fire.

When the world started to come back into focus, I saw that the fight was pretty much over. The necrosis specialist seemed to have been dragged into the earth and crushed by something Jack did, only his head and arms left above ground. He was very much dead. The guy with the sickle who focused more on telekinesis was still alive, but only barely; he was bleeding heavily from where Andrew had gotten a hit in with the machete, and stumbling backwards towards the tree. I was following, mostly because I wasn't sure what else to do. Andrew, Jack and Audgrim were as well. We were, I realized, the only people still standing and functioning. And frankly, even we were pretty fucked up. Jack was visibly, deeply exhausted, and he had a broken arm. I was barely walking, and Andrew looked like an extra from a horror movie, horribly burned and with open, gangrenous wounds over much of his face and arms. The fact that the werewolf was still functional at all was astounding.

He was, though. As we all kept advancing, the mage fell, and Andrew was on him in a heartbeat. His left arm was dangling uselessly at his side, but the right had a machete in it, and werewolves were *strong*. Now that the mage was too exhausted and dazed to maintain a kinetic barrier, that was much more apparent. One more slash was enough to cut the man almost in half, exposing much of his chest cavity. The idea of him surviving that was ludicrous.

They'd kept their promises, a small part of me noticed with the mental equivalent of a hysterical giggle. Saori had most definitely set one of them on fire, and while Andrew hadn't precisely ripped this guy's heart out, I was willing to count cutting him open so that it was exposed to the air as close enough.

I stumbled forward and sat down hard on the grass. Every part of me hurt. We'd won, though, after a fashion. It was a Pyrrhic victory, but they were all dead, and at least some of us weren't. The sword was still embedded in the tree. The humanoid tree spirit, the one next to the tree, was still motionless, the ritual spell not actually disrupted. The lupine one on the ground was still barely alive, I could see that. I remembered the VNC guy saying that they'd

killed the spirit when they cut the tree down. It was not a great memory.

Audgrim and Jack were catching up now. I let myself slump down a bit, next to the dying tree spirit. Sitting up felt like far too much effort right now. I reached over to the spirit, stroking his head gently. It felt like a cross between fur and fern. "It's okay," I murmured to him, soft and gentle and every bit of it a lie. "It's okay. I know it hurts. I'm sorry. Shhh. 'Sokay."

I wasn't sure why I was doing it. It was probably stupid. It was just...he looked so sad lying there, sick and dying because of a wound too abstract to heal. I'd never seen him before this moment, but I was sure he deserved better than this. Sitting with him while he died was very cold comfort, but it was all I had.

In front of me, Audgrim reached the dead body of the last mage. He bent down, and with his free hand he plucked the sickle from the dead man's hand. He still had his sword in the other. He looked at the sickle for a long, long moment. Then he tucked it into his belt and sighed. "Looks like we got them all," the half-dvergr said, sounding a kind of tired that I wasn't sure I'd ever heard before, not from anyone. "It's over."

The other two men were standing next to him. I frowned a little. This felt off somehow. In a dissociated haze, I pondered that observation while I murmured soft lies to a creature that I suspected didn't even know what words *were*.

"Looks like it," Andrew agreed. He sounded tired, too, and he sounded like the agony of his wounds was finally hitting. Jack was nodding.

I realized what felt wrong, and opened my mouth to shout a warning.

Before I could get the words out, Audgrim took one long step forward, and stabbed Andrew in the back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It made sense, I thought dully, as I watched Andrew realizing what had just happened. That was the worst part in some ways. It made total sense. I could have seen it coming a mile away if I'd stopped and thought about it. Andrew looked down at the sword now protruding from his chest. He was dead; his body just hadn't figured it out yet. The strike was placed well, cutting through the spine. I was betting it was charged silver, too. Coming on top of all the other injuries, I was quite sure he was dead.

Audgrim, who had only ever agreed to work together until the hunt was concluded, pushed the dying werewolf off of his sword. Andrew fell to the grass. It felt like everything was moving in slow motion. Audgrim turned on Jack next, while the exhausted druid was just beginning to process what had happened. He didn't stab Jack, though, perhaps feeling like he wouldn't be able to cut through that magically reinforced coat. He just punched the other man hard in the face.

It was enough. Jack was already injured and running on fumes, and at the end of the day, as strong as Jack Tar was, underneath all the magic he was only human. Audgrim was stronger than a human, wearing heavy steel gauntlets. Jack went down hard, and he didn't get back up. Audgrim, as I'd known he would, turned towards me next.

"Hunting accident, is it? Use us to take care of the thieves and then turn on us?" I was surprised to hear myself talking. My voice sounded eerily calm, level and lacking any real emotion.

"Yes." Audgrim's voice was also level, though it was less calm than it was grim and grey and tired. "It's the simplest way." It was almost fully dark, now, and I couldn't see his expression; my eyes were keener than a human's, but there were limits.

"Why? What are you gaining here?" I was pretty sure I knew the answer, but I wanted to keep him talking, buy myself time to think.

"My uncle was going to kill me," Audgrim said, stepping closer to me. I was still on the ground. He was less injured than any of the rest of us, and I knew I couldn't move fast enough right now to outrun him. "It wasn't official yet, but I know how these things work. As soon as I let these people get their hands on that key I was dead to him. But this ritual is still primed and active. I can hand him the sword and the sickle both."

Buying his way back into his family's good graces. Of course. Would it work? I sort of doubted it. Oh, the dvergar would be thrilled to get those weapons. The dwarves were famously materialistic. His mother and uncle would probably love to add those treasures to their hoard. But I highly doubted they would spare Audgrim as a reward for having returned them. If nothing else, this would be terrible for their reputation.

Sure, he could kill all of us and present it as a tragic loss while we were fighting the mages. And he'd been careful enough that this wasn't actually breaking any oaths. But they would know, or at least suspect, and they wouldn't want to risk being associated with what he'd

done. He would still be a liability. He would still die.

I didn't bother saying that. It didn't matter whether he was right, not anymore. He was committed to this course of action, had been the moment he'd stabbed Andrew in the back. If he let any witnesses to that act survive, he would die a horrible death very soon, and he knew it.

"You are such a petty, manipulative coward," I said instead, still in that calm, quiet voice. And then, without even really meaning to, I added, "You're a nithing and we both know it."

He flinched at that. I didn't know many words in Icelandic, but I knew that one, if only because it was infamously hard to translate and I was drawn to such words. And this was exactly the kind of situation it existed to describe, too. This kind of manipulative, cowardly murder, dishonorable and treacherous, was precisely what the idea of nith meant. And in the old days, Norse culture saw these traits as so vile, so debased, that what I'd just said to him would have been grounds for him to challenge me to a duel to the death.

The dvergar were traditionalists. He knew that word too. And he did, in fact, know that in this moment it was true. He flinched.

But he recovered, and stepped up to stand over me. He had his sword raised, still dripping with Andrew's blood. He paused there, and said, "For what it's worth, Kyoko, I'm sorry."

It was the pause that did it. If he'd just gone through with it immediately, I was pretty sure he'd have killed me with no difficulty at all.

But he didn't. He hesitated. Just for a moment, but sometimes a moment is all it takes. And we'd both forgotten that we *weren't* the only people still conscious in that canyon.

The tree spirit next to me had been bound. Those mages had wrapped him in such intense magical compulsions that he'd been utterly helpless to resist. He'd been forced to just lie there and wait while the people who had already murdered him got to the part of their ritual where they were going to finish the job. That was what serious magical compulsions were like. There was no resisting that command.

But those mages were dead now. Those compulsions didn't matter anymore. And while he was sick unto dying, weak and broken, he wasn't dead yet, not quite. As Audgrim hesitated, the spirit lunged forward like the wolf he resembled, teeth closing on Audgrim's ankle. And with what had to be the very last of his strength, he wrenched on it.

The blade still came down, but it was out of control, and Audgrim was falling with it. I was able to roll away, and rather than decapitate me, both he and the blade ended up on the ground. I forced myself to my hands and knees, desperate and angry and scared and empty.

I couldn't explain why I did what I did next. It wasn't a rational, conscious decision. I was running on impulse at this point, too tired and too hollow for clear thought. Maybe I was just desperate. Maybe it was the same subconscious impulse that had known what to say, exactly what would get to Audgrim, make him flinch and hesitate for that one, pivotal moment.

Regardless, with all four limbs and a whimper of pain, I flung myself forward. Not

towards Audgrim. Not towards the sword he was reaching for.

Towards the tree.

I ended up crumpled at the foot of the tree. My whole body hurt. I was at this point guessing that at least one rib was broken rather than just cracked. The stunt I'd just pulled hurt like hell on my sprained wrist. But pain was a familiar thing for me, and I had a hell of a lot of motivation. Leaning heavily on the tree, I pulled myself upright, and I reached out for the blade embedded in it. My hand closed on the grip, and I pulled.

I couldn't have explained it. Logically, I knew that the mages hadn't actually completed their ritual. I knew that this tree was still as intact as ever, that it would resist any effort to take that sword. I knew that the mages would hardly have gone to all this effort if it were that easy.

But it felt right. And when I grabbed it, that felt right too. The grip fit into my hand like they were made for each other. The blade slid out effortlessly. And as it did, the exact moment the blade was fully freed, things...changed.

There was a strange sort of euphoria that washed over me. This felt *right*. The weapon in my hand was a relatively short sword, perfectly sized for me. It felt strange in my hand; the weight was off, though I couldn't have said whether it felt like it was too light or too heavy for its size. But that strangeness was easily forgotten in the heat of the moment. I could feel a surge of euphoric glee, and I could feel bloodlust rising to meet it.

It wasn't that I stopped being in pain, or that I stopped being afraid. Those things were still there, still just as intense. They just stopped mattering as much. They were lost in the storm of magic and bloodlust that was suddenly raging inside me. There was much less magic flying around now that the mages were dead, and as a result I could very clearly feel the power in that sword once it was drawn. It smelled overpoweringly of blood and sweet flowers; it burned with a cold, dark flame; it sent shivers down my spine and across the rest of my body.

The sword itself, I noticed absently as I turned to face towards Audgrim again, was beautiful. It was a strange sort of beauty, though. The blade was a little longer than my forearm from elbow to fingertip, and it was curved forward, like a claw. Sharpened on both sides, though the canted hilt and the way it was weighted would make it easier to use the inner edge of the curve. It was an odd blade profile, to go with the odd weight. And while it was nothing like them in shape, something about the claw-like blade reminded me of a gladius, or maybe a Chinese dao.

A teacher had once explained to me the difference between the dao, or broadsword, and the jian, the straight longsword once prevalent in Chinese culture. The jian, he had said, was the gentleman's sword. It was beautiful. It was elegant, graceful, and precise. The dao, on the other hand, was a sword for killing people. You could give someone a dao and within a week they'd be able to chop someone into pieces with it. It might still be beautiful, but there was never any ambiguity or pretense about it. It was a simple, straightforward tool made for killing people, and that was always apparent in its design and its use.

Similarly, I thought, this sword was very obviously a weapon, would never pretend otherwise. But it was undeniably beautiful. The blade was so brightly polished it looked like a mirror. There were subtle patterns worked into the steel in even brighter silver, flowers and

wolves, and more obvious inlay that looked like amber and looked like writing.

I had time to see that much, because everything seemed to pause for just a moment when the blade was drawn. It was like the sheer power, the intensity of the magic now spilling out into that little canyon, was such that it demanded one pause for a moment to recognize it. I was still for a moment looking at it. Audgrim, in the process of picking up his own sword, was still for a moment as well. Even the breeze seemed to go still for the span of a breath.

And then the moment was over. He was stepping forward to go back to killing me. I was stepping out to meet him, moving slightly better now. The pain from the broken ribs was there, but it felt less important, less urgent. It felt like I was in a sort of waking dream, unreal and drifting within the storm. Exhaustion and stress and pain, when mixed with my justified outrage and the separate surge of bloodthirsty euphoria and thrill coming from the sword, became something very different. I had no name for what I was feeling now, but it wasn't anything as simple as pain.

I was in fur, had been for quite a while now, and there was lightning playing through it. As always, that lightning was a vivid, unnatural green in tone, the same as my eyes. Now, it was also dancing down the blade of the sword, playing across the mirror-bright surface, a stark contrast to the amber inlay. It was the only light in that bloody little canyon, lending the whole scene a surreal, flickering cast. I was laughing. It didn't sound happy at all. It sounded harsh and jagged, like broken glass.

Audgrim was done talking, now. And I really was out of allies at this point; that sudden attack had been the last that the tree spirit had in it, and it had collapsed to the grass motionless. Strangely, though, I wasn't afraid anymore. Audgrim was dangerous, sure, but there was a reason he'd done it like this, why he'd hung back and let others take the brunt of the fighting. A reason why he'd waited for everyone else to be broken after the battle, and even then had attacked by sudden treachery. He knew how to fight, but that wasn't the same thing as being a fighter, not quite.

He went for a simple, aggressive opening, slashing at my torso. I slipped aside, faster than I should ever have been able to move with how severely injured I was. Still acting on impulse, as his sword went past, I lashed out at it.

His weapon was forged by a dvergr smith. It was of excellent quality, better than any mortal blacksmith could match. But as I'd been told, the blade currently in my hand was the sort of weapon that people wrote sagas about, a peer to fucking *Excalibur*. It barely even slowed down as it passed through his sword, and suddenly half his blade was lying in the grass.

He pulled up short at that, and opened his mouth to say something. But I was done talking, too. The blade cut through his neck just as easily on the backswing, and that was that. I collapsed to the grass next to his body, with his blood both literally and figuratively on my hands.

And so died Auðgrímr, son of Eyvindr. He was a treacherous, cowardly man, and he never really was my friend. And yet we had liked each other, in our way. I understood him. I genuinely believed he would have been sorry to kill me, and if I'd had a choice I wouldn't have killed him.

“I’ve never done this before,” I said to no one in particular, sitting there in the bloody grass on top of a broken ritual circle. “I mean, obviously I’ve participated. I must have helped to kill a dozen people today alone. I’ve killed people myself. But when I did that I was so far out of my mind I’m not sure it even counts as ‘me.’ I’ve never actually made the conscious *choice* to kill someone before.”

It felt both ironic and strangely appropriate, I thought, that my first had been someone who was almost a friend. There was a sort of poetry in that.

I became aware of a presence next to me, looked over and found the other tree spirit standing there. I had one on either side now, the first dying and the second finally able to move again. Apparently some part of what just happened had broken the half-formed bindings being placed on her. She was beautiful in a way no human woman could hope to match, and smelled like golden apples.

“It is a hard thing,” she said quietly, in a voice like rustling leaves.

I nodded. Then, remembering, I offered her the sword, noting idly that it was perfectly clean, like blood just couldn’t stain it. “This is yours, I think.”

She took it. But she only kept it long enough to slip it into a sheath. I wasn’t sure where she’d been keeping that; it wasn’t like she was wearing clothes to have pockets. As soon as the sword was sheathed, though, she was handing it back to me.

“It is yours, now,” she murmured. “A gift for she who can retrieve it, and rightly claimed. Thorn will always find its way back to your hand, now.”

I sighed, and nodded. Figured, really. All these people dead, all this bloodshed over who got to take the damn thing, and I ended up keeping it when I didn’t even want it. At least the overpowering hum of its magic had shut off like a light switch once it was sheathed. The sheath itself was apparently immune to its edge, so maybe it had its own sort of magic with which to contain the blade. It even had a little restraining strap to keep the sword from coming free by accident, which in my slightly hysterical state I found bizarrely amusing. The sheath, too, was beautiful, black leather with subtle patterns of wolves and flowers and skulls. None of the images were wholly visible, but it was easy enough to tell what was being depicted.

I took the sword from her, feeling a little bit silly, like a macabre caricature of the normal myth. The lady of the sword was giving it away, but rather than a heroic knight or noble warrior, she was handing it to a battered lupine monster too tired to stand up while claiming the relic. It felt heavy in my hand.

I sat and looked around the little canyon. So much death. It felt like such a waste. I realized that a fair number of these people might still be alive, and soon we’d need to figure out how to get everyone out of here and back to the city. But not quite yet. I didn’t have it in me to work on that quite yet.

I found myself petting the other tree spirit’s head again instead. He wasn’t quite dead yet. He twitched a little at my touch, a tiny movement. It would take a little more time before that severed connection to the tree he’d been linked to finished draining his life away. He’d

probably burned through some of that time to fuel that last, desperate attack that had saved my life. This, too, seemed like such a tragic, pointless waste.

"I don't suppose there's any way he could be saved?" I asked the other spirit. I didn't sound hopeful, because I wasn't hopeful, but I felt I had to ask.

She sighed, a gentle sound like wind passing through barren branches. "His body cannot sustain itself without his tree. It will wither and die, slowly but surely."

I started to nod, and then paused. She hadn't actually answered my question, not quite. And if she was even vaguely associated with the fae, that was important. They didn't, couldn't, lie. But that didn't mean they were going to tell you the truth, either. Much as Martin had demonstrated to us, you could be extremely effective at deception without ever saying an outright, factual *lie* at all.

It was hard to think through the haze of exhaustion. I forced myself to focus, though, to push through that haze. "His body will wither," I said slowly. "That's inevitable. But it's not the same thing as his death being inevitable, not intrinsically."

She smiled sadly down at me, and said nothing at all.

"Is there a way," I said, slowly, trying to pick my words very carefully. "A means by which he could be preserved through that death of his body?"

"The mind, the spirit, these things have their own nature," she murmured. "They are not wholly the same as the body, only tied to it, and mediated by it. But without that tether, they cannot exist; they are too fragile. A person's spirit must be anchored within the world, or it will dissipate into the aether."

I nodded, thinking. Again, not actually answering my question, but she didn't seem hostile at all. My guess was that either she was incapable of answering my questions directly, perhaps from some binding oath or constraint on her, or she just wanted me to work through it and find the answer myself. Still, what she *had* said was telling. The spirit required an anchor, a physical host, in order to keep itself intact. That didn't mean the host had to be the same body he was currently in, though.

But what would work instead? It couldn't be another tree, I was guessing. He wasn't the same as that tree, was not himself a cypress. He was linked to it, sure, but separate. The being currently shuddering and dying next to me wasn't a tree, for all that he had some of the same traits. He was an animate being, and to the extent that he expressed the traits of a mortal organism at all, they were as much those of a wolf as of a plant.

And as simply as that, I understood. I looked up at the golden-apple dryad, and smiled a little. "Thank you," I said, simply. She smiled back, and said nothing.

I had to roll Audgrim's body over to get the sickle. It hummed in my hand, cold and dark and quiet, and nothing like rot at all. It wasn't as powerful as the sword—as Thorn, I reminded myself; the sword had a name, and if I was going to have to keep it, it seemed polite to use that name. I didn't for a moment imagine that I could get rid of it, either. When someone tells you that a relic of legendary proportion will always find its way back to your hand, they probably aren't exaggerating. Thorn was mine now, like it or not.

Anyway, the sickle wasn't as powerful as Thorn. But it was plenty powerful enough, humming with a cold power that felt a great deal like Cerdinen himself. No surprise there.

A tool to guide the forest, he'd said. The wildfire that prunes away the weak, and leaves the strong stronger. It wasn't an evil thing. It was harsh, cold, and ruthless, sure, but the simple reality was that wildfire was necessary for the health of the forest. Similarly, the sickle was dangerous, but it wasn't evil. It wasn't even destructive as such.

I turned back to the tree spirit. The other, I noted, the one that looked like a woman rather than a wolf, was gone. This didn't surprise me. I sat beside the creature that was still here, still dying, and rested my hand on his head. Something a little like fur and a little like ferns, soft under my hand.

He wasn't quite a plant, but he had much the same nature in some ways. And for reasons entirely unknown to me, I could apparently talk to plants now. It wasn't a huge leap of logic to guess that I might be able to communicate with him as well. It was, if nothing else, worth a try.

"Hey," I said to him, soft and gentle. "I don't know if I can save you. I'm not sure how any of this works, not really. And even if I can, it won't be the same as what you are now. I think you'll probably have to share a body with someone; I'm not sure if it'll be me or someone else, long term, but I don't have an empty one to give you, so it'll be some kind of sharing. I understand if you'd rather I not try. But the offer's open."

There were still no words in response. I suspected that actually *talking* wasn't what he was able to understand from me. But the emotions I could feel from him were far more nuanced, far more complex than those I felt from actual plants. Unsurprising; he had an actual mind. There was sorrow, contemplation, gratitude, uncertainty, fury, and respect, all woven into an enormously complex web. And then, at last, there was acceptance.

I nodded, leaned closer. I reached out and cut his throat with the sickle. And as something that wasn't quite blood and wasn't quite sap flowed over my hands, I reached out in another way, one I didn't understand but instinctively knew how to do. I found the mind and the spirit of something that wasn't quite a tree and wasn't quite a wolf, and invited them into my own.

It didn't take long. Within moments I was sitting on the ground next to the bodies of two people whose throats I'd cut with magic blades. At first, I wasn't sure whether it had worked. But then I felt something, a sort of hum in the back of my mind, an awareness of presence. I smiled, relieved. Tonight had been a bloody, horrifying mess, but at least I'd saved one person, at least a little bit.

I wiped the sickle clean, and started to work on getting us home.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I do not like hospitals.

I am aware that this is not exactly a shocking, novel opinion. Nobody really *likes* hospitals. They aren't a place anyone goes for fun. They're a place of death deferred, of fear and pain and sickness. The patients go because they're seriously sick or badly injured. The families arrive full of anxiety, sick with worry that something will go wrong, that they'll be leaving in mourning. The staff mostly go there while tired, stressed, and badly overworked, hoping that nothing goes too terribly wrong today, that they won't be the one who has to deliver bad news, all while their empathy is being steadily ablated away by the sheer volume of tragedy they're immersed in. Virtually no one goes there because they like it.

And that emotional resonance sinks in. It makes the structure feel like fear and pain and grief. There are exceptions, sure. There are individual departments and wings that have a very different mood. They *are* a place of healing as well, and sometimes that shows through more clearly. But by and large, hospitals ache with the negative emotions that have passed through them. I really did not like that feeling.

On another level, particularly in departments where the patients have more injuries and more severe illness, I have a different kind of uncomfortable feeling. When I walk past the wounded, I smell blood. It's such a distinctive odor that all the disinfectant and isopropanol and air freshener in the world can't fully cover it up. I smell that, and I feel hungry. I see the elderly and the seriously ill, and a little part of me in the back of my head notes that they would be easy prey.

I'm not a werewolf, but I have enough of the wolf in me to have a seriously prey drive. Usually, I can manage that; it was just one more component of my experience that I selectively tuned out, and I was much better at that than I used to be.

But it was harder here, surrounded by vulnerable people like this. It was harder when I was already stressed. If one of the patients tried to run from me right now, it would be a struggle not to chase them. Being here was a reminder of how deeply rooted that prey drive was, and I didn't like to be reminded of that. There were far too many dark thoughts there. Too many memories of what had happened *before* I learned to manage that prey drive.

I don't like hospitals. This was something I already knew. The fact that I was in this one because I was, myself, seriously injured didn't improve the experience one bit.

A surprising number of people had made it out of that canyon alive. Not all, not even close to all. I'd been extremely correct that Andrew was dead, for example, and I'd done Audgrim in myself. One of the werewolves had been burned too badly to survive. But the rest of us were alive. After the fight was over, I'd dragged myself out of the ritual site, and found the escorts we'd brought along.

I suspected they were not thrilled, and not just because the victory had come at such a cost. Audgrim was dead, and the way he died really didn't look like it happened during the

fight itself. I could see that the three remaining people from his group of employees had noticed this, and they weren't happy about it.

But they were outnumbered by the wolves, and the wolves weren't happy about how much Andrew didn't look like it was mages that finished *him* off, either. Rebecca, the inhuman woman who smelled like a glacier and moved through the forest like a predator, was also standing right behind them. They didn't cause a fuss. And while the evacuation process was tiring, painful, and challenging, it didn't take that long. We got everyone out fast enough to get them to medical care.

The tree had a hole in it where Thorn had been, obvious even at a glance. And I was carrying a sword I hadn't had when I went in there. Nobody said a word about that, either.

The losses and injuries were significant, though, enough that it was somewhat chilling to think about how close we'd come to catastrophic failure. The werewolves took the worst of it, on the whole. Andrew was dead, as were five others. There was one who had been burned to death in the canyon, one I saw die from a silver bullet in the neck, two who had been with the rear guard, and I later learned that the other wolf I'd seen get shot, two silver bullets in the chest, had died from her injuries. Pretty much all the survivors were wounded, many of them badly so. Cassie had serious damage to both shoulders; there were multiple tendons that had snapped, and that was the kind of thing that even a werewolf had to take seriously. It would be a while before she was fully recovered. Derek had broken a forelimb and got clawed open all down his flank. The other wolf in the canyon with us, who turned out to be Robert, the same guy who had gone out scouting earlier, had taken a blast of kinetic force that caused extensive internal bleeding. He was lucky to be alive.

For the Tribe, the damage had been lighter. Jack was so overdrawn that between that and the head trauma he picked up when Audgrim decked him, he'd been in a coma for the past week. He was starting to wake up today, but he was still seriously out of it. The expectation was that he'd make a full recovery, though, so I thought he'd still gotten pretty damn lucky. Richard had survived his injuries. Alice, the wizard who specialized in enchanting objects and defensive wards, was almost as drained as Jack, and the damage to her left leg was severe enough that she was going to have a limp for the rest of her life. But they'd all survived.

Audgrim was dead, obviously, though I doubted the dvergar would consider that much of a loss. Hell, I was guessing they'd feel like they owed me for it, all things considered. Not to mention that with how their laws worked, the debt Audgrim had taken on in trade for my help was on them now. He'd been acting as their agent at the time, and they were responsible for his actions and debts while he was in that role. And I had put myself through hell in the process of helping him with this hunt, a hunt which was successful largely because of my actions. The dwarves fucking *owed* me at this point.

The rest of us came out of it...more or less intact. Rebecca was unscathed. Melissa was going to be fine, or as close to it as she was getting; the preexisting damage to her mind was still there, obviously, but the fresh injuries were healed within a week. She was hardy. Capinera was pretty much fine as well; she had some burns, a couple bruises, and a sprained ankle, but the attack that actually took her out of the fight just knocked her out, no serious harm done. But Saori and I...were less fine.

I'd been correct about the broken ribs. I had four of them, and several others were cracked. My left elbow was slightly dislocated, the wrist was badly sprained, and one of the bones in my forearm was fractured; I'd made all of these worse trying to use that arm towards the end. I'd hit my head pretty hard, and probably a lot of the confused, unreal feeling I had towards the end of the fight had been the product of a moderately severe concussion. I healed very well, and far faster than a normal human, but even for me, that was a lot of damage, and I'd need a while to recover.

Saori, meanwhile, had basically shattered the right half of her body when she hit the wall of the canyon. I didn't know how else to think of it. She had fractures in her collarbone, lower arm, and thigh, a dislocated hip, and three broken bones in her hand; enough ribs were broken to make counting pointless. She looked like she'd been in a car wreck, and not a gentle one. It would be weeks to months before she was able to walk normally. Kitsune apparently healed relatively well, but not nearly as fast as I did. She was confident she would eventually recover completely, but it would take a while.

A week after the battle, we were both still in the hospital. We'd ended up sharing the same room; I wasn't sure who had pulled strings to arrange that, but I was grateful for it. Her company made it...more tolerable. It was after midnight, now, and I was trying to sleep; it wasn't working at all, but I felt I should make the effort. Saori was in a stupor on the other side of the room. They had the kitsune on a hell of a lot of painkillers, and she was out cold.

The door opened, and Cassie slipped inside. The room was very dark, but I knew it was her. She moved in a distinctive way, and smelled like werewolf. I was quite sure we were outside of normal visiting hours, but she clearly didn't care. This was the first time I'd seen her since that night out in the woods. Derek, Capinera, and Melissa had each visited at least once, and I'd heard about Cassie's injuries from Derek, but she hadn't been here herself yet.

Her arms moved strangely as she closed the door. It wasn't healthy, but the damage would heal given time. Werewolves were even better than I was at recovering from injury.

"Hey," I said quietly. "Good to see you."

"Likewise." The werewolf's voice was quiet enough that if I were a human I couldn't have heard her. "I'm glad you're...relatively okay. Things got pretty bad there at the end. I wasn't sure you'd survive that hit."

"Me either," I sighed. I'd gotten ridiculously lucky. Saori's injuries were enough to convince me of that. When she took the same kind of hit, she'd broken most of the bones on one half of her body, and she'd been wearing armor. I was sure at this point that as bad as that impact was for me, the mage hadn't even been trying. It had been a quick, reflexive spell without time to put much power into it.

"I saw what happened," she said, and her voice was still quiet, but there was a lot of emotion in it. Anger, sorrow, gratitude, and guilt. Her voice was distant, and I was willing to bet that if I could see her eyes clearly, they would be distant too, and haunted. It was a moment in which her age showed, and I was willing to bet she was a pretty damn old werewolf based on that tone.

"Yeah. I kinda figured." She hadn't been unconscious, after all, just debilitated. She

might be the only one who had actually seen what I did at the end. Jack saw the initial betrayal, but Audgrim had knocked him out almost immediately.

"I haven't told anyone. It seemed better to ask you first." There were a *lot* of layers in that, a lot of kinds of implicit meaning.

I sighed again. "As fucked as it is, I think it might be better if it does go down as a hunting accident. Audgrim's behavior was appalling, but I don't know what good it would do to have that be public knowledge. It's kinda...as it is, I think this can be a good thing for the city."

She tilted her head to the side curiously, an extremely canine posture. "How so?"

I tried to shrug, remembered it hurt like hell right now, and gestured vaguely with my good hand instead. "It's sort of the inverse of what they were trying to do. The mages, I mean. They tried pretty hard to drive wedges between us, to damage relations so much that it sparked a war. They wanted that to happen so that we'd all be focused on killing each other rather than stopping them."

"Ah." The werewolf nodded a little. "I see. You think this will draw our different factions together more. Establish an alliance of sorts."

"I think it's possible, yeah. I mean, I'm not a diplomat. And I don't expect it would be a terribly close alliance. But as it stands, it's a bit..." I trailed off, but this time I remembered that shrugging was a bad idea. "There were a lot of people working together on this," I said after a moment. "A lot of different skillsets, and having that breadth was important. And it *worked*. Everyone saw that cooperating like that was effective, it let us find those bastards and kill them. And they were very easy to hate."

"Yeah, I follow. It establishes incentives for cooperation. But if Audgrim were known to be a traitor, that trust would evaporate."

"Yup. Sure, he wasn't really acting on behalf of the dvergar at that point. I'm sure they'd disclaim his actions, possibly outright disown him posthumously. But people won't care. It'll be seen as a polite fiction, a way to avoid responsibility by distancing themselves from him after his failure."

"And thus drive people apart again. Yes." Cassie was quiet for a moment. "Do you think they'd be wrong in that distrust?" she asked eventually, her voice still so hushed it was barely audible even to me. "The dvergar *do* have some degree of responsibility. They kept him in a position of authority, unsupervised, even though they knew he was desperate and had just shown a serious lack of competence."

I sighed. "I don't know. I don't know any of the actual dvergar well enough to even guess. It's possible they set him up in that position intentionally to try and get the sword without taking blame, for all I know. But I'm also not sure it matters. It will establish good relations between the major local powers. Even if it's built on a lie, I like that idea a lot more than the thought of my city turning into a warzone."

She laughed a bit at that, soft as falling snow. "I can understand that. I'm not entirely sure I agree, but it's your decision. So, a hunting accident it is. I'll have to tell a couple of the others for safety's sake, but I know who to talk to. They won't spread the word further. And I'll

tell Jack about your wishes as well. I expect he'll go along with them."

"Thank you. For a lot of things, really."

"It's nothing. Don't trouble yourself over it." Cassie was quiet for a long moment, just sitting in the chair in the dark. Saori was snoring. It was a strangely amusing scene, and I had to fight not to giggle.

"It was my first time. I guess technically not quite, since there was that one rampage the first time the raiju traits manifested overtly. But I don't even really remember doing that. It didn't feel like this, didn't feel real." I wasn't sure why I was saying it, not really. I mean, she already knew; I'd said as much at the time. I guess I just needed to talk about it, and this was the right moment for that. There are some things you can say in a darkened room to a near-stranger that you could never tell a friend in the light of day.

"First times are always hard." Cassie sounded almost meditative. "First time doing anything. And killing is a harder thing than most."

"Yeah." I was quiet for a moment, then said, "It's kind of funny. I'm not sorry I killed him, not really. It was the only way any of us were getting out of there alive. And it was quicker than what would have happened to him if he'd survived and gone home. I'm not sorry I did it. But I feel like something in me changed when I did, and that part I do feel bad about."

"That's always how it goes." The werewolf was smiling, but it was a sad smile. Her tone was the soft, gentle voice a mother uses when explaining to her daughter that every flame, however pretty, will burn. "I think of it as a sort of revelation. Before you kill someone, you can tell yourself that you wouldn't, that you couldn't bring yourself to do it. But once you've made that choice, that illusion is gone. You know that you do have that in yourself, and you can no longer believe otherwise. And you might have known, before this, that you were capable of it, but that was an impulse during an overpowering fugue state. It doesn't have much to do with who you are as a person, outside of that context. This was a choice."

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds exactly like what I'm feeling." I was glad it was dark, in that moment. I didn't want to see Cassie's face during this conversation.

"It's always hard. The first time doing anything. Audgrim would have had a similar experience, had he survived. He would have known that when push came to shove, he was willing to betray a trust and murder his allies." Cassie sighed, long and soft and slow. "The first cut is the deepest. I would like to say that killing never gets easier, but that would be a lie. Everything grows easier with practice. Anything can become normal."

I nodded. "Yeah, I imagine so. And it's a bit...I mean, I'd like to say it was a one-off. That it will never happen again. But...if I'm being honest, I think that's probably an unrealistic hope. I don't really believe that I'll be able to avoid it."

The room was quiet after that, except for a kitsune snoring. She was a heavier sleeper than I'd realized, to have not stirred through this whole conversation. Nothing was said, though. There seemed to be little to add to what I'd said. It would be nice to think that I would never kill someone again, but logic didn't support that conclusion. I seemed likely to end up in positions where it was them or me that died, and I now knew that when it came down to it, in

that situation I was probably going to choose them. It was ultimately that simple.

“You kept the sword,” the werewolf said eventually.

“Didn’t have a choice. It turns out that when the story said Gram picked Sigmund and was a gift for his hand specifically, they were kind of understating it. The sword isn’t going to leave me.” I’d tested that already, and confirmed my suspicions. When I had given it to Melissa and then to Derek, Thorn hadn’t stayed away long. Within less than twelve hours, both times, the sword had just...appeared in the hospital room while I wasn’t looking. I had no idea how it had gotten there, but I had a very strong feeling that it would *always* get back to me. The tie between us was not one that could be broken. I wasn’t sure how it worked, but I suspected there were not many barriers that could prevent Thorn from finding me.

Currently, it was under the sheet with me in the hospital bed. It seemed easier to just keep it on hand in a way that was relatively concealed rather than risk it returning in an awkward way. I really didn’t want to have to explain Thorn’s presence to the nurse.

Cassie nodded. “I imagine not. It seems to be how such things work. And it was what was needed. But taking it will have consequences for you.”

I sighed. I’d thought about that already, and came to the same conclusion. Thorn was a brand-new relic with serious, intense magic woven into it. People would notice that it was out in the world now, and there were people who would care. It was inevitable.

“There are always consequences,” I said, and I sounded almost as tired in that moment as Audgrim had in the moments just before his death.

“Yes.” The werewolf’s voice was calm, and simple, not varnishing the truth at all. “There are. But not all of them negative, I think. A blessing in one hand, and a curse in the other. It is the way of things.”

Her speech patterns, I noted idly, were not nearly as modern as when I’d spoken to her before. When I’d first met Cassie, she’d seemed very much like a product of the modern age. She exclusively used a casual nickname, wore modern clothing, used contemporary slang. But in this more intense, private moment, she sounded nothing like modern.

“I’ll let you get some rest,” she said, standing up like her back hurt. Even for a werewolf, she’d taken a beating. “Don’t be a stranger.”

I looked over at Saori, still out cold, and I smiled a little bit. It was completely sincere. Despite all the pain and the looming threat and the emotional turmoil, I could feel an odd kind of happiness as well. I could also feel an emotional resonance in the back of my mind, another kind of happiness, an amused one. “I’m always strange,” I said. “But I’ll be in touch.”

Life went on. That was, perhaps, both the greatest gift and the deepest curse of the world. No matter what happened to you, no matter what changed in your own life, the world still turned. People still had their own lives to take care of, and were not particularly affected by your tragedies or triumphs. Life went on.

My life changed after that. It couldn’t not. I didn’t, couldn’t, go back to obscurity, not

really. That attack on the grove was a big deal, locally, and I went down as an essential part of it, perhaps the most essential part. I suppose that made sense, in a way. I hadn't done all that much to the mages, but my use of that flashbang *had* been what set up the last mage's death. And even without knowing about Audgrim's betrayal, I looked a lot more important than I really was. I was the only one still standing at the end of the fight. I was the one who walked out with Thorn in one hand and the sickle in the other.

The sickle itself went back to Cerdinen. I was already going to be keeping one more magic blade than I wanted, and I really didn't feel the need for another. I was already so strongly themed around plants that it was kind of upsetting. And pretty much none of it had been my idea, either. Even the tattoos, including the very obvious scarlet hibiscus blossom on my right hand, hadn't been my idea. Those had been done in a traditional Japanese style where the artist chose the images, and they'd been done before any of the raiju traits or talking to plants manifested.

I had prominent tattoos of flowers, wolves, and clouds. I was now the owner of a sword named Thorn, and I didn't have the heart to rename it; that felt wrong, somehow. The sword itself had wolves and flowers depicted on it, as did its sheath. I turned into something lupine with lightning wrapped around me. Plants would always thrive in my care, and I talked to them. Even my surname referenced cedars. On the whole, it looked very much like I had an unhealthy obsession with wolves, flowers, and storms, and I kind of resented how ubiquitous these things had become without my having any say in the matter.

And having a lord of the Midnight Court in my debt was worth far more, anyway. Of course I gave it back to him.

I couldn't go back to obscurity after that. But I also found that I didn't want to, that the idea of returning to a life spent trying to find busywork to fill empty days sounded awful instead of restful.

So things changed, over the next few weeks. I started going to Softened Dreams more often, and I actually talked to people there rather than sit in the corner watching them. There were several pieces of my art on display there, vivid and surreal and not quite like what anyone else would have made. I went to the Blackbird Cabaret occasionally, and I'd contributed samples of music for Capinera to use there; I couldn't perform on stage, for obvious reasons, but I was still involved. I spent time hanging out with werewolves, and learned more about magical theory and practice from various members of the Tribe.

I went on a date with Saori, as predicted, and as predicted, it was romantic. Granted, she also put hallucinogens in my dinner—ones she'd gotten from my own collection, even—which made it a bit more exciting. Having seen something of the sort coming, I'd preemptively arranged to get her back with habaneros, and a stimulant mixed into her soda. She did, in fact, start a bar fight, despite the fact that she was still on crutches. At least it didn't escalate past fists. But it was romantic, and I couldn't deny that I'd enjoyed the night.

In short, I started to actually live, rather than just survive.

I would always be strange. My art was vivid and surreal, and my perception of the world was not what anyone else would see. Life would always be difficult. My activities would always

be restricted, and I couldn't do them in quite the ways I'd like. I was now welded to Thorn so tightly that I knew it would always be there.

All of these things were true. They would remain true. It was still the case that nothing I did was likely to change them. If anything, I'd added more limitations. I no longer had the option of anonymity and obscurity.

But it was time—well past time, really—that I accepted that and moved on. Crying about these truths hadn't changed them either. And I could see, now, that I'd been letting the impossibility of finding “perfect” get in the way of having “good”. It was time for me to accept that this was just my nature, the inherent nature of my existence.

In the end, we can all be only what we are.

Epilogue

Three weeks later, I was standing in a small apartment in a bad part of town waiting for someone to make a choice.

I still wasn't entirely sure this would work. I'd worked through the theory extensively. I'd consulted with a ton of people about it. Alice, the wizard from the Tribe, had helped a lot with the underlying theory and principles involved. I'd been introduced to a guy named Nate who mixed magic with graffiti and was more shamanic in his focus, less tied to concrete and rational thought than a wizard. The categorization tools for mages would always be inadequate, but it was informative in this case. Wizards, as the most common categorization system defined them, were characterized by linear reasoning, structured and abstract thought, and rational logic. Alice fit that description perfectly, which was great for my education. But for this I also needed to draw on that more intuitive thought process.

So, I met Nate and we talked for a while. He introduced me to a girl named Opari who had personal experience of what I was doing here. Derek, Cassie, and Robert all had some amount of insight because of werewolf things. They also had a veterinarian that they worked with in town, which I found fascinating when they told me about her. Werewolves rarely needed medical care at all, but apparently there were some very specific things that sometimes came up that a vet was helpful with. So there was a vet in Pittsburgh who knew what they were, and I talked with her for a while. Hell, I even went back to my old cognitive neuroscience connections and asked *them* some questions.

In short, I'd consulted with as many experts as I could find, and in theory, this would work. But I wouldn't know for sure until we'd done it. I was nervous, and I could feel that the spirit in the back of my mind was nervous, too.

But it needed to happen. My mind and body were an adequate host for him, enough to anchor his mind and perception and sense of self so that these things wouldn't dissipate. But it was uncomfortable for him, to put it mildly. Actually perceiving the world through my senses was at best awkward and disorienting for him. He had found that bipedal locomotion gave him motion sickness, and my sensory oddities meant that sharing my senses was overwhelming. The one time I'd dropped my perceptual filters while he was sharing that experience, it had been instantly miserable for him, and it wasn't even a particularly strong input.

In short, while I'd been a perfectly adequate host in an emergency, he was going to need something else. While he was hosted in me, he had to pretty much cut himself off from sensory experience entirely, since mine were the only senses available to him and they made him sick. That was a nightmarish way to live, long-term. Hence, this project, an attempt to find somewhere better for him.

A plant was out of the question. It didn't have enough mind to provide an anchor for his, and it wasn't animate, was barely sensate at all. That would be hell, not sanctuary. A human, even if I could find one who was willing, was complicated. They were too far from his nature

for him to anchor himself to their mind easily. He would also still have the motion sickness going on, because that didn't seem to be getting better with time. It just wasn't a feasible idea.

And, thus, I found myself here, looking down at a dog. She had the classic black-and-white markings of a Siberian husky, and cold blue eyes. She was striking, healthy, and surprisingly relaxed around me considering she'd never seen me before. This was particularly remarkable given that she had several puppies curled up beside her.

We'd eventually settled on this as the best available option. Siberian huskies were just about the closest a dog comes to being a wolf, in several senses; their body structure, genetics, and behavior were all pretty strongly lupine relative to most dogs. The quadrupedal body shape should remove that issue with motion sickness, and the resemblance to his original body was close enough that he should be able to use the dog as a connection point. And everyone from the werewolves to the veterinarian to the neuroscientists had agreed this was about the right age for this. The puppy's brain would still be quite plastic with how young they were, which should make adjustment easier than if this were an adult dog, for both of them. But the puppies were old enough to have formed a discrete sense of self, a clear enough one that they wouldn't be overwhelmed or subsumed by the mind of the tree spirit.

I'd made that very clear to him. This would certainly change the dog's experience of life substantially. It was inevitable. They would be growing up with a supernatural, sapient presence sharing their mind, and that was very far removed from a puppy's normal experience. I was willing to do that in order to provide him with a way to survive. I was *not* willing to actually damage or destroy the dog's mind in the process. If he was aggressive in that way, we would have serious issues.

But I was almost sure that they would be able to coexist. The tree spirit didn't need to actually take over or occupy the dog's body, only to have it as an anchor so that the relatively fragile metaphysical structure of the mind was not ripped apart by environmental energy flows.

They could live. It would be an unusual life for both; this kind of sharing, of peaceful cohabitation, was not a common event even in the supernatural realm. They would see through the same eyes, but their minds would be discrete. I would be present to help them with adapting to that life. It was the best solution I could manage. Now, I was just waiting on him to settle on which of the puppies he felt the strongest affinity for.

They were beautiful. The mother's owner was standing next to me, and I could tell that she cared deeply about these dogs. It wasn't hard to see why she wasn't keeping the puppies, though. This apartment was small enough to be cramped just with the mother, and huskies were a demanding breed to care for. This climate was also warmer than they were adapted for, and I'd need to be mindful of that; it added a few more complications.

We stood there in silence for a few long moments, and then I felt a sense of certainty and focus from the spirit, followed by words. *That one. There is a sharpness in her.*

I'd been astonished at how quickly he'd picked up language. After just a handful of weeks, he could think in words and construct sentences. It was amazing, and I strongly suspected that his presence would lead this puppy to develop a great deal more intelligence than an ordinary dog. If sharing my mind for a few weeks could allow him to move from

emotion-concept-imagery communication to complex language skills, I was guessing that sharing with him would be exceptional in its impact on her.

I reached out, brushed my fingers against her fur. "I think I'd like this one, if that's alright?"

The woman nodded. "That's fine, yeah. Nobody's spoken for her yet."

I smiled, and I pushed, just a tiny bit, with my mind. I still didn't have a clue how this worked, and I was pretty sure it was mostly the spirit himself doing it. All I knew for sure was that I felt a strange, full-body tingling sensation for a moment, there was a tiny bit of static electricity between my fingertips, and then the spirit was gone.

It felt strange, disorienting even. I'd gotten accustomed to that background feeling of emotion and thought happening independently of me. For a moment, in that mental silence, I thought he'd died, and this was all a colossal waste of time and energy.

But then I felt it. An emotional resonance, curious and peaceful and familiar. I smiled. I'd been reasonably confident in this, too. Given the familiarity between us, and his relative closeness to the plants that I seemed to be capable of some sort of communication with, it had seemed likely I would still have that empathic link. That would be helpful. The puppy was still sleeping peacefully, and I was sure that the theory had been correct and they were both intact.

I pulled my hand away, with a little bit of reluctance. "I'm glad," I said. "I think she'll be very good for me."

The mother's owner was smiling too. "Sounds good. Her name is Raincloud."

I managed to restrain a sigh. Of course it was. If my dog's name *wasn't* further reinforcing the impression that I had an obsession with weather phenomena, how would anyone know she was mine? And as with Thorn, I wasn't willing to change it. It was her name; it didn't belong to me.

"Great. Thank you. When should I come back to get her?" I was pretty sure she needed a little more time with her mother before she was ready to live independently.

"Give it about a week, I think, and she'll be ready."

"Excellent. If you have any advice for me, in terms of making sure everything's prepared and ready for her, I'd appreciate it."

The woman smiled wider, and I got the impression she approved of that question. We talked for a while about things that would be necessary and things that would be helpful. I arranged payment, since even coming from an owner who seemed to care more about the dogs' well-being than cash, purebred Siberian huskies are rarely free. And then it was done. I'd finished the last of my tasks, in terms of getting people home from that battle.

I stepped out into the dusk, and started walking, with no particular destination. I watched the sunset, and I watched the city lights come on all around me to replace the sunlight. It started to rain, a soft, slow autumn rain that felt gentle on my skin, and I smiled.

It was time to go home. I was exhausted. I was nowhere near fully recovered from my injuries yet, and it had been a long week. It would be good to rest for a little while.