Pawn and Storm

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This book is a work of fiction. All characters, locations, and events are either fictional or are used fictitiously.

This book is dedicated to the Harvard Computers.

If I have a wish it is to find you where I find poetry
Do you ever close your eyes in full sunlight Here close your eyes
You are everything that has not yet been lost
-Joanna Klink, excerpted from "Aerial", *Raptus,* 2010

Die Sprache verkleidet den Gedanken. Und zwar so, dass man nach der äußeren Form des Kleides, nicht auf die Form des bekleideten Gedankens schließen kann; weil die äußere Form des Kleides nach ganz anderen Zwecken gebildet ist als danach, die Form des Körpers erkennen zu lassen.

-Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung 4.002*, 1921

Language disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized.

-Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophico 4.002* 1921; tr. Charles K Ogden 1922

Chapter One

Attending a show at the Blackbird Cabaret was always a fascinating experience.

The building itself contributed a lot to that. Capinera actively refused to add permanent furniture, so you either stood, or you brought a chair or blanket to sit on if there was room at the event in question. The ceiling was open to show ducting and rafters from when the building was a warehouse, and the floor was open concrete except for a single, simple stage. The overall impression was an odd, surreal minimalism. It lent the Blackbird a sort of raw feeling, unfiltered and without any pretense.

Then you had the audience, which was its own kind of bizarre. Capinera didn't exactly bar normal humans from it (though some of the individual performers did), but the crowd was always mostly or entirely drawn from the supernatural community. That never made up a large portion of the total population, but Pittsburgh had enough people to still maintain a decent crowd of us, and the Blackbird had enough of a reputation by now to draw people from further afield as well. I'd seen a lot of very strange people there, many of whom were barely even pretending to be mortals.

And, finally, there was the performance itself. Capinera was easily the most gifted *a capella* vocalist I'd ever heard, and those nights were so intense in their sound and emotion that I could barely tolerate being in the room for them. But most nights, she wasn't performing herself, just providing the space for someone else. Those performers could be very, very strange, and unfortunately their quality was...not often on par with hers.

Tonight's show was some kind of modernist theatre performance. It was very much on the strange side, framed as a murder mystery attempting to find out who murdered Santa Claus. That would have been odd enough already, but then the story started to portray a very different view of him than usual. The suspects included an elf (who was, I thought, genuinely some kind of fae) upset about the slave-driving nature of the North Pole's operations; Rudolf (a minor-talent sorcerer I'd met once, in a bad costume) being depicted as transgender and pregnant with Santa's child for unclear reasons; Frosty (I had no idea what he was, but the impression of an actual snowman was flawless) seeking revenge for a recent violent assault; and Mrs. Claus finally being fed up with Santa's constant adulterous affairs.

It got more surreal from there. I sat and watched, fascinated but also somewhat baffled. The actors either weren't doing a great job, or else they were doing a fantastic job of being artfully clumsy. The whole experience was extremely strange, and even Raincloud, currently lying down on my feet, felt confused.

When I'd grafted a tree spirit into a puppy, for lack of a better word, I'd been expecting to still have mental contact with him. My empathic connection to plants hadn't gone away, and between that and the fact that he'd spent a few weeks living in my head, I'd been guessing that was how it would work. I hadn't been disappointed.

I had *not* expected to also have that connection with the dog's mind. I'd been very careful about making sure she still had her own mind and identity, sure. But I had no connection of that sort with animals. I didn't know why I had one with Raincloud herself. My best guess was that the spirit was somehow mediating it, but he didn't seem to be directly involved; he was separate from her, and her emotions didn't seem to be filtered through him, didn't feel like him. He'd said he wasn't aware of any action on his part in the process.

I didn't know why I had that connection to Raincloud. But I did. I could feel her mix of confused interest and boredom in the back of my head. It wasn't as clear as talking to the spirit in the back of hers; Raincloud hadn't quite gotten the hang of verbal reasoning yet, and she communicated mostly in emotions and sentence fragments.

Then again, given that the husky was only about four months old, that was still impressive as hell. Human children took years before they started to use language. Raincloud did it in a handful of months.

I reached down and scratched her ears a bit. She nuzzled up against my hand, and I felt a surge of affection and happiness enter that emotional mix. I smiled, and relaxed a bit, a tension in my shoulders fading. I hadn't realized it was there until I let those muscles relax again.

There was something about Raincloud's feelings that tended to affect me that way. I would have struggled to explain it in words. It was just a sort of…purity or completeness. When she felt that affection it was genuinely unconditional. Between her age and just, you know, being a dog, she loved without reservation. It was always…touching to feel that.

We watched as the play spun out to a close. The murder mystery went unsolved because, as the actors informed the audience, the writers had gone on strike before finishing the script, so they didn't know how it was supposed to end. I applauded with the rest of the crowd, though I felt more bewildered than impressed.

People started filtering out, crowd and actors both. I stayed where I was, sitting on a small, folding camp chair in the back corner. Capinera let me store it here; she knew that I tended to lose my balance during the more intense shows, so she made sure I had the option of sitting down. I stayed there, pet Raincloud some more, and watched the crowd leave.

Once everyone else was gone, Capinera herself wandered over towards us. She was wearing a simple, dusty-black tunic and pants, giving her a rather severe look, the only spot of color being her eyes.

"Not leaving?" she asked me. Her voice was gentle, and slightly melancholic, as it almost always was.

"Not yet, if that's alright," I said. "My ride's not here yet, and I figured I'd wait inside. Kinda chilly out."

"Of course it's alright," Capinera said, sounding very pointedly patient, as though she were explaining the same thing for the tenth time. Which, to be fair, she was. "You are always welcome here. Both of you."

Raincloud wriggled a bit at that. She was better at understanding words than shaping them, and between that and getting the meaning secondhand from me, she knew what Capinera said. She liked being included.

"Thanks. I know. I just don't like to assume."

"I understand," Capinera said, leaning back against the wall. She seemed to do that rather than sit pretty often; I wasn't sure why. "Saori's not with you tonight?"

"Nah, she's got her own thing tonight. Some kind of street racing deal, not really my scene." I shrugged. "It's not like we're attached at the hip."

"Probably for the best. It's not healthy to become too enmeshed." Capinera smiled a little. "What did you think of the show?"

"It was very...unique," I said, trying my best to be polite without being dishonest. I was pretty sure my tone gave me away, but it seemed courteous to at least make a token effort. "Is it okay if I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"Why do you do this?" I gestured vaguely at the building around us. "Like, run this place, let people use it so freely. It must be an enormous headache. And even if you were particularly concerned with money—which, having seen your living space, I kinda doubt—this is not the kind of business that pays the bills. So why do you do it?"

Capinera was quiet for a long moment before saying, "I suppose I see it as a form of atonement."

I blinked. That...was an unexpected answer. "Atonement," I said. "To...host improv theatre?"

"Among other things. I don't think atonement really has to be a direct inversion of what you did in the past. It's more about the intention and meaning of the action." She shrugged. "I give people a space in which to exist and express themselves freely. I make it easier for them to be who they want to be and to do what they want to do. I've taken a lot of things out of the world. My hope is that this adds something good back into it."

I nodded slowly. "Okay. Yeah. I think I follow. You do a lot to try and make up for those things."

A sad, wry half-smile played across Capinera's features. "I have a lot to make up for."

I always wanted to contest it when Capinera said things like that. I wanted to tell her that she was exaggerating. I wanted to believe that myself. Certainly I had a hard time picturing her committing atrocities. The Capinera I knew was a melancholic, gentle woman, one who spent enormous amounts of time and effort trying to help people, who had risked her life to protect a group of total strangers this past fall without hesitating for a heartbeat. I really wanted to believe that she must be exaggerating her older self's sins, that the obvious guilt she felt was magnifying them in her memory.

I wanted to believe that, but I didn't. The reality of the situation was that there were people who did live how she had described her old habits. There *were* people who killed other people for no reason beyond idle entertainment. And at the end of the day, she was there for that time in her life. I wasn't. It would be incredibly arrogant of me to say on the basis of zero knowledge that she was wrong about it.

"I think you're doing a pretty good job," I said instead. "I don't think I've known many people who were this committed to doing well by others."

"Thank you, Kyoko. That means a lot to me." Her smile was still slight and sad, but her eyes seemed a little less so.

I shrugged. "Just being honest." I checked the time, then stretched a bit. My neck was stiff after sitting still for so long. "Okay, we should probably get going. She'll be here pretty soon. Yes, that means you have to get up, c'mon."

This last was directed at Raincloud. I did not, strictly speaking, have to say it out loud. Much of the actual meaning was being transmitted mentally, and actual speech wasn't necessary for that. But I wasn't all that accustomed to framing thoughts clearly enough and projecting them strongly enough for telepathy to work well. And it was also good for her, I thought. I wanted for her to be able to understand her world and the people around her. By both saying the words and projecting the meaning directly, I was hoping to help her learn the language, and it seemed to be working.

She grumbled a bit, but she stood up and stretched as well. I ruffled her ears a bit more and then got up myself. "Thanks for having us," I said to Capinera, suppressing a yawn.

"Anytime. Thank you for talking with me." She smiled as I walked out of the Blackbird, sad and sweet and gentle. She always seemed so gentle, in every interaction I'd had with her.

But I could see the rapier leaning against the wall beside the door, old and cold and well-used. I heard her locking the door, several locks, and good ones. I could feel the warding spells being armed again, and while I still wasn't sure what those would do to someone who tried to break in, the power I could feel in them was anything but gentle.

It was snowing outside. Not hard, but it was noticeable. I stood and watched the snowflakes dancing in the light of the one functional streetlight in that warehouse lot. Raincloud frolicked in the snow like the puppy she was. Siberian huskies were bred for colder places than this, and a little snow would hardly bother her.

It didn't really bother me either. Oh, I felt a bit cold. I would not have wanted to wait out here if I didn't have to. But it didn't actually *bother* me, didn't register as important. And, in any case, it was only a few minutes before Maddie pulled up.

I got in the car, some older SUV with a lot of cargo area, and had Raincloud on my lap before saying anything. It was for the same reason that I had been waiting outside a few minutes ahead of schedule. Maddie was a friend, and she was happy to give me a ride, particularly given

that she lived not far from here and had an appointment not far from my house. But she was obsessively punctual, and she'd really not appreciate it if we made her anything remotely close to late for that appointment.

I could feel Raincloud's distaste at the vehicle. I couldn't really argue, either. Maddie's car smelled like blood, indelibly so, and while I normally had no objection to that, this was…different. It wasn't fresh, for one thing. This was a layered smell, the product of repeated exposure over the course of years. Fresh blood mostly made Raincloud hungry, and my response was usually either indifference, hunger, or arousal, based on context. But old, stale blood wasn't nearly as pleasant.

And there was something else, though I wasn't sure Raincloud would notice it. I wasn't even sure it was a physical smell; it might have been coming from my perception of the car's energy, its metaphysical qualities. To me, though, it was very apparent. The smell of blood in there was subtly wrong, in a way I couldn't have explained. It just…didn't smell the way blood should, and while it was not intrinsically unpleasant, it was very jarring.

"So how've things been going?" Maddie asked, pulling out of the lot. Her driving was very measured, very calm. Now that I was accustomed to Saori's madcap recklessness and daredevil stunts, it felt almost surreal how sedate Maddie was.

"Pretty well, I think," I said. I shrugged. "I'm pretty much done healing from the mess in September. Thanks again for that, by the way. You were accidentally very helpful in dealing with that situation."

"Anytime. Literally; I hear bizarre stories with no apparent meaning so often you can always count on me to have one." Maddie was grinning.

I snorted. "Yeah, well, that's an increasingly common trait among the people in my life. Though some of them are, ah, a little more *proactive* about finding bizarre stories. Last week Saori burgled a haberdasher. So that she could put a hat on a statue while vandalizing it. I didn't even know haberdashers were a real thing anymore."

Maddie started to laugh, then realized I wasn't, and paused. "Wait. You're not kidding?"

"Nope!" I said cheerfully. "I was there for that one. It wasn't even a nice hat. I have no idea why she bothered."

I wasn't sure what it said about me that this kind of thing was starting to feel almost normal. I mean, it's amazing what all can become normal, can start to feel mundane. I knew that. But still.

"Damn. She's insane." Maddie had met Saori, though only a couple of times. That was enough that while she sounded a bit disgusted, and a bit impressed, and a bit fascinated, she didn't sound *surprised* in the slightest.

"I think that's why we get along with each other, honestly," I agreed. "Who else could tolerate us?"

Maddie laughed, and I grinned, and let her think that I was joking. I wasn't, though, not really. It was something I'd thought about a lot over the past three months or so. And the truth was that while I talked a lot of shit about Saori being a maniac, in my own ways I was every bit as far

past the limits of sanity as she was. The connections I drew between ideas were not normal and were not always rational. My perceptions of the world were so far removed from objective reality a lot of the time that I might as well be hallucinating. Emotionally I was a mess, and while the numerous psychiatric diagnoses when I was younger had been very incomplete, they hadn't exactly been *wrong*.

Maybe it made sense that I seemed to only get along well with lunatics. Who else would understand this? Who would be able to relate to it? Maybe all my friends, definitely including Maddie herself, were nuts because I was insane myself. Maybe sanity and madness just didn't mix well.

I wasn't joking at all. And in its own way, that was the funniest part.

"So how did that trip to Chicago go?" I asked her, rather than try to explain any of that. Raincloud curled up a little more snugly in my lap. She wouldn't be able to do that for all that much longer before she outgrew it. Siberians were not a huge breed, but mine was not a huge lap, and she wouldn't be able to fit like that for long. She knew that, and was relishing it while she had the chance.

"St. Louis," Maddie corrected me. "And it was a shitshow. First the girl I was supposed to be bodyguarding forgot to tell me that oh hey one of the people at this 'business negotiation' was going to be pissed at her for having misplaced a shipment of something, and *apparently* she didn't word the terms of the parley agreement very well because they were able to start shooting without breaking that truce."

I winced at that. Oaths were a huge deal among supernatural creatures of all kinds, without exception as far as I knew. Even among humans who just dealt with them extensively. If someone agreed to a truce, and they broke that promise, they might as well have just cut their own throat, long-term. But that guarantee only extended as far as the exact limits of the oath someone had sworn.

"I know, right? Moron." Maddie would have rolled her eyes if that wouldn't have required her to look away from the road. It was empty, between it being a little past midnight and this being a pretty low-traffic part of the city to begin with. But she was the sort of person who would still follow the guidelines. Hell, as far as I knew she barely ever went above the speed limit unless she was on a job or running late.

"So what happened at that point?"

"Well, I got her dumb ass out of the building. Not the easiest trick, by the way. But whatever, got her out, drove out of there, done. Except then when it was time for her to pay up, she decided instead she should poison me so she didn't have to."

I had to actually close my eyes and take a deep breath at that. "What kind of fucking idiot do you have to be to do that?"

Maddie laughed. "I know, right? I can't fathom why people try this occasionally. Like, girl, you hired me because I was good at keeping people from getting killed. The hell did you think you agreed to pay *for* if you don't think I can survive that? I don't get it. So anyway yeah at that point I

killed her and gave her head to the guy she'd cheated, with a note apologizing for the inconvenience."

"Yeah, honestly, have to admit she kinda deserved that one." I was still trying, and failing, to figure out how many ways this woman had counted as "too dumb to live". I thought at least four but it was hard to say for sure.

"Yup. I don't normally go in for that kind of thing, it's kinda tacky, but that bitch had it coming." Maddie paused, and looked away from the road long enough to glance at Raincloud. "Oh, uh, sorry. Didn't mean to insult you with the comparison there. Can I give you something to apologize, maybe a pendant to hang from your collar or something?" She gestured vaguely with one hand, drawing attention to the bracelet she was wearing. It was silver, set with a vivid, gorgeous scarlet crystal.

I had to admit I was impressed by how smoothly she'd worked that in. I knew Maddie, and had more than half expected this, and yet I still could almost have been convinced that this offer was a natural part of the conversation. Certainly Raincloud fell for it. I could feel her sudden interest, could tell that she was starting to move to agree.

Before she could indicate as much, I interrupted. "No. You may not." My tone wasn't exactly cold, but it was distinctly firm, not at all the casual banter of a few moments ago.

Maddie didn't seem perturbed by that. She just laughed a bit. "Okay, okay. Sorry. Had to try, you know how it is."

I nodded, a little tense, but not terribly so. I did know how it was, and while I was a little upset that she'd tried this stunt with my dog, I wasn't really *angry*. Maddie was what she was. And leaving all other factors aside, she was a freelancer in a line of work where freelancers often didn't fare well. She'd had her own clients try to kill her enough times that it barely even registered to her as meaningful anymore. Holding her to the same standards I would apply to someone without that background would be unfair of me.

Still, I was tense. And I could tell that Raincloud had noticed, because she felt curious. This time the thought she was expressing was formed clearly enough, and specifically enough, to fit it into words. *Why? They're pretty.*

They are pretty, I agreed. I didn't say it out loud this time, though. Maddie knew why I'd stepped in there, but saying it in front of her would still be gauche. And besides, I could use the practice; I was still getting the hang of projecting thoughts clearly and strongly enough for this without saying them out loud. *But they are also dangerous. Maddie can control those crystals; it's why she's always looking to give them to people. She can turn them into weapons very quickly.*

There was a feeling of dawning realization at that. *Oh. I see. Is she not your friend?*

I managed to convey a shrug without actually shrugging, something I'd had to practice; gestures were an automatic thing for me much of the time. *She is my friend, but her life has taught her that friends can become enemies very quickly. She wasn't planning to hurt you; this is something she does with a lot of people, just in case she needs it later.* I ruffled Raincloud's ears a

bit. *We can get something else for you that's not dangerous. Maybe a ruby to hang from your collar. The red* would *look nice on your fur.*

She made a happy sound, and nestled in against me with another surge of affection. I gave her some more pets, and tried not to think about how worried I was that I wouldn't be able to keep her safe.

Chapter Two

Maddie didn't take us all the way home, and I didn't ask her to. She had offered to drive because she was making the trip anyway. She lived pretty close to the Blackbird Cabaret, in the same largely-abandoned post-industrial ghost town of a neighborhood. I was pretty sure she was there for similar reasons, too; it was quiet, and defensible, and there were no neighbors to cause a fuss. She had a meeting in the middle of the night tonight at Mark's, the bar that was one of the other major local social spaces for our crowd.

So, she drove us there and then dropped us off outside the bar. Her need to be early for that appointment was obsessive enough that trying to get her to take us the rest of the way would have been a waste of effort. And it was only a few blocks from Mark's to my house, anyway. Comfortable walking distance, and both Raincloud and I could handle the cold just fine.

The snow was coming down more thickly now. It was a very dense, wet snow; I always noticed that here. Other places I'd been, I'd sometimes seen light, crystalline powder snow, the sort that had more air in it than ice. In Pittsburgh, though, the snow was always wet. We got a lot of slush in the winter, a lot of ice. Honestly, between that and how steep the hill I lived on was, it was entirely possible that Maddie couldn't have driven us the rest of the way if she'd tried. There were a lot of cars that floundered in my neighborhood in the winter. They would try to start up that street, lose traction, and slide right back down.

Snow always had a sort of hushed, soft feeling to it, and it made the world feel like a very different place to me. In the urban night, where the flakes were dancing past the streetlights and the snow on the ground glittered with reflected, artificial light, it felt almost unreal.

As we walked, I felt contemplation coming from Raincloud. It wasn't as clear without skin contact, but I could tell she was thinking about something, and then I got another actual question. It came in the form of a memory of Capinera discussing atonement, and another simple phrase. *Why does she do this?* That was always the question that caught her curiosity most sharply, a trait I suspected she was picking up from me. Raincloud didn't have half as many questions about "what" and "how" as she did about "why".

I sighed and shrugged. "I don't know either, really. It's not something I would do. The fixation on atonement seems like an unhealthy attachment to the past. It's not like feeling guilty about the people she's killed makes them less dead. Personally I tend to think that what you do tomorrow matters more than yesterday." I was impressed by Capinera's dedication, sure, but there was at least as much confusion in it as respect. My grasp on morality was tenuous at the best of times, and her approach to the topic felt particularly strange.

But I was used to that. Not understanding other people's moral reasoning was a familiar feeling for me.

It was a quiet walk after that. I was lost in thoughts that I couldn't turn into words, listening to the snow crunching under my feet. Raincloud was continuing to frolic. We turned and started up the hill, and the footing got worse, forcing me to actually pay attention to walking.

There was very little warning. I didn't see the woman coming at all. I wasn't sure whether that was the result of magical concealment or she was just good at hiding and I wasn't paying enough attention. Regardless, by the time I realized she was stepping out of the alley beside me, she was right next to me and the sword was already in motion.

I twisted aside, more by luck than skill, and rather than take my head off, she just sliced into my shoulder. Dodging like that had put me off balance, though, and the ground was icy. The world felt suddenly like it was moving very, very slowly as I started to fall.

Somewhat frantically, I reached out and grabbed the cloak she was wearing. Some idle part of me noted that this was very surreal. Who wears a cloak and uses a sword in this day and age? The rest of me, though, was much more busy tugging and twisting. The motion was instant, reflexive; it had been a while since my judo classes, but muscle memory stuck around, and I'd practiced this sacrifice throw a lot back then.

She was probably pretty strong. But I had leverage, I was making her support my full body weight, and the footing was very poor. The end result was that I still fell, but so did she, and she was the one who went flying downhill.

I scrambled to my feet. Raincloud was starting to react now, and thank fuck she was smart enough for that reaction to be shying away from the woman rather than trying to attack. At some point in the process of getting upright again, my hand came down on Thorn's hilt without me quite noticing it.

The sword was clingy, and it had a habit of showing up randomly in my presence. In the past this had mostly been funny, and on occasion distinctly inconvenient. Right about now, though, I was grateful as all hell for it.

I hadn't drawn Thorn since that first night in the woods, when I had deliberately chosen to kill someone for the first time. I framed it mentally as a respect thing, not to treat the sword casually. To a degree that was true; drawing a blade like Thorn was not a small action. If I was being honest, though, it was probably more that the sword scared the hell out of me.

Regardless, I had never drawn it from its sheath, only from the tree it was housed in before I claimed it. But its grip fit into my hand perfectly. Undoing the restraining strap felt natural, the snap holding it closed working smoothly. It was a very modern sort of fastener, but then, Thorn was not an old relic, just a strong one. Around the time I was fully upright, it slipped out of its sheath, and I could swear the sound it made as it was drawn was a song.

The world stood still for a moment, just as it had when I last drew Thorn. Everything seemed to pause and hold its breath for just a second before resuming. Now that it was free of the sheath its magic felt overpowering, the scent of flowers and blood thick in the air, dark flames forming a sort of overlay on my vision. The woman in front of me finished getting to her feet as well, and she had her sword in hand.

I noted that I had been a little hypocritical a moment earlier. I'd thought she was silly for having a sword, but here I was holding one myself. They even looked sort of similar. They were both relatively short, both curved forward. It was hard to tell for sure in the dark, but I thought hers was bronze, and the metal had a strong resemblance to the amber inlay on Thorn.

We started to close on each other, moving slowly with how bad the footing was. She'd clearly been hoping to kill me on that first attack, and now that it had failed, she was much more cautious. I was bleeding from the cut on my shoulder, but it was on my off arm, and I could barely feel it. The euphoria and bloodlust surging up into me from Thorn was enough to make that pain feel...trivial. I realized I was grinning and I didn't know why.

She lunged once we got close; I was guessing she was hoping to take me by surprise. It didn't work out so great for her. The world still felt like it was moving in slow motion, and I was able to sidestep without losing my balance this time. The sword didn't miss by much, but it did miss, and as it went past I swiped at it with Thorn. The inner curve of the blade, the side that was easier to cut with, caught her weapon near the hilt.

Any competent swordsman would tell you that parrying with the edge of your sword is stupid. It's a technique for movies, for choreographed fights that are meant to be flashy. It's foolish, it risks breaking your own weapon, and it'll certainly dull the edge of the blade. If you have to parry with your sword, and you'd rather not, you want to use the flat of the blade.

Anyone could tell you that, and would. With any other sword, they might be right. Thorn, though, was...not like other swords. I didn't really know what enchantments were laid on the blade, didn't know how it worked. But I knew that the sword was more durable, and its edge sharper, than anything else I'd ever seen. And so, I didn't so much *parry* the other woman's weapon as just slice it in half. Thorn cut through it so easily it felt more like I was cutting wood than bronze, and not even a sturdy wood, at that.

Suddenly losing that much weight from her sword threw the attacker off balance. She stumbled back a step, trying to adjust to having been suddenly disarmed. Without even thinking, moving on muscle memory and instinct, I followed, and turned the momentum as I descended the hill into a thrust.

Metal put up only a token resistance to Thorn's edge. Flesh and bone didn't manage even that much, and the claw-like profile of the blade was well-suited to an overhand thrust. Before she could adjust to what had already happened, the woman was left looking down at the sword that had pierced through her just beside her sternum. Her mouth formed a soft "oh", more surprise than pain. And then she fell.

I let go of the grip, and Thorn fell with the body. She was already dead, and there was already enough blood in the snow to have me a bit freaked out. The sword's power was still an intense, almost painful presence in the world, but the euphoria faded slightly once I let go of it, and the bloodlust settled out into a sort of calm, sated feeling, a satisfaction.

The moment the fight was over, Raincloud was running over to me. I could feel her anxiety, her worry about the cut I'd taken. Now that the adrenaline rush was starting to fade, and I could

feel it, I was a bit worried too. It wasn't actually dangerous, I was sure of that, but it had gotten into muscle and I would have a hard time using that arm for a little while. I healed unnaturally well and quickly, but still, it was troubling.

I tried not to let that show, though. Raincloud didn't need to carry my stress, too. I just knelt down and hugged her. "Shh," I said. "It's alright. I'm alright. Pretty sure it was just her, and she can't hurt us now."

She calmed down quickly, and I stood up. I felt a lot more tired than I had a few minutes ago. "Come on," I said, turning away from the body. "Let's go home."

I left Thorn behind in the body. I wasn't worried about it being stolen. As I had been assured, and as it had demonstrated, it would always find its way back to me.

We got home without further incident. I knew it was a bit silly, but I still felt a lot more relaxed once we were inside and the door was firmly locked. That feeling was largely an illusion, given that my house was hardly a fortress, but it was an illusion I needed.

Now that I was calming down a bit and able to think more clearly, I realized that I had a pretty significant problem on my hands. I'd killed people before, on two occasions, but both times I'd had some degree of organizational backing. And while I'd known, on some level, that it was inevitably going to happen again now that I had Thorn in my keeping, I'd been hoping it would take more than a few months before things escalated that far. Now that they had, I realized I hadn't really done much to prepare for the aftermath.

There was a dead body in the street. It was well past midnight, and no one sane wanted to be out traveling in this weather, so I doubted it had been seen yet. But that couldn't last. There was a lot of blood out there and it would absolutely show in the snow. I hadn't gotten a ton of it on me, but there was some, if only because I was bleeding, too. Would someone be able to follow it straight to my door? I wasn't sure.

I tried to think of what to do, and ended up grabbing my phone. My hands were surprisingly steady. Derek answered on the second ring; he usually stayed up late, which was why I'd called him rather than one of the other werewolves.

"Hey," I said. "It's Kyoko. Listen, I uh, I kinda need a favor. Some girl just jumped me with a sword a few blocks from my house."

"Are you okay?" The concern in Derek's voice was instant, and sort of touching. It was nice to know he cared.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," I said. "But I don't really know what to do about the body. I'd *really* rather not talk to the cops about this. I don't know if you guys, like, know a fixer or something, but it seemed worth a try."

The pause felt like it stretched out too long, but it was probably just me, because he sounded pretty chill when he did answer. "Yeah. I know a guy. Send me the address and I can get him out there pretty quick, I think. Should be fine."

I felt a palpable wave of relief at that. It had seemed like a relatively safe bet; for a variety of reasons, werewolf packs tended to have some degree of criminal connections. But still, it was a relief. “Thanks. I can pay you back later.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said dismissively. “It’s what friends are for. I have to go call him, but would you be okay with meeting up tomorrow? Kinda worried about you.”

“That should be fine. Coffee around lunchtime work?”

“Yeah, sounds good. Have a good night.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

I hung up, and tried not to think about how many kinds of disturbed I felt right now. I was moderately successful. It was easier once Raincloud came over and leaned against my legs. Her presence was calming, in a few ways. I could tell she was still worried about me, but that was fading away quickly now that we were home and she was sure the injury really was as mild as I’d said. Raincloud had a very immediate focus in some ways, good at releasing thoughts about the past or the future, and she let go of that anxiety quickly once the threat was past. I wasn’t sure how much of that was personality, how much was age, and how much was just that even a sapient dog was still a dog. But regardless, it was calming, grounding.

I was a little calmer now. But I still got my sawed-off shotgun from the basement before going up to my living area on the third floor. Upstairs, I found Thorn leaning against my desk, back in its sheath. It felt satisfied. I looked at it for a moment, and then I looked away, and went to wash off the blood.

The laceration in my shoulder was, as I'd expected, fairly minor. It was noticeable, sure, but it wasn't a serious impairment. And while I didn't heal as quickly as a werewolf, I was still significantly better than human baseline. I was guessing it would only be a few days before it was completely healed, at most. I didn't even bother bandaging it, just washed it in the shower and put a clean shirt over it. Infection wasn't a huge risk for me. Like poisons, infectious diseases seemed to have little effect on me for some reason. I did not get colds, hadn't had one since I was a teenager.

It took time, though, and energy. By the time I was done, I was feeling tired. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep yet, though, and ended up at my computer instead. Raincloud came and curled around my feet almost immediately, and she was *absolutely* capable of sleeping. I could feel her dreams flickering in the back of my head, half-formed presences much more pleasant than mine usually were. Even the tree spirit cohabiting with her seemed to be asleep, or something like it. I wasn't entirely clear on how that worked, but he did seem to go dormant most of the time when she was asleep, and that was definitely the case now.

I spent a while working on a logo design I'd agreed to do for some Australian guy who owned a ranching supply store. He'd had a hard time finding someone to do that work, and now that I was halfway through the project, I could understand why. I wasn't making much progress, but I was too worked up to sleep still, and too distracted and tired to do much of anything well. It was something to do with my hands while I calmed myself down more than anything.

Eventually, I gave up and closed out of the program. It hadn't helped much; I still felt antsy, on edge. I looked for something else to distract myself with, and saw that Pepper was online. Talking with her was probably a better distraction anyway. She was usually…very good at drawing my attention.

EmeraldKeychain: *You're up early.*

The response was immediate. **thepeppermintcondition:** *couldn't sleep. you'e up late*

EmeraldKeychain: *Ditto. Been a really long day. Tired. I like the name, by the way, you're getting better at them.*

thepeppermintcondition: *thankts, i was feeling existential. and yeah ai can relate to that*

I thought about what I'd just done to leave me feeling so drained and anxious, and had to fight to keep the giggling from waking Raincloud. **EmeraldKeychain:** *For your sake, I really and truly hope you can't.*

thepeppermintcondition: *you know key sometimes you say these theings and i can't quite tell whpether you're baeing a drama queen oryou really are this liek. spooky serial killer cannibal girl just hannibaling it up on here. alo;s either way i assure you i can relate because i have been awake since thurestday morning and i am tired beyond words.*

I winced. It was Saturday, or, well, tipping over into Sunday by now. She was sitting at around seventy-two hours without sleep. I knew from experience how brutal that was.
EmeraldKeychain: *I have to maintain the air of mystery somehow. And that explains the typos. Why haven't you slept?*

thepeppermintcondition: *a few things. got the usual, you know hos;w it is. insomnia, back hurts like hell, etc. but also parents hasdfve been worsae then usual; laately.they uasually only treat *me* like shit, so it's kinda fun to hearwe them screaming ateach other too. notg reaat for my sleep schasduel though.*

I winced again. Pepper's parents were...a special kind of terrible. I really didn't even know how to capture the extent of it in words. My understanding was that her mother once threatened to kill her for not falling asleep quickly enough. She'd needed medical care more than once because of her father's tendency to lose his temper while drunk. Her relatives made *mine* look good by comparison, and that was not something I had cause to say often.

EmeraldKeychain: *I hate those people. Like. When they die, I'm having a party on your behalf. There will be cake. Just so you know.*

thepeppermintcondition: *thank you but also pie > cake you we;irdo. on which note i had to call off today, really no t functional enosugh for a kitchen, so i've got time. chess?*

I hesitated. I thought I should probably try to sleep some. I mean, I had at least two people to meet today, and given that someone had literally tried to kill me a few hours ago, it would probably be smart for me to rest. I did *not* want to be dull from lack of sleep right now.

But Pepper clearly needed some support at the moment. And she was a friend. She deserved so much better than the life she had, and while I couldn't do much for her, having someone to talk to when her life was this awful was...better than nothing.

Fuck it. I had practice at functioning without sleep, and an ungodly amount of caffeine on hand. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Sure, sounds like fun.*

I sucked at chess. Oh, I knew how to play, the rules and the basics of strategy. But I didn't play very *well* at the best of times. The kinds of spatial mapping, prediction, and alertness the game required were not easy for me. I did a little better in person, because I could get a better sense of my opponent's headspace and plans, and I could play without relying so much on logical analysis. That kind of intuitive play still didn't do great, but it was at least erratic, swinging between extremes of unexpected insight and profoundly dumb choices. Online my play was consistent, but it was consistently mediocre.

Pepper, on the other hand, was quite good at chess. Ordinarily she kicked my ass any day, and we played with the understanding that she was taking it easy on me to be sporting and it was still mostly a thing we did because my flailing was funny to watch.

Currently, though, she was running on fumes after spending three days awake. That entire time had been spent at either a job she hated, or in a house which she desperately wanted to leave

but didn't have a way to escape from. So while I was fairly sure she couldn't relate to the specific event that had left me feeling so drained, she *was* absolutely exhausted, and extremely stressed. As a result the matches were actually relatively even this time, a comedy of errors that was kind of spectacular.

peppercorndog: *you do realize you just left your rook opean, right?*

EmeraldKeychain: *Probably! Also and incidentally, remember what I said about you getting better at coming up with handles? Yeah I take that back so much.*

peppercorndog: *lov3ey you too key. how's the acid fuzzbath doing?*

I wasn't entirely sure why Pepper had started using nicknames related to acid for Raincloud. It was something about how she behaved like she was high, and then concatenating her name with acid rain. It didn't make a ton of sense to me, but I'd checked with Raincloud and she thought it was hilarious, so I just kinda rolled with it.

EmeraldKeychain: *Currently asleep on my feet. I think she's dreaming about playing fetch, she keeps pawing the air occasionally.* I could also feel the rough shape of the dreams directly through that mental bond, but I was hardly going to mention that part.

peppercorndog: *lucky bitch. why can't i ever get dre ams about playing fetch? that'd be great. but noooo, my subnconscious just deicide s to give me sureealist nightmares about squid instead.*

I made the very conscious decision not to ask. I had enough nightmares of my own without adding Pepper's, and honestly, I did *not* want to know what her subconscious came up with on the theme of squid. For once, I was smart enough not to ask anyway.

EmeraldKeychain: *Yeah kinda same vibe here. Last night mine was something about being strangled by an eel. No clue why. The hell do you think you're doing with that knight?*

peppercorndog: *key if you think that i'm thinking abi;ut what i'm doingt right now, you have fundamnentally failed to undersand the situation. god i'm tired. they're supposed to be leaving in a few hours, hopefully i can sleep some then.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Here's hoping. Did something set them off, or are they just being themselves?*

peppercorndog: *holidays. holidays are always worshe. and then also his cousin got laid off, so now he's freaking out worrie d that he will be too, so he takes it out on everyone else. c'est la vie.*

EmeraldKeychain: *What the hell does that have to do with anything? They don't even work in the same field, right?*

peppercorndog: *girl i stopped trying to make these people mak esense years aog. you can't find rational thinking where it do;jesn't exist, and it's not worht the headache to try.*

I sighed. Yeah, she was probably right about that. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Yeah, I know. I guess I still have this impulse to try and understand people like them. Like if I can just figure out what's*

going on in their head I can get through to them. You'd think I'd know better by now, but c'est la vie.

peppercorndog: *so it goes. when logic tries to argue with neuroticism, it's usually the sane part that breaki;s first. brians do be weird that way. mate in five.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Pepper. You just moved your queen right in front of a bishop. Also, I *do* still have a degree in neuroscience, I have a pretty good idea how weird brains are.*

peppercorndog: *...welp. not my brightest move. also i always forget about that for some reason. i guess you don't really writet he way i expec;t academicsfd to, aside from the bit where you proofread and grammar check in causual chats.*

I smiled a little bit at that at that comment. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Like I said, I have to maintain the mystique. A proper mysterious demeanor doesn't just develop itself, you know. And anyway I wouldn't call myself an academic. It's been quite some time since I was involved in that world.*

peppercorndog: *you do a great jobn on it 10/10 would be perplexed by again. how old are you, anyway? i've never gotten clea ron that.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Old enough I could have died. Young enough I haven't yet.*

peppercorndog: *see key that's another of those things where i don't know whether you're being melodramatic or i should actually be really unsettled by what you just siad. well played, very impressed by the mystiqzue. god i feel twitchy thpis morning.*

EmeraldKeychain: *You're at about the point where most people start hallucinating from sleep deprivation. Not terribly surprised. How long until you can lie down?*

peppercorndog: *honey i think we both know that neihter of us needs help from sleep dep to hallucinate. and about two hours i htink. they're supposed to leave about then and i'm guessing there wil;l be anothe rscreaming match when they do, so not worth trying yets.*

I winced. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Ugh. Yeah probably not. Looks like I'm probably skipping sleep for tonight, and I don't have anything actually planned until late morning. So I can keep you company for a while longer. Another game?*

peppercorndog: *sure, sounds good. and thanks. like, seriously, thank you. i am not sure you understand how much this means to me. i mean, i think probably sitting and playing chess with someone online isn't something that most people would see as a big deal. but things are really bad for me right now. and this is helping a lot.*

I smiled a little bit when I read that, though I was guessing it mostly looked sad. Raincloud twitched and made a soft sound in her sleep, and I took a moment to pet her before responding. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Sometimes it's the smallest things. I remember back in high school, when my life was really hellish, some employee at a convenience store asked if I was okay. I almost broke down crying because I'd been really fucked up for a while, to the point I was considering suicide pretty seriously, and it felt like this total stranger was the only person who'd noticed anything wrong. I still remember that guy. So yeah I get what you mean.*

peppercorndog: *yeah. guess you might. i can't really talk about this stuff with anyone else. not and have them understand at all. so, yeah, thank you. also did you seriously just do that with your rook wtf girl sometimes i worry about you be;ause that is the ;ikind of play i would expect someone to make after a traumatic brain injury.*

I laughed. Raincloud stirred again at the noise, just enough to nestle in against me more closely. **EmeraldKeychain:** *The health of my brain is extremely suspect, but I don't think it's gotten worse. The concussion was rough, but not acute brain damage rough. So I'm probably fine.*

peppercorndog: *that'ss good. how's foxface doing?*

EmeraldKeychain: *Pretty decent. She's most of the way to recovered now, enough that she's out bullying the local street gangs. The wreck did not do much to discourage her.* I'd presented the injuries Saori and I had picked up a few months ago as the product of a car wreck. I didn't love that, but I hadn't wanted to keep my injuries a secret from Pepper either. And the kinds of damage that we'd had was all consistent with that narrative; blunt force trauma was much the same, whether the momentum slamming you into a wall was coming from a vehicle or a spell.

Pepper also didn't know Saori's name, and certainly didn't know she was a kitsune. But I'd presented her as having a fox-themed nickname, and Pepper had just taken it from there on her own. It was...simpler that way. It meant that if I slipped and referred to something related to that, it would be easy to pass it off as a joke or a bit of poor phrasing. I didn't love having to think that way, either, but it was so much better than the alternative.

peppercorndog: *good. and good she's in shape for, ah, extracurricular activities. cause girl you realtly needed that.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Preaching to the choir. She's planning to come over again tomorrow. Today. Whatever, you know what I mean.*

peppercorndog: *as oppposed to what, coming under?*

I sighed. If those two ever actually talked to each other, they'd get along great, though I was a bit nervous about the prospect of actually introducing them. I was quite sure they'd get on like a house on fire, but with Saori involved there was a very real chance that wouldn't be just an idiom.
EmeraldKeychain: *Yes, well done, you're very clever.*

peppercorndog: *thank you, thank you. also;p thank fuck because i can finally hear them getting ready to leave.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Isn't it still, like, four in the morning there?*

peppercorndog: *just after five, so close enough. they're taking a road trip to visit her family, which in a true chrissmas miracle meands i get the house ;to myself for a week. idk why they deiceides to leave this early something about traffice but i'm so much not complaining. i'm going to go get ready for bed again. seriously, thank s. also good luck with that terrible exhaustion which mustn't be related upon.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Anytime. Though preferably not this time specifically if you can help it, because mornings are awful. I should try to rest for at least a couple hours I guess.*

peppercorndog: *good lurk. give the acid bath a hug for me. gnight.*

I smiled a little, and thought for a moment before grabbing my phone. I wrote out two quick texts, one to Saori to let her know that I'd been attacked, was okay, and would be at Softened Dreams tomorrow; and one to Alice asking whether I could drop by tomorrow and have her look at something.

That done, I scooped Raincloud up, gave her a hug, and went to lie down. My sleep, if you could even call it that, was fitful, restless, and full of bloody laughter. There was, perhaps inevitably, a squid involved.

Alice was free for a while, she'd said, starting a little before noon. That was kind of awkward timing for me, not allowing a lot of time to rest and likely to run over into when I'd said I'd meet Derek. I wasn't complaining, though. For her to have availability at all on such short notice was quite generous on her part. More to the point, she was a very useful person to know, and I hardly wanted to get on her bad side.

It wasn't snowing today, but it was if anything colder than last night. I was just as glad for that. It meant I could wear a longer coat without it looking odd, and that meant I could conceal weapons much more readily. Sure, I had access to Thorn regardless, and that helped a lot. But...there were reasons swords were no longer the favored weapon of the mortal world. I had pepper spray and a few useful little trinkets on hand, today. I'd also managed to fit my shotgun under that coat, which was probably illegal, but given the shotgun itself was *definitely* illegal it didn't really matter much.

Even with everything bundled under the coat, I was nervous. I didn't usually carry weapons, for a variety of reasons, and I felt irrationally afraid that at any moment someone would call me out on it.

But no one did. People on the street walked past without noticing me much at all. The rideshare driver balked at Raincloud, but a few twenties were enough to persuade him. He didn't comment on anything else. As it started to sink in that I was getting away with this, the anxiety faded out into an odd sense of power. I had so many ways to kill these people, and none of them even knew it. There was a strange, almost elated feeling in that.

Alice lived in a very ordinary house in Homewood. Or, well, an ordinary house for the area. It was a bad part of town, deeply impoverished after generations of societal neglect. There were a lot of buildings that were abandoned around there, boarded up or falling in on themselves, many with notices up saying the building had been condemned. As a result, the fact that Alice's windows had bars and were boarded over anyway didn't make the building stand out much. The front yard was barren dirt under the snow. She...wasn't really big on aesthetics in general. At a glance, her house looked as abandoned as its neighbors.

But walking up to it, I could feel the power in the building. Alice maintained some pretty serious wards on her house. They weren't, like, world class or anything, but she'd discussed their

theory and design with me a bit, and they were plenty scary enough. My understanding was that while the first layer just reflected kinetic energy back at the source when someone tried to break through, if you tried too hard it started setting off landmines. Not literally, but close enough.

I was always very courteous when I was in the wizard's home. I didn't expect her to do anything to me; we'd been on fairly good terms since we met a few months ago. But being in her house, where she'd had plenty of time to prepare things and I was surrounded by those wards, felt a little bit like sitting in a room knowing the person chatting with you had a loaded gun. You might be friends. You might not expect them to shoot you. But you're very aware that they *could*.

On which note, I dropped my own just inside the door, after she'd lowered the wards and waved me in. Carrying a weapon into someone's home was...kind of the exact opposite of courteous, really.

"So what's up?" Alice asked, leading me into the building. She was moving slowly; my understanding was that her left hip and knee had been badly enough damaged in September that she was expecting to have a limp for the rest of her life. She looked like a normal human otherwise, a woman a little bit too young for the iron-grey streaks in her hair, dressed in a simple T-shirt and sweatpants. I could feel the magic hanging around her like a shimmering cloud, though, and it was strong enough to give the lie to that impression of normalcy immediately.

"Mm. Lot of things, but in particular I was hoping you could look at something for me," I said. "A sword. It's extremely magic, but I am...not qualified to say much more than that. And I'd like to know."

She glanced back at me, and her eyes were dark and knowing for the split second before I looked away. "This is the sword from that tree."

"Yeah. It is." I didn't see much point in trying to hide that.

"You haven't asked me before this. Why now?"

I shrugged. "The last few times we talked, I was mostly working out how to get Raincloud to happen. She's doing well, by the way." At the moment, she was curled up next to my shotgun by the door for a nap. She had very little interest in this conversation. Raincloud had a surprising degree of interest in magical theory, and routinely sat in on my remedial lessons lately, but this specific topic didn't seem to catch her interest. "That seemed more of an immediate need. And then I still need to get enough groundwork that jumping straight to this seemed...premature."

"But now you want to know?" Alice pulled open a trapdoor, an actual trapdoor, and started down the ladder to her lab. I felt kind of bad for her; managing that with her leg had to be hell.

"Yeah, kinda need to now. I...had to draw it again. And I have questions." I didn't say why I'd needed to use Thorn, and she didn't ask. There...really weren't many plausible answers.

I wasn't exactly being dishonest. Raincloud's odd symbiotic relationship with the tree spirit had taken a fair amount of work to set up. And the rest of my study time had been decidedly of the remedial nature. I was moderately well-informed about the supernatural world, and I could perceive and identify magical signatures and lingering energies better than just about anybody. But

I'd never learned much about the theory or practice of magic, how it actually *worked* and how it was used. The parts I did know a lot about were esoteric, scattered between topics more or less at random.

There was another element to it, though. I was scared to learn what Thorn actually was, what it could do, what I'd done when I pulled it out of that tree. I'd been putting off asking questions like this as a result.

"I see. Did you bring it with you?"

"Not on me. But it seems to kinda…show up on its own, especially if I want it. I don't know how, that's one of the things I wanted to ask about."

"Well then. I have an hour or so. Let's take a look."

I sighed, and started down the ladder after her.

I'd never been in a wizard's laboratory or workshop space before meeting Alice. I wasn't sure what I'd expected from it, either. It just wasn't something I'd ever really considered much. But it definitely wasn't what I'd gotten.

Her lab was a disaster area. It was pretty large, but every inch of it was cluttered with various supplies, tools, and half-finished projects. She had some really strange stuff in there, too. I'd gotten in the habit of leaving most of it very carefully alone. There were *stories* about what happened to people who wandered around a wizard's workshop carelessly. And granted those wizards had been quite a bit stronger than Alice, but it still just seemed…unwise to risk it. I didn't even look too closely at most of what she had in there, let alone touch it.

She went to a relatively open workbench, moved a Bunsen burner and a vice out of the way, and turned towards me expectantly.

With some reluctance, I closed my eyes and focused. This part I *had* experimented with a little, since it didn't require actually drawing the sword. Thorn was generally content to be left on its own for anywhere from eight to twelve hours. After that point it was liable to randomly, inexplicably show up wherever I was. It didn't seem to matter in the slightest how far away I was, or where I'd left the sword. It could find its way out of a locked safe and show up on Saori's dashboard three hundred miles away, as we'd learned in a particularly awkward way when we went to a concert in Philadelphia last month.

I couldn't really keep it away. But there was a certain kind of *want,* of focused and intentional desire, that seemed to bring it to me immediately. I couldn't have really described the feeling; it wasn't quite the same as asking for it, or thinking about it, or even just wanting it to show up. It was a much more focused feeling than that, more intentional.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw Thorn on the floor under one of the workbenches. I picked it up and handed it to Alice without a word.

She drew it from the sheath, slowly, and set it on the table. Then she grabbed one of the stools and sat down to look at it.

It took a while. It took long enough that the feeling of Thorn's magic, blood and flowers and shadowed flame, shivers down my spine and giddy laughter just above the threshold of hearing, was starting to make my eyes ache. I sat down after a few minutes and started looking at pictures on my phone while she examined the sword. Occasionally she muttered to herself; I didn't try to make out the words.

Finally, Alice put down the loupe and slid Thorn back into its sheath, looking a little strained. I let out a sigh of relief as that overwhelming aura of power faded away. She turned towards me and said, quite simply, "God damn."

I put my phone away. "That bad, huh?"

She shrugged. "That *something*. Okay. To preface this, I am not remotely competent to actually analyze this thing. I'm pretty good at this, but I know my limits, and that sword is well outside of them. So keep that in mind."

"Noted. So it's better than what you make?"

Alice just stared at me. "It's better than anything I've ever *seen.* By at least two orders of magnitude, maybe more. I can't even tell how many workings it's imbued with; I can identify at least six, and make guesses at what they do, but there are probably others. The structure is very, very intricate; the same piece of geometry might be a part of three different workings, with a different function in each. I can't make many confident statements, and you aren't going to like the ones I can."

I winced. "Oh. Well. Might as well get started then."

The wizard nodded. "So to get the obvious out of the way, there are at least two enchantments making it structurally stronger. They're both fairly standard, but far more powerful than I would normally expect. I would be shocked if you found a way to break that sword. It will never dull, and it will never stain. Its structure is preserved too well for that."

I nodded. "Yeah, kinda figured. It seems to cut through steel without any real issue, so…yeah."

"Right. Those are the obvious ones. The next is different, much more abstract, and if you'd asked me an hour ago I would have said it was impossible. You said it keeps showing up near you? I'm guessing it's actually teleporting."

I waited for Alice to continue. She didn't, just looked at me like what she'd said was deeply significant. After a few moments of that, I prompted, "And that's important?"

"Yeah, it uh. It definitely is. Look, true teleportation is…virtually impossible." Alice was looking at Thorn now, in much the same way she might look at a venomous snake, or possibly an armed landmine. "There are tons of ways to fake it. Tricks with Otherside portals, manipulations of space, arbitrarily fast movement…but actual teleportation, directly moving from one point to another, is almost impossible. There are only a handful of beings that can do it, and essentially all of them are gods. At a human power level…there are standing prizes and awards for anyone that can figure it out."

I was staring at the sword too, now. “But Thorn does it all the time.”

“Of course it has a name,” Alice sighed. “And yes. It does. I think that structure is also contributing to its sharpness. When it cuts something, it’s also manipulating space in some way to make it do more damage. Which is also impossible, by the way. I guess nobody told it that.”

“I didn’t pick the name,” I said, in a distinctly sour tone. “Great. So that’s three, right?”

“Yeah. Fourth is some emotional thing. That’s far outside my skillset, so I can’t really tell what it does beyond that. Fifth is another that’s hard to explain. Short version, it cuts magic too. Not sure how it works exactly, but I can definitely feel it pulling minor workings apart, and fast. With how powerful this thing is, it’d probably take a hell of a strong piece of magic to stop it.”

I was starting to see why people would start wars over a sword like this. “So it’s basically indestructible. It can’t be lost, stolen, or disarmed. And it’ll cut through pretty much anything, up to and including magic.”

“Yeah. And there’s at least one more structure that I can just barely spot. I can’t quite tell what it does, it’s very abstract and I don’t know how it works. My best guess is that it’s to do with healing. It might cause health problems just to be around it, for all I know.”

There was a long silence after that. Finally, I said, “Well then. You ever get the feeling that you’re in hot water so far over your head that you’re about to pass the eggs someone’s boiling?”

“I do not,” Alice said. “That’s a great analogy, though, and I’m definitely stealing it in case I need it later.”

“Thanks, that means a lot to me. Okay. I should probably get going. Thanks again, sorry about the short notice. How much do I owe you?” I pulled out a scrap of paper to write it down.

“Thirteen ounces of pigeon blood collected at night. A bottle of moonlight collected without light pollution. I’ll give you containers for those. Oh, and four ounces of cypress needles from within city limits.”

I nodded. This was another reason I hadn’t brought Thorn for her to look at before this. Alice seemed to like me, and she seemed to think she owed me from September for some reason. But there’s very little in this world that’s free, and an education was high on the list of things that wasn’t. She didn’t take payment in cash, either; she always asked for this kind of bizarre shopping list. She claimed it was to use these as reagents in her lab, or workshop or whatever this space was. Personally I was guessing more than half the time she was just fucking with me. For someone who specialized in analytical thought and careful works of magic, Alice was surprisingly mischievous.

“Great. Thanks for bringing the sword in, by the way. I’m glad I got the chance to examine it. Please don’t ever bring it back.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I sighed. “But I think we both know it’s not going to be that easy.”

I took the containers she gave me, and climbed back up the ladder to collect Raincloud, wincing a bit at the strain it put on my shoulder. I really needed to get better at dodging. I tucked the shotgun under my coat again, but I left Thorn in a bush right outside Alice’s door. It could find me, and it would be tricky to conceal it.

Chapter Four

Things with Alice hadn't taken as long as I'd expected, and it was still relatively early when I walked into Softened Dreams. I'd thought about going somewhere else first, but even if I could have thought of anything useful to do, I probably wouldn't have. The coffeehouse had a number of good qualities, but right now the one I was most interested in was that it was pretty damn safe. Nobody in their right mind, and few people who are out of it, will start shit in that building. The consequences of ignoring Hope's policy of neutral ground and peaceful conduct are just too immediate and scary.

Normally, that only really mattered to me in that I liked the quiet. It was a very low-stress, lowkey kind of environment, and I appreciated that about it.

Today, though? I mean…someone tried to kill me last night. Granted she hadn't done a great job of it, but as the ache in my left shoulder was happy to remind me, I'd gotten pretty damn lucky. And worse, I still had no idea whatsoever who she was, why she wanted me dead, or whether she had friends who felt similarly.

So yeah. I was fine with spending some time at Softened Dreams on my own before Derek or Saori got there. Right about now, I was very okay with that idea.

It was fairly busy at the moment. Just before lunchtime was always a popular time at a coffeehouse, I'd found. There were quite a few people in there, and several that I knew or recognized. There were a pair of identical twin sisters in the corner who had a slightly eerie tendency to finish each other's sentences, meals, and romantic affairs, and who had once paid me an exorbitant amount of money to help arrange the latter. At present, they were playing chess against each other, and losing. The guy in the corner who wasn't even pretending to mix coffee in with his whiskey was named Ralph, and he was always very respectful towards me ever since he saw Saori drunk one time. I think after that he was just impressed that I spent time around her voluntarily and hadn't yet died as a result. One of the employees currently present, whose name was Ezekiel and who quite reasonably went by Sparrow instead, always found excuses to visit my table so he could pet Raincloud. Others I recognized and might have spoken with a time or two, but I didn't really know them.

On impulse, once I'd gotten my tea and some sort of raspberry-based pastry, I took them over to a table by the back wall. As busy as it was, there was still a noticeable space left open around that table, where people didn't want to get too close. Naturally, I walked right up and said, "Heya. Is it alright if I sit with you?"

Lacuna looked up at me and smiled. It was a reserved expression, one that showed no teeth, but it was friendly, and they nodded. I smiled back and sat down, setting my cup and plate on the table. "Haven't talked in a while," I said. I used to avoid that kind of phrasing with them, but I'd figured out years ago that Lacuna genuinely didn't care. "How have things been?"

Their answer was a shrug, and a balancing gesture with one hand. They didn't say anything. Lacuna never said anything; in all the years I'd been coming here, I had never once heard any vocalization from them at all beyond a rare, breathy laugh. But they were very expressive, and it wasn't hard to take their meaning. Not too bad, not too great.

"Yeah," I said, sipping tea. "Some months are like that. Oh, I don't remember whether I've introduced you, this is Raincloud." I was probably not allowed to bring her in here, given that this was a dining establishment to some extent, but the staff never gave me shit about it.

Lacuna smiled, and held out a hand for her to smell. They waited for her to indicate it was welcome before petting her ears and neck. It wasn't exactly a surprise that Lacuna, of all people, would know to wait for consent before touch even if that consent wasn't vocal.

Raincloud liked them, I could tell. The quietly contented feeling I was picking up from her did have a thread of curiosity, though. I suspected she'd already noticed one of the odd things about Lacuna, namely that they had no scent. It was one of a number of ways that they just...weren't there. They didn't talk. They were ghostly pale, with silver hair and eyes that were a blue only barely distinguishable from white, white clothes, never any color. They had no scent at all. At first I'd thought they had no magical aura or signature, either, which had creeped me out.

Then I'd figured out that they had one. It was just that their signature was defined by a feeling of nothingness, of void. The power in them was actually quite intense, but it felt like the intense absence of any energy at all. They left no emotional echo behind, and even the background energy flows of their environment faded out around them. And *that* had creeped me out even more.

"Been a bit of a long month for me," I said after a few moments of companionable silence. "Not bad, exactly, but tiring. Kinda stressed lately too."

Lacuna reached out and gently patted my wrist. A lot of people who went to Softened Dreams would have probably flinched away from that touch. They'd seen what could happen to people Lacuna touched. But I was well aware that Lacuna's role as the coffeehouse's peacekeeper was just that, a role. It didn't have a lot to do with who they were as a person outside of that function. This was just a comforting gesture.

I liked Lacuna. We got along well. That made sense, I supposed; we'd both had plenty of experiences of being set apart from the people around us by a different mode of existence. I wasn't sure whether they were actually unable to talk or just strongly preferred not to, and in many ways it didn't really matter. I'd had enough intervals of being unable to talk myself to know how hard it made things. I didn't need to know why they behaved this way in order to accommodate it.

"Thanks. I guess I'm kinda worried. Some girl jumped me with a sword last night. And I'll be fine, but it's got me nervous."

Lacuna's concern at that was so clear it might as well have been words. *Are you sure you're okay?*

"Eh, yeah, I'll be fine. I got cut but it'll heal pretty quickly I think. She was really sloppy. But that's kinda what worries me, you know?" My vague gesture towards the world at large was

not nearly as expressive. It could have been; I was reasonably good with American sign language, same as Lacuna was perfectly capable of writing. If they wanted to use words right now, they could.

They didn't feel the need. A nod, a tired smile, and petting Raincloud some more were sufficient. They understood.

"And I don't know who it was, either," I continued. It was probably a stupid idea to say all this in public, but I thought it was fine in this case. I wasn't being loud, and people left Lacuna a lot of personal space. "It was over so fast. I don't know who she was or why she was doing it. And so it's kinda...she got pretty close with a very basic attempt. Literally just one person waiting in an alley with a sword, about as simple as it gets. What am I going to do if, surprise, she has friends and they're actually *good* at this?"

Raincloud, though she was dozing and semiconscious at best, twitched a little at that. She could feel my anxiety, even if she wasn't awake enough to know why. I paused, reaching down to pet her neck in a way I knew she found soothing. She made a soft, happy sound and curled down further towards sleep.

It would have been so nice if it were that easy to soothe myself. But the anxiety wasn't baseless this time, and I didn't really know what to do at this point.

Lacuna was nodding, and they looked sad. I was guessing I knew why, too. They could protect me. I had no doubt of that. But they wouldn't, because they wouldn't leave this building. I didn't know whether there was some supernatural restriction involved, or their dedication to Hope was just that intense. The end result was the same. They might want to keep me safe, but once I left Softened Dreams, it wouldn't happen.

This time I was the one who reached over and patted their wrist, and then smiled a bit when I realized how much it was the same thing I'd done with Raincloud. "I know," I said. "I'll try not to die, promise."

They smiled back at me, and they seemed genuinely grateful. That was touching to me, that my survival was that meaningful to them. Maybe I had been less of a pariah than I'd thought, even when I was living like a hermit most of the time. Sure as hell seemed to be more people concerned about my sudden peril than I would have guessed.

On which note, glancing at the door I saw that Derek had just come in. "I have to go," I said to Lacuna, nudging Raincloud and standing. She grumbled about being woken up, but did get up after a moment. Lacuna waved goodbye, and I walked over to where the werewolf was looking for an open table. It was starting to thin out a bit in there, so he didn't have much difficulty.

"Hey," I said. "How's things?"

"Apparently less exciting for me than for you," he said. His tone was very dry. "Oh, and the body was taken care of, no problem." A lot of people would have been shocked to hear him casually discussing covering up murder in public. But that really didn't matter at Softened Dreams. Most of the people who came here didn't care much about human laws, if they even understood

what they were. And violence was...a much more common thing among the circles we moved in. Much less shocking than in modern society.

I sighed with relief and sat down. Raincloud promptly curled around my feet again. She didn't actually go back to sleep, but she was definitely relaxed. She liked how Derek smelled, something about a comparison to spearmint from what she'd said before. I wasn't sure where she was getting that, since he smelled very little like mint of any kind to me, but I was willing to admit the wolf-and-flowers smell that werewolf magic had to me might be getting in the way.

"Thanks. Seriously. You sure I can't pay you back?"

Derek shrugged dismissively. "It's nothing. He didn't even charge much. Very easy job as I understand it."

I stared. "Easy? The blood would have stuck out like crazy on that much snow. Kinda garish, don't you think?"

"Yes," the werewolf said patiently. "And that also means that pretty much all the blood would have been *in* that snow. It's easier to get a snowplow than clean that much blood out of the sidewalk. And she had no ID on her at all, so very little chance of a meaningful missing person report happening I'm guessing. Nah, this was an easy job even on short notice. It's fine."

"Oh." I wasn't entirely sure whether to feel unsettled that he knew this much about making murder evidence disappear, or grateful that he was willing to use that knowledge on my behalf. I ended up settling on both.

From Raincloud, I got another verbal question, a more ambiguous one this time. *How'd you know?*

You mean how'd I know that he would know a fixer? She indicated agreement, and I responded with a mental shrug. *I wasn't sure about him specifically. But werewolves tend to have criminal connections. Not all of them, but enough that any given wolf can probably access them one way or another.*

Because they need to have things like this done? Huh. That was a more complex thought than I'd heard her express so clearly to date. Raincloud was picking up verbal reasoning so fast it was kinda spooky.

Sometimes. They often lead violent lives. But either way they need connections. They aren't humans and don't age, but they live in human society. So they will often need things like false identification, money laundering, and similar aids to avoid trouble.

"So what's going on?" Derek asked me as that side exchange was wrapping up. As it turned out, telepathy was a very fast means of communication, enough so that it was easy to have mental conversations in parallel with normal ones. "Why do you have people trying to kill you?"

"In this specific case, no clue," I sighed. "I don't know who she was. In the general case, I'm nine kinds of fucked and I have no idea how to deal with it. Starting to seem like this is going to be a regular occasion now, people trying to kill me I mean."

"You realize that explains nothing while still making me even more worried, right?"

"I am aware, yes," I said dryly. "But I really don't like explaining things multiple times and Saori hasn't gotten here yet. With most people I'd blame road conditions, but considering who we're talking about, 'distracted by something flammable' is probably more realistic."

"Hey now, give her some credit," Derek told me. "She's more versatile than that. It might have been some*one* flammable."

I snorted. "Okay, yeah, you got me there. Probably won't be more than a few minutes, though. So at risk of repetition, how's things?"

He sighed. "I don't know. Not terrible. The pack's been picking itself up again. We lost a few people in September, but pretty much back to full strength already. Couple people had friends who came in, and there were a couple of wolves who weren't doing well where they were and decided to move here. One girl got turned last month and just did her first full moon, handling it well so far."

I'd never really been sure how the werewolves determined the optimal number of wolves per city. There wasn't some kind of formula for how many a population could support. Nor, in most cities, was there a specific leader who made that kind of decision; it was a consensus thing. It was a delicate balancing act in many ways. If there weren't enough of them, they'd get overrun by some other group. Too many, and their social system became increasingly unstable. The end result seemed to usually be a dynamic equilibrium, with rates of "birth", death, and migration all being high.

And I knew all that. But still, being reminded of the losses they suffered a few months ago hurt, and it made me feel irrationally guilty. I felt like I should somehow have managed to prevent them from happening, though logically I knew I had very little ability to do so.

"That's the pack," I said after a moment, right as the silence was starting to get awkward. "What about you?"

He shrugged. "I'm honestly not sure. It's been a really long year. Mostly a good one, but...long. I guess I feel lonely lately. Lost a lot of friends this year." He paused. "Amanda got killed about six weeks ago. I don't think you probably heard. She was visiting a friend in West Virginia and got mixed up in some turf war between a vampire and some kind of demon or something."

I winced. I hadn't heard. Six weeks ago put it in October, and I'd been pretty occupied with Raincloud at the time. I hadn't known Amanda well, only met her once that I could remember. But I knew she and Derek had been in some kind of semi-romantic relationship. That would also have been right after the whole clusterfuck in September, and in my experience that always made things like this cut deeper. Someone dying a week or two after a disaster, right when you were starting to process what had happened, was like a gut punch at the end of an exhalation.

Suddenly Derek's concern for me had a very different tone to it. My teasing about giving him a nonanswer that only made him more worried didn't feel very funny anymore.

"Shit," I said after a moment. "I don't know what to say. That's...shit. I'm so sorry."

He shrugged again. “It’s okay. You didn’t know.” He was terrible at poker, and it showed here. Derek always looked vaguely puppyish to me somehow, and right now it was not a happy puppy look. “Anyway. I guess I’ve just been kinda out of it lately. Lonely. A bit sad. It’s been a long year.”

I sighed. “Yeah. Sounds like it. Wish I knew how to help.” I paused. “I mean, I guess to a degree I can help with the lonely part. If you want to spend more time together just let me know. I know it doesn’t make up for the people who aren’t there, but having any company sometimes helps me keep from fixating on loss. So, uh, if it’ll help I’m available. Don’t know what else to do though.”

“I appreciate that,” Derek said, and he sounded like he really meant it. Puppies were pretty good at earnest. “I might take you up on it. Though some of the loneliness is, ah, euphemistic.” He was very nearly blushing as he said that last part, which was kind of adorable. You’d think he’d know better by now, too. He’d been around me enough to have some idea of how shameless I generally was about sexuality.

“If you mean you need to get laid, I have time. Might need to wait for my shoulder to heal, though. So probably not until Tuesday or so.” I was not blushing. I was, in fact, smirking at him.

Derek was *definitely* blushing now. “What about Saori?” he said after a moment, clearly attempting to maintain his composure and just as clearly failing.

I frowned. “I mean, you can try,” I said dubiously. “She’s not usually into guys, but I guess it’s possible she’ll make an exception for you. She does like werewolves, so if nothing else you can probably get some cuddling.”

“Not what I meant,” the werewolf in question said. “Aren’t you two dating or something?”

“We’re definitely something. What’s that have to do with anything, though?” I was staring at him, and it genuinely took a few seconds for me to figure out what he meant and laugh. “Oh, uh, not really relevant. We’re not doing the monogamy thing. It’s been discussed.”

Derek looked like he felt incredibly awkward by this point. Which was really entertaining, but all things considered I felt I should probably be nice rather than push it further for the sake of amusement. I excused myself for a moment and went to get more tea, mostly just to give the poor boy a chance to compose himself. Raincloud stayed where she was and pretended to sleep, though I could tell she was laughing internally.

I’d thought about trying to censor the sexuality around her. It seemed like I should, given that she was in some sense a child. But I’d given up on it after a few weeks. For one thing, it was practically impossible in any realistic way. Not without a much cleaner mind than mine. I was at least self-aware enough for that.

And then on another level, while I compared her to a child at times, I was aware that Raincloud fundamentally was not a human of any kind. She wasn’t exactly a dog, and certainly she didn’t think in anything like the same ways as an ordinary dog. But there were ways in which she was much closer to one than to a human. Siberian huskies matured quickly, and were generally physically almost completely grown by the time they were a year old. They could and routinely

did mate and have puppies of their own by around the same time. By their second birthday they were fully adult by any reasonable standard. If they lived to be eighteen they were very, very lucky.

With how insanely quickly Raincloud was picking up language and abstract reasoning, I was pretty sure that was still going to be the case for her, that she was maturing both physically and mentally far more quickly than a human. Trying to impose human standards on inhuman beings was almost never a good idea.

By the time I'd gotten my tea and made it back to the table, Derek was mostly composed again, and Saori had arrived. I didn't say much until she'd gotten her own drink, which smelled like some unholy mix of coffee, chocolate, mint, oranges, and brandy, and arranged herself at the table.

"How do you even drink that?" For once it wasn't me asking that. Derek had a comparably acute sense of smell, and he was watching the kitsune with a sort of horrified fascination. It wasn't an unusual expression around Saori.

She just grinned at him and drank some more, then lounged back with about half her weight in my lap rather than on her own chair. "Generally with my mouth, but there are options."

Derek made the conscious decision not to ask. I was good at recognizing the pause when someone did that, at this point. This, too, was a pretty common reaction in Saori's presence.

She recognized it, too, and snickered as she leaned further into me. I was deeply unsure how she wasn't falling out of her chair at this point. "So what's up? Someone tried to shank you?"

I frowned. "I don't think so? Pretty sure shank implies stabbing someone with an improvised knife. She tried to cut my head off with a sword, which I think is a different verb."

"Okay, sure, but that verb probably isn't as much fun to say."

"I don't think that's how language works," I said dryly. "But the salient part is that yes someone jumped out of an alley and attempted to kill me."

"Oh, well if it was a surprise attack from an alley we can say she ambuscaded you. That works. How'd it go?"

"Eh." I remembered the injury to my shoulder before trying to shrug, which I was oddly proud of. "She got a pretty decent hit in, but I'll be okay before long. She…won't. So, not terrible I guess?"

"I'll take it, yeah." Saori grinned at me. "I'd rather you not die without asking me for permission."

Was there any hesitation in her at all when I said that I'd killed someone? Not that I could tell, not even a tiny bit. Not even enough to have dismissed any questions about it, and I doubted she'd even asked any. I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"I'll do what I can," I said, rather than mention any of that. "But if there's a really good opportunity, I might not have time to call and check first. It's like a flash sale, you have to jump on it while the offer's there."

She laughed. I grinned. Derek didn't. "To get back on topic," the werewolf said, "why the fuck are people trying to kill you?"

My grin faded away instantly. "Um," I said. "I don't know why she, personally, tried to kill me. But in the general sense things are kinda…not looking so great. That sword I picked up a few months ago is, uh, stronger than I realized. Enough so that some pretty scary people are likely going to want it. And given that it's apparently impossible to steal it while I'm alive, I have a strong suspicion that they're going to be trying to make me otherwise."

"When you say it's stronger than you realized," Saori said, "how scary are we talking, on a scale from 'bananas Foster' to 'cluster bomb'?"

"I have no idea how to use that scale," I told her. "And the fact that you apparently do is a bit unsettling. But pretty up there, I think. It's indestructible, unstoppable, casually does things that aren't supposed to be possible, cuts magic, and it might also kill people a little bit to be around it or something."

"Spicy. But still just a sword. You think they'll want it that badly?"

I shrugged. "Not sure, but yeah, I think so. Honestly, it's a bit…even leaving aside the question of whether it's that powerful, it seems pretty *easy*. Like, most of the time if you want a weapon like this you have to take it from someone much scarier than I am. I have a strong suspicion that people will look at this, look at me, and see an opportunity."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Derek said quietly. "There are plenty of stories about people picking up something they aren't ready for and getting screwed as a result."

I sighed. "Yeah. And I don't really know what to do about it. I couldn't get rid of the thing if I tried, I'm pretty sure. So it's kinda just…looking like this might be an ongoing issue."

Saori nodded and curled into me a bit more closely. "Yeah. Welcome back to the violent lunatic club, then." She managed to make this sound at least slightly like condolence, though both the rest of her tone and all of the affection seemed excited.

I had to laugh at that. "Thanks, I guess." Raincloud twitched a little, still not nearly as asleep as she looked, and I reached down to pet her ears some more. She might not understand the full context, but she was picking up on enough to be nervous. "I needed it at the time. And I knew there would be consequences. I just…don't really know what to do about them."

"Well, you know there's a threat," Saori told me, now sounding like she was trying to be very patient while walking me through remedial education and only mostly succeeding. "And you probably want to get ready for it. Set up some home defenses, maybe do some training so you don't fumble that badly with a random ambuscader. Seriously, this is embarrassing. You did so much better the last time someone tried to shank you on your way home."

"Hate to say it, but she's probably right," Derek said. "Maybe not the nicest thing to think about, but pretending it's not there won't change things. *Si vis pacem, para bellum*."

It took me a second to remember what that meant, but I got there. If you want peace, prepare for war. I had no idea why I knew that sentence in Latin, or when I'd learned it, but the information was there.

"Okay, so first off," I said, "I'm not sure why you two think this would be a foreign concept to me. Just because I haven't gotten things in place yet doesn't mean I haven't figured out I need to. Second, since when do you speak Latin?"

Derek shrugged and grinned. "I don't. But it's a famous phrase, and my cousin is a huge gun nerd. The number of times he's told me why the nine-millimeter Parabellum round is called that would astonish you."

Aaaand that would be why I knew it, even if I'd forgotten since. "I see. Well. In this case it does seem to be good advice." I sighed. I didn't like this, didn't like being in this position. It wasn't even that I had some kind of ethical issue with the idea. I just…didn't want to need to think about things like this. Sure, I had weapons on hand and did basic home security, but that was a far cry from this kind of focused, extensive planning.

But it didn't matter. Like Derek had just said, pretending this wasn't happening wouldn't change the fact that it was. Someone had tried to kill me, and all available evidence said there would be more, probably soon. I did not like the idea of dying, particularly not now, when my life was actually going *right* for once. It was that simple, really. Whether I liked that reality or not was immaterial.

"Okay. So in terms of concrete ideas, any suggestions? I'm not sure where to start."

"Your house is a really soft target," Saori said promptly. It was a good thing that everyone at the table had preternaturally good hearing, because with how the kitsune had mumbled that into my ribcage there was no way a human would have heard it. "That's probably the big one. You're going to want to move somewhere easier to work with, get real defenses set up, or both."

"Neither of which I can do today," I sighed. "Ugh. I guess I can at least start looking into it. You mean, like, warding spells?"

"Uh, yeah. A security camera is nice and all, but let's be real here." Saori shrugged. "Not my area of expertise, but I can probably find someone for you to talk to about it if you want."

"That would be nice. I don't really have any connections like that," I said, stroking her hair absently. I was, I thought, going to have to fix that too. "And I guess I probably shouldn't go home until I can start getting that set up. Even if they don't know my exact address, people clearly have a general idea of where I live."

"Sounds like you get to have your vagabond period," Saori said. "I'll try to make it quick, but not sure how long it will take to find people who are good at this. It's been a while since I talked to any of them."

I nodded. "Still faster than if I tried to do it myself, though. Thanks." I glanced over at Derek.

The werewolf just shrugged. “I don’t have much experience here. I can give you the number of the guy I called last night. He’s good at what he does, and decent to work with. And you can crash on my couch if you want while your place is getting, uh, renovated. But I don’t know how much I can help beyond that.”

I sighed and nodded again. “Still helps. Thanks, seriously. I’m kind of out of my depth here. I really appreciate the help, or even just, like, having someone to talk to. I’m feeling…pretty overwhelmed. I know it was necessary, but I’m really starting to regret grabbing this thing.”

“You know,” Saori said, “I hate to be the one to point this out to you, but I think you’ve been so focused on how much of a problem the sword is that you’ve overlooked something.”

I started to get a sinking feeling. She sounded excited, and Saori being excited could mean a lot of things, but the angle of her grin said I wasn’t going to like this one. “What’s that?”

“Well, you keep saying you’re fucked because you own Thorn now,” she said. “And I think you’re overlooking a *much* bigger way you’re fucked. See, okay, so that sword is a lot like Gram out of that one saga or whatever, right?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “The Völsung Cycle.”

“Right, that one. And in that story, some guy crashed a wedding and stuck a magic sword in a tree, which incidentally we should do that sometime. It sounds like a hilarious prank. Anyway, only the one dude could pull the sword out and he kept it and war ensues. So yeah probably bad that you have it. Thing is, though, do you remember who crashed the wedding in the first place?”

I saw where she was going now, and I had been correct. I didn’t like this. I didn’t like this at all. “It’s not stated directly, but it’s pretty obvious it was Odin.”

“Yeah.” Saori’s grin was wider now, and sharper. “Which tracks, it’s his style. So I think you should also be asking who stuck Thorn in that tree to begin with, because they’re probably *way* scarier than the people who want the sword now.”

“I am so fucked,” I said. My voice was the kind of hushed whisper that sounds almost reverent, spoken in the moment of revelation. She was right. I hadn’t even considered that yet. I suddenly felt like kind of an idiot for having not moved faster on this kind of stuff.

“Yep!” the kitsune agreed brightly, nuzzling my shoulder. “You are fucked beyond belief. But hey, at least you won’t die bored!”

“I am glad that my disaster of a life and likely upcoming gruesome death are entertaining for you,” I said dryly. I wasn’t even being sarcastic, as such. If it was going to happen anyway, it was weirdly comforting to think that she’d get some excitement out of things.

“In fairness, they aren’t the *only* things about you that entertain me.” Saori was smirking; I couldn’t see her face, but I could hear it in her voice. “You want an itemized list?”

Derek cleared his throat. “I’m, uh, just gonna head out now. Let me know if you need anything. And try not to get killed.”

I grinned at him, and pretended I didn’t see Thorn lying on the floor under the table, quietly menacing even with its magic contained by the sheath. “I’ll be in touch,” I said. “And I’ll

probably take you up on the couch." Apparently I'd gotten the tone right for the innuendo there, because he blushed, and I snickered as he walked away.

Saori left a few minutes later. The innuendos and public display of affection hadn't exactly been a joke; I knew from experience that she wasn't bluffing. If I'd expressed interest, she'd have been absolutely fine with ignoring an urgent situation in favor of hedonistic indulgence. Caution and prudence were not on the list of words anyone sane would apply to Saori, except perhaps to use her as a bad example. Safety wasn't first for her, and was generally lucky to come in a distant third.

But it was, ultimately, a relatively urgent situation. I wasn't sure when the next attack might come, or from what. I didn't know how much said attacker would know about me, but my address was hardly a secret. I wasn't going back there until this was done, and while that didn't fuck with me like it would some people, it was inconvenient as hell.

So I wasn't terribly interested in delays. And Saori was reckless, not stupid. She knew this needed done. She only lingered a few more minutes, and then she was off to start reaching out to her contacts. I'd offered to come with, but she said it would be likely to cause more issues than it solved. Her contacts were not fond of strangers, and given that she seemed to be expecting strain on those relationships already, I was forced to agree it was smarter not to bring me along.

She left, and it was just me and Raincloud still in the coffeehouse. She was dozing on my feet, and had actually slipped into sleep now rather than just faking it. I let her doze for a few minutes while I sipped tea and tried not to think about what I had gotten myself into. I wasn't very successful; this situation was deeply uncomfortable, and it didn't seem likely to get better anytime soon. If anything, it seemed likely to get worse. I was guessing that even if Saori could find someone to install some defenses, it would only be a temporary solution. Eventually, I'd need to come up with a better idea. As the past day had illustrated, it was probably best to assume "eventually" would happen sooner than I liked.

I sat and drank tea for a few minutes. Then I sighed, woke Raincloud, and reluctantly left Softened Dreams to go be productive. I took Thorn along; it wouldn't get stolen if I left it there, but I didn't want to freak anyone out when they saw it under the table.

I hadn't been prepared for the logistics of hiding a body. But I *had* been preparing. That part just hadn't occurred to me, that I would need to deal with evidence of murder. I wasn't sure why, really, beyond a generalized lack of experience. Logically it was pretty obvious, given that I'd been pretty sure there would be violence in my life soon. I just hadn't thought about it.

But I *had* thought of other things, some of which were now paying off. In particular, I had a keen appreciation for the value of information. Understanding what you were dealing with was a massive force multiplier when shit hit the fan. And my information was…unfortunately limited. While over a decade spent intentionally isolating myself from reality had arguably been good for my mental health, it hadn't done wonders for my knowledge of current events.

Nor had my education before that really been all that complete. I knew the basics of how magic worked, and I could find and recognize energy signatures far better than most people. But practical application, detailed examination of spellcraft, and its mechanisms of action were all much less familiar to me. I'd been starting to take steps to remedy that, but at the moment I did not have nearly as much knowledge as I'd like.

What I did have, at least temporarily, was a reputation. The way things had played out in September had left me looking both more important and a lot more badass than was really accurate. People were aware of me now. And given that the coven of mages I'd helped take out had been intentionally going out of their way to make people hate them as much as possible, that awareness was of a positive kind. It wouldn't last, but for the moment I had goodwill, and I'd leveraged it to make some useful friends.

It would be a while before my next meeting, which was scheduled for just past sundown. I had some hours to kill first. I didn't particularly want to wait at Softened Dreams for that duration, though. However nervous I felt about the possibility of further attacks, it was obviously a risk I was going to have to take. It wasn't like I was going to stay in this building for the rest of my life. That...honestly sounded quite a bit worse than a sword in the neck, even assuming the protection it offered was that complete, which I didn't. Lacuna was scary, but they weren't invincible.

So I sucked it up and left, and found a ride to the right general part of town well in advance. I didn't really have a whole lot to do right now, and one of the reasons I'd suggested this as a meeting place was that I had no association with it. It was just some random park out by the zoo, and I genuinely wasn't sure I'd ever been there before in my life. It was as far from a known location as I could get in this city.

Raincloud was quiet on the ride, though I could tell she was thinking about something. It just wasn't in words, which was understandable, really. Hell, sometimes *I* couldn't put my thoughts into words, and that was with the benefit of decades of practice. And aimless, meandering walking, movement without destination, was one of the more consistently useful things I knew, for working through ideas like that. So maybe wandering around the park would be helpful for both of us.

It was a nice park. Raincloud was full of energy now, bounding through the snow. It felt...good, watching that. Between the rapid development of her species, the enormously accelerated cognitive development from various supernatural factors, and the experiences she'd had because she shared my life and my life was insane, Raincloud was growing up *very* quickly.

It was good to see her get to just play for a little bit like this. She deserved that opportunity. Even the tree spirit who shared her head (and had firmly declined a name of his own for some reason) was glad for it. I didn't get any words from him either at the moment, but I could feel a satisfaction distinct from the exuberance in Raincloud herself.

I'd initially worried, when we were planning this arrangement, that he would get too intense or aggressive mentally and cause problems for the dog hosting him. That had been rapidly shown to be a nonissue; he was deeply protective of Raincloud, and at the moment he shared my satisfaction that she was able to have this more innocent moment of play. He knew how much

we'd impacted Raincloud's existence, knew that she would never have the kind of life a husky normally would. He was glad she at least got moments like this sometimes.

Raincloud deserved better than this world. I thought that about a lot of people, and as with the others, I couldn't do much half as much for Raincloud as I'd like. It was good to see this, that she was getting at least a little bit of innocence and joy. I already knew that she wouldn't get enough of those things in this life.

It wasn't a hard prediction to make. If there was someone who *did* get enough of those things in this world, I hadn't yet met them.

I sighed, pushed the darker thoughts away, and found a bench to sit on. I was not possessed of a puppy's seemingly boundless energy, and I hadn't gotten much sleep. I wasn't up to frolicking just now. But I sat on a small wooden bench, and I watched her play, and I did a surprisingly good job of stilling my anxiety for a time. I let the thoughts pass without words, paying enough attention to my surroundings for safety but otherwise letting myself drift. Those formless thoughts weren't all that joyous, and innocence was a lost cause, but they felt clean.

It couldn't last forever, though. Raincloud was in some ways still a puppy, after all, and as such tended to have seemingly boundless energy that suddenly ran out all at once. I watched her play in the snow for a while, but eventually the giddy feeling I was getting from her faded out into fatigue. She walked over, hopped up onto the bench, and sprawled across my lap.

Physical contact always made the impressions I got from her clearer. As she sprawled there and I gently petted her neck, I could feel the joy and excitement more clearly. It was, I thought, mostly the product of getting to run around in the snow. She wasn't stupid—the absurd speed with which she was picking up language made that pretty clear—but she was more immediate in her focus, more able to enjoy the moment rather than worry about the larger situation. I envied her for that a little bit.

But there was something else stirring under that excitement, something thoughtful. And after a few minutes of this, Raincloud sent me another clearly formed thought. There was a mental impression of Saori, of the kitsune's face and voice and scent. It had a question attached, clearly mapped into language. *Do you love her?*

I burst out laughing, which was probably not the best response and would have gotten me some odd looks from bystanders if any were in the area. I couldn't help it, though. It was something about the simplicity of the question, the way Raincloud didn't bother with any of the niceties and elaborate social rituals humans tended to have around topics like this. Just a single raw, simple question.

"You don't go for the easy questions, huh?" I said once I'd gotten that initial giggling fit under control. "Couldn't start with something simple like 'what is the nature of the divine' or 'what is the meaning of life', I take it?" Again, I said the response out loud. It would make me look like a crazy person, but nobody was around, and honestly at the moment it was kind of a perk anyway. I wanted to be unremarkable, and nobody wants to look closely at a crazy woman ranting

at her dog in the park. And it *did* seem to be helpful for Raincloud's language development to have the auditory and mental information linked this way.

She felt smug. I laughed a bit more, and then the laughter died away into a sigh. "I don't know. I don't really know how to tell," I said. "I mean, I like her. I enjoy her company a lot. But I'm not sure I *know* what love feels like. It's...not something I've had a lot of opportunity to experience. I like her, and I want to do well by her, and I want to be around her, but I don't know whether that's what 'love' means or not." I wouldn't usually have been that honest, and probably I'd have deflected the question in one way or another, but Raincloud deserved a better answer than that. She was, after all, trying to learn what love meant herself.

Raincloud took a moment to consider that, and then the mental image shifted to one of herself. The question remained intact.

I hugged her a bit closer. "I definitely love you, yes," I said. "That's easier in a lot of ways. I know you better, which is probably the biggest one. I've only known Saori slightly longer, and we don't spend as much time together as I spend with you. Between that and how long she was alive before meeting me, there's a lot of her life I don't know much about. Some of what I do know is kind of troubling, too. So even if I do love her, it's with some reservation. *You,* on the other hand, are very easy to love."

She curled closer around me when I said that, and I could feel a surge of happiness and affection well up in her. I smiled and scritched her ears a bit. Raincloud might still be working on figuring out what love meant (and who wasn't, really), but she was already very capable of feeling it.

"Okay, we've looked the place over," I said. That had been largely the point of coming here early; the issue with choosing a meeting place I had no prior association with was that I had no prior knowledge of it, either. I wanted to get the lay of the land before my meeting. "We should probably go get something to eat."

Raincloud practically jumped out of my lap at that, to the point that I had to giggle again. It was, I thought, another way in which she was good for me. I routinely skipped meals because I just forgot to eat. With Raincloud around, that happened less, because like most dogs she was *quite* happy to remind me of mealtimes.

Finding food wasn't as simple as it seemed. Having Raincloud complicated things in that regard. I flatly refused to give her kibble; between smelling it and knowing what went into making it, I wasn't willing to feed that shit to anything sapient, much less my own dog. Most of the time, she primarily ate meat, most of it plain and raw. She liked it just fine that way, and it was simple for everyone involved. At the moment, that would be a bit...awkward, though.

She could eat food which was meant for human consumption, and she often did. But it was delicate, because she wasn't human or anything like it, and there were some significant dietary restrictions to be observed. Chocolate was an overstated concern; theobromine was toxic to dogs,

but it was easy enough to avoid, and it took a lot of it for a lethal dose. Even at her current size, she was reasonably safe given she knew better than to do anything stupid. Macadamia nuts weren't a huge issue either; they were poison for her, but also easy to avoid.

The tricky part was actually onions, and related plants like shallots or garlic. They were pretty seriously toxic for dogs, and they were also ubiquitous. Garlic was in everything, once you started having to be attentive to it. Finding somewhere that I could be absolutely certain would avoid it upon request was harder than it felt like it should be. Between that, finding something each of us *liked*, and preferably being able to have her at the table, things were just...tricky. I knew a few restaurants that worked well for this, but as I'd noted, this wasn't a neighborhood I was familiar with. It was challenging.

This time it ended up being sandwiches, and we took them back to the same park. It was already almost sundown by that point, between it having taken so long to get food and sunset coming early in December. I was still early, but not absurdly so. I managed to eat most of a sandwich; Raincloud devoured hers with impressive speed and made as much of a mess as one would expect from someone with no hands. How she ate that much when she was that small was beyond me, but I was used to accommodating needs I didn't understand, and I'd thought to get some white chocolate to give her afterwards.

She promptly flopped on my lap afterwards. I petted her ears, and waited to meet my own friend in low places.

Tobias Morgenstern was not a visually remarkable person. He was so nondescript that despite having met him multiple times before, I still didn't know he had arrived at the park until he was actually walking up to the picnic table I'd claimed. He had hair a shade of brown somewhere between sandy and muddy, brown eyes, and facial features that were hard to remember even while I was looking at them. He was on the tall side of short and the dark side of pale, wore a hoodie and jeans, and had a perpetually harried look so stark that I suspected he practiced it. There was no way the stubble on his face was that consistent by accident.

"Hullo, Key," he said, dropping onto the bench across from me. Toby definitely knew my actual name and could probably say it, but the nickname was how I'd introduced myself initially and it was the only thing he called me. His smile was friendly, and I imagined a dentist would be astounded at how average his dental health was. He had a slight accent, but not one that could be pinned down to anywhere in particular.

I'd seen this shtick before. Looking average and unremarkable is something a lot of people see value in, and Toby was hardly the first person I'd seen who cultivated that. But I had to admit he did a hell of a good job at it. You'd never guess from looking at him that he was an information broker, fence, and probably involved in other shady things that I didn't know about.

"Hi, Toby. Thanks for coming out here, I know it's a bit of a trip."

"No problem," he told me. It was hard to guess whether he meant it. "Though I am curious why you asked me to."

I shrugged. "You don't go to Softened Dreams. I don't go to the Labyrinth. Mark's is somewhere I'd rather not be seen just at the moment. Rules out the first three places that come to mind, and a park was the best I could do as a substitute on short notice."

He nodded. "Parks are good for meetings," he agreed. "Too public to try anything dumb, can still have a private conversation. Why not Mark's?"

I sighed. "That...has to do with why I wanted to chat. My life has become interesting lately. I don't know as much about why as I'd like to."

His focus sharpened at that, though it barely showed up externally. I mostly noted it in his aura. Toby had a fairly ordinary human signature, shimmering and strong enough that he had some degree of power, not enough to suggest the power was a big deal. It felt sharper as I said that, and there was a momentary flicker of something else. It felt like a fish's scales gleaming in the sun for just a moment before it dove back beneath the surface. "I do have a fondness for interesting things," he said.

I chuckled. "Yeah, that's what I figured. Standard terms for negotiation?"

He nodded. "Yeah, agreed. What's up?"

I relaxed slightly. He and I had a set of agreements we'd established the first time I did business with him, and it was easier to cite that than list them every time. The important parts were mutual nonaggression, and a degree of confidentiality. He might share the broad strokes of what we discussed here, if someone asked; he wouldn't pass along details about my plans or requests, or anything that would represent a clear security risk for me. In Toby's line of work, reputation was everything, and I was certain he wouldn't risk his by breaking that agreement.

"Somebody tried to kill me last night," I said simply. Raincloud twitched in her sleep; she had her head on my lap, and the skin contact made things clearer, enough that even sleeping she noticed the thread of anxiety I felt. I gave her some absent-minded ear scritches to make up for it. "Near Mark's, it's a known location for me. It felt weird, in a few ways. Method is probably the biggest one; it felt almost clumsy, she just stepped out of an alley with a sword."

He whistled. "Damn, Key, you are good at interesting life events. Are you trying to track her down?"

I shrugged. "Not exactly? She's dead and gone. But it felt weird, and I'm concerned she might have friends. Ideally, I'd like to know who she was, why she was there, and whether I'm right about the friends."

He nodded. "Ah, yeah, that makes sense. Hm. I can't really think of anything relevant off the top of my head. I don't think she was local, if only because there aren't all that many people in town who use swords."

I snorted at that. "Yeah, coulda fooled me. Ah, well, it was worth a shot."

I started to stand up, but Toby interrupted me. “What are you talking about?” he said, sounding almost offended. It might have been the most actual emotion I’d seen from him, though admittedly this was only the fourth time we’d talked. “I said I don’t know off the top of my head. That’s not the same as being unable to find out. I can ask around some, see what I find. If it’s a group, they might have local operations, people they’ve talked to. No promises, but I can check.”

“That would be appreciated,” I said. “How much do I owe you for that?”

“Wait and see if I can find anything,” he told me. “I’m not going to charge you if I can’t. We can talk payment when I know how much you’d be paying for.”

“Aren’t you worried that I might decline then and make it a waste of your time?” I asked. I felt vaguely curious. He and I were…not strangers, and technically I’d made a couple of deals with him already, but they had been very small things. Almost more an excuse to make introductions than a transaction, really. I wouldn’t have expected him to be that trusting given his profession.

He just laughed. “No. You’re not stupid enough to be bullshitting me about it happening, and I don’t like it when I don’t know who’s operating in town. I’d want to know anyway. I’ll be in touch.” He smiled at me as he stood up, seemingly genuinely, and he was whistling while he walked away. He wasn’t very good at whistling.

“Well, that went better than expected,” I said to Raincloud after Toby left. I’d woken her up when I started to stand earlier, and she hadn’t fallen back asleep. “Come on, we should get moving. Been here too long, and I’d like to get over to Derek’s before it gets much later.” I caught the impression of a question, not quite formed into words this time, and rolled my eyes at her. “Yes, you can play dice with him when we get there.”

Saori, I thought, was clearly rubbing off on her. It wasn’t even just that Raincloud had learned how to play liar’s dice already. She’d also figured out that Derek was as terrible at it as he was at poker, and took a sort of impish, slightly malicious pleasure in fleecing him. I was pretty sure Saori had also started to teach her to cheat at the game, and I wasn’t sure how that was even *possible*.

Chapter Six

Derek lived east of Pittsburgh proper, around the border between eastern Pitcairn and Monroeville. This, in and of itself, would be enough to make it an unexpected place for me to be. Pitcairn was an odd mix of abandoned and stuck-up, and Monroeville was worse, the kind of suburb you'd hold up as an example of why suburbia is a diseased phenomenon. I liked Derek enough to visit his place, but I sure as hell wasn't prone to dropping in because I happened to be in the area.

But I could cope. I had the rideshare driver drop us off several blocks away outside a Chinese restaurant, just in case someone had both the ability and inclination to trace it, and we walked the rest of the way. It was significantly less pleasant than earlier. It was solidly night by now, and it was cold, and "walkable" was not an adjective I could apply to Monroeville with a straight face if I tried. By the time we got there, I was feeling drained as hell, and even Raincloud looked a bit bedraggled. I told her as much, and got a flicker of amusement from her at how specific the adjective was in its mood.

The amusement faded out rapidly into fatigue, though, and by the time we got to Derek's place we were both pretty much wiped out. Maybe the werewolf could tell, because he just waved us inside without any witty commentary. Raincloud immediately curled up on the couch and went to sleep. I would have liked to have done the same, but as tired as I was, I was still too anxious to sleep yet.

I ended up sitting at the kitchen table with Derek. It was a nice table. I wasn't entirely clear on what he did for work. It was something in or adjacent to the medical field as I recalled, but if I'd heard the details I'd forgotten them. It definitely paid pretty well, though. He could afford a house in the suburbs, a nice car, a cleaner when a friend killed someone...it was pretty clear he was doing alright for himself.

"You seem stressed," he told me, sipping coffee. It was late for that, but I didn't really have any room to talk there. I would have been consuming some caffeine too if I could stand the taste of coffee. As it was, given that was the only form of caffeine he had on hand, I was left to watch in envy.

I sighed. "Yeah. Long day. This situation is...much more draining than I would have guessed. It's not like anything has even really happened, you know? I got cut one time and it's already pretty much healed. I don't know why it has me freaking out so much."

He shrugged. "It makes sense to me. It's not about the injury, it's about the implications. You've got an unknown threat and you don't know what to expect from it. You're also not used to feeling like there's someone actively trying to harm you. It seems pretty reasonable to freak out about that."

"I guess so. And it's not like I do great with uncertainty to begin with." I sighed again, and shrugged. "But these are the circumstances I get, I guess."

"We play the hand we're dealt." Derek sounded almost meditative. "It doesn't matter whether we wanted to get it."

I snorted. "Yeah, and in your case we lose regardless. You manage to lose to *me* at cards."

The werewolf laughed. "Okay, fair point. But the metaphor still applies. And I kind of understand, I think. It's…I didn't opt into this."

"Into the werewolf stuff?"

He nodded. "Yeah. You know how it goes. Mostly people choose it these days, in one way or another. It's better for everyone involved that way."

"Sure. More confident it will work, right? I know it's not all that easy to get the new patterns to overwrite human ones." It was always hard to change someone's fundamental signature, and lycanthropy spread by overwriting the existing one almost entirely. I was pretty sure that was why humans were, as far as I knew at least, the only ones susceptible to it. Human signatures were weak as hell, and still too strong for that process to be easy.

"Yeah. You have to be in pretty rough shape physically. And a lot of people don't handle the change well mentally if it does take. So it's just overall better to take people who are more likely to tolerate it and get them ready ahead of time."

Get them ready. It was a nice way of saying you wanted the prospective werewolf close to death, in a controlled way. If someone *hadn't* made that choice beforehand…well. There was more than one way for a person to end up close to dead with a werewolf involved.

"But not you," I said softly.

"No. Some moon-crazed bastard just jumped me while I was walking home and mauled the hell out of me." He shrugged. "I don't know whether he meant to leave me alive or just got bored. Doesn't really matter. This is where I ended up."

I winced. "Wow. Damn."

He nodded. "I got lucky. Someone found me before anything got…messy. That wolf got put down, by the way. Too far gone to come back. Not the way I expected my life to go, but we play the hands we're dealt."

I smiled a little, though it mostly felt sad than anything. "Yeah. Suppose you do understand that. I don't think I do, at least not in that way. My stuff was all inborn. Didn't all manifest when I was a kid, but things were never normal for me. So I've never had quite that kind of sudden transition."

Derek nodded. "Yeah. It's…different, I think. I can't really imagine the other. I had twenty years to build an understanding of the world first before anything supernatural happened in my life. I don't really know whether that made it better or worse."

"Not sure how you'd even guess that," I said. I thought about it for a moment, and then shrugged. "I think at least in my case that would have been worse. The parts that *were* sudden for me got…really bad. I don't think I would have handled it well if the perceptual strangeness and seizures had all set in at once too. I'm guessing they wouldn't have let me out of the psych ward for

a long time, if ever." I paused. "Well, until the transformation started. Not sure what would have happened then."

He nodded. "Yeah, hard to say. You were in the psych ward?"

Normally, I wouldn't have answered that question. But he was a friend, and I was in the right mood to talk about it. So I sighed, long and thin, and said, "Yeah. A few times, as a kid. At first it was because of the sensory stuff getting labeled as hallucinations, panic attacks, that kind of thing. Later on behavioral issues as well. Spent about eight months in there, cumulative. I got diagnosed with a ton of things over the years, some of which were probably accurate. Things got...very messy for a while."

"Damn. I don't know how I'd have handled that one. Mental hospitals are a little spooky."

I shrugged. "In my experience, nobody does. It's...you know how there are some situations where you can't quite predict how someone will respond to it? Even yourself; until it happens, you don't entirely know how it will hit you. Things like a death in the family or sudden violence or whatever. Psych wards are kinda one of those."

Derek nodded. "Yeah. That tracks. God, we're quite a pair, aren't we?"

I laughed, hard. "Kinda are, yeah. So many different kinds of trauma here. We should play bingo sometime."

He grinned. "You know, that honestly sounds kind of funny. We could drag some other people in on it, Saori or Cassie maybe."

I tried to imagine either the older werewolf or the kitsune being willing to participate in that, and what they would say if they did. I'd had the laughter mostly under control again, but that mental image was just so many different kinds of comical that I lost it again. It might have been a bit more than was *quite* justified, but I felt that a certain amount of hysteria on my part was forgivable at the moment.

It took a while for me to bring that back down. I even managed to wake Raincloud with the intensity of the echoed amusement, and once she caught the thread of what I was laughing *at* I could feel her cackling just as hard mentally. That set me off again, and by the time I got myself under control, Derek was giving me a very unimpressed look.

"Sorry," I said, a little breathlessly. "Sorry, just. The mental image of what Saori would say in a game of trauma bingo. Wow. You'd probably get answers, but I guarantee you'd regret asking."

"You would know." His voice was dry, but the perpetual impression of puppy he gave me (despite, from what he'd said earlier, probably being at least as old as I was) made it hard for him to mask amusement. He was so bad at masking tells in general it was kind of impressive.

"Yeah," I agreed. "And you don't want to. Promise."

"Having met Saori, I am entirely capable of believing that."

I snickered. "People have that reaction so much. It's hilarious to watch."

Derek sighed. “There’s definitely a reason you two get along well. Okay. I have to get some sleep pretty soon, work tomorrow. You’re welcome to crash on the couch for a while. I can get you the spare key so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Thanks. This…makes things much easier.” I yawned. His mention of sleep had been enough to remind me of how little I’d gotten last night. “Alright. See you tomorrow.”

I wasn’t expecting to find sleep easily, even with how tired I was. It could be hard for me to get to sleep, especially somewhere I didn’t know well. But Derek’s couch was better than most, and I had a soft blanket to nuzzle into. I could smell him on it, wolves and lavender and something like spearmint echoed from Raincloud, who was a warm weight on my legs. Sleep was quick in coming, and it was a gentle one as such things went.

The next morning was interesting. I slept much longer than I’d anticipated, for one thing, and by the time I woke up Derek was already gone. I’d thrashed in my sleep enough that the blanket was on the floor, but Raincloud was sprawled over me instead, which was more than sufficient for warmth. I scritched her ears, and she made happy noises in her sleep. I was smiling a little as I checked my phone.

I had several text messages waiting. Maybe the most unexpected was one from Toby, saying that he *thought* he had something, but would need more time to confirm details. Frankly, I was astonished I had even heard back from him already. That was…impressively quick turnaround time to have found anything at all.

Less unexpected, though predictably still quite strange, was the one from Saori. She’d at least *found* some of her old contacts, but it was slow going past that. The guy who had been the best with wards was eaten by lizards last year, apparently, and fallback options were taking their time about things. She was guessing she’d be back in town Wednesday, and as what might have been the strangest flirtatious gesture I’d ever seen, she included what looked like a photograph of a dullahan using his own severed head as a prop for a striptease routine.

I made the very conscious decision not to ask any questions whatsoever, and started getting ready for my day. Sometimes even I could tell that I did not want to know the context of something Saori said.

The rest of the day was an exercise in frustration. It was an unpleasant blend of anxiety and boredom, and it felt far too confining.

Oh, it wasn’t like I spent the whole time in Derek’s house. I really didn’t think there was a need to. The chance of someone spotting me seemed vanishingly low. Sure, I was visually distinctive. But the Pittsburgh metro area is a big place, and there was very little linking me to this corner of it. If someone were tracking down my known associates, that might eventually lead them here via Derek. But I was guessing that would take a while, and as long as I didn’t do anything stupid I was probably safe enough for the moment. I could go outside, take Raincloud for a walk, get food from a very suburbian chain restaurant. It wasn’t *horribly* boring.

But it was enough that I chafed at the inactivity. There was something very frustrating about it, about how limiting it felt. This wasn't that far from my normal life, but the moment it stopped being a voluntary choice, it became unpleasantly restrictive, like being somewhere I wanted to be but knowing that all the doors out were locked. And, moreover, there was very little I could do about it that I hadn't already done. Knowing that I'd already gotten things into motion that would help in the near future didn't make waiting through today any less frustrating.

I didn't like waiting. Waiting had far too much room in it for thinking, and with the most recent turns my life had taken, those thoughts weren't exactly full of sunshine and roses. Raincloud helped, at least; the immediacy of her perspective, I thought, was a large part of it. She was just…so much more able to set things like the larger context of events and the long-term consequences they would lead to aside.

I expected that a lot of people would have thought of that as a sort of naïveté, a childlike innocence. I was also sure they would be wrong to do so. Raincloud was hardly unaware of these things. If nothing else, the frequency with which she asked me questions about *why* someone did something, why something was true, clearly showed that she both understood and had interest in broader contexts. This seemed more like a sort of mindfulness, an ability to set aside things she couldn't act on, and focus on her immediate experience. There was probably a lesson in that.

It helped, but it was still a long, miserable day for me. Nothing particularly bad happened, but the anxiety was wearing on me quickly. And then there was another element that made it even worse, too. If I'd guessed correctly, and so far my guesses had seemed pretty accurate, this wasn't going away. Things might get better with time; more understanding, defenses, experience, there were lots of potential mitigating factors.

But mitigation was probably all they were. To some degree this was my new normal. It might get better, but to some extent this vigilance and anticipation of attack was going to be my life for the foreseeable future. I'd always had some degree of tendency for paranoia, and anxiety seemed inevitable. Having a close family member die while one is a child in a way likely related to a terrorist attack was, I had found, not great for one's long-term sense of safety in the world. This…was definitely going to make that worse, regardless of what I did or how I felt about it.

It was a long day. Derek wasn't around to provide company or distraction, either. He worked in a hospital, I remembered that even if I didn't remember what he did there exactly, and the hours were insane. He was already gone when I woke up, and it had to be almost sixteen hours later when he got back. It was past midnight by then, I was most of the way to asleep on the couch, and he was clearly exhausted. Werewolves have great endurance, but even for him spending sixteen hours at a mentally taxing job was…kind of a lot. He managed to eat something—he *was* still a werewolf, and there was a reason I'd heard dozens of jokes over the years about lycanthropic appetites. But that was about all he did before he was passing out.

That was Monday. Tuesday was not a whole hell of a lot better. I slept well again, at least, but there was no reprieve. No one had new information for me. Things were so quiet that I wasn't even sure why I was so on edge, but the agitation hadn't calmed down. There were no attacks, no

signs of menace at all. I couldn't explain why I was so certain that I was in immediate danger. My long-term risk assessment aside, everything had been entirely peaceful since that first attack.

And yet the anxiety just refused to stop. All through Tuesday I was so on edge I was practically vibrating. I was restless and fidgety; when I was outside I felt nervous about the crowds and the possibility of surveillance, but in the house I felt confined and claustrophobic. By late afternoon Raincloud was feeling agitated just from the echoes of that anxiety that she could feel coming from me; I tried to keep it from cascading to her, but it wasn't working well. That bond was too visceral, and I wasn't practiced at telepathy of any kind. Probably the only way I could have kept her from feeling how on edge I was would have been to block her out entirely, and I wasn't willing to do that. It felt too isolating, like I'd be cutting her off from the world far too extensively for me to be comfortable with it. Echoed anxiety seemed better to me than that.

We weren't in the best of moods when we went out to get something for lunch. Thorn decided to show up at a smoothie shop and very nearly got me in a whole lot of trouble, which I didn't appreciate very much. It definitely didn't do much to calm me down suddenly seeing the sword sitting on my table out of nowhere.

But no actual threat materialized. Tuesday afternoon slipped past in a dissociated haze. When Derek came back, it was slightly jarring, surprising even. It was like I'd forgotten where I was, that someone else was going to be here. That happened to me sometimes. Unfamiliar physical environments had a tendency to leave me a little disoriented. I could never quite describe the feeling to someone else. It was like my sensory perception got overloaded trying to process the unfamiliar surroundings and shut down entirely. And at that point, those surroundings barely existed for me.

He hadn't been working as late today. But that really didn't say much, all things considered. It was still past ten when he walked in, and he still looked pretty drained. I was at least awake enough to go sit with him while he ate dinner, though.

"They're working you pretty hard," I commented while he waited on the microwave. Leftover meatloaf, I was pretty sure. There were reasons Raincloud and I had mostly been eating elsewhere the past couple days.

He shrugged. "It's pretty normal. Ten to twelve hour shifts are the norm. But people still rack up overtime pretty often."

"What do you even do that has that schedule?" I was morbidly curious at this point.

"Imaging technician, mostly. It gets a little complicated because everywhere is so short-staffed. People get shuffled to other departments for a shift now and then to cover someone if they know how." He shrugged again. "It's how the medical field works. Nurses have it even worse. I have seen a nurse work for thirty consecutive hours, multiple times. Not legal, but the hospital tends to look the other way when it comes to that particular law."

"Fuck's sake." I knew about how brutal schedules could get for nurses, but it was in an abstract way. I hadn't really talked much with someone actually impacted by it. "It's that hard to find techs?"

"Yup." He went to get his meatloaf. It smelled bland as hell to me, ground beef and not a whole lot else. He seemed to enjoy it, but then, he was a werewolf. Some of them ate their meat raw half the time. "The specific position I'm in requires specialized training. As in, legally it requires some specific credentials, people usually go to community college as an associate's degree or do vocational school."

I frowned. "I didn't think you were doing anything that complicated."

"Nope," he agreed cheerfully. "Most days someone could do my job with a high school education and a few weeks of on-the-job training. But it's a legal requirement, and that limits the employment pool pretty hard. And anything related to the medical field has insane burnout rates, so yeah. We're *always* short-staffed to some extent."

I sighed. "God damn, man. I don't know how or why you do that to yourself. This place is nice and all, but that sounds awful."

Derek shrugged. "I like it, honestly. It's tiring, but I like the work, and mostly I like the coworkers. There are worse gigs."

"If you say so," I said. I...really couldn't imagine why he would live like this. Lycanthropy might be softening the physical fatigue for him, but it didn't do a lot about mental or emotional exhaustion. I didn't believe for a moment that he lacked options, either. Derek was an intelligent werewolf with good social skills and criminal connections. The chance that he couldn't find another way to support this lifestyle was virtually nil. I didn't understand this choice.

But I was used to not understanding people. And it didn't really matter whether it made sense to me. Much like Lacuna's muteness, I didn't need to understand *why* he lived this way in order to adapt to it. He worked with a much nastier schedule than I'd quite realized, and it left him with little time and energy for things like building social networks. I expected that was a lot of why he was so lonely; when your work was that demanding, other things tended to slip. I made a mental note to work on helping him with that.

I didn't know what else to say, and apparently he didn't either. We sat there in comfortable silence while he finished his meatloaf, and then he went directly to bed. I went back to the couch, where Raincloud woke up just long enough to cuddle me to sleep.

Chapter Seven

I met Saori in Fox Chapel. Which really wasn't something either of us was a huge fan of; I didn't like it because the borough reeked of conspicuous consumption, and she didn't like it because it was a joke at her expense. Giving the kitsune a house in Fox Chapel was just...her benefactor had a *terrible* sense of humor. And there was also the fact that it *was* associated with Saori's benefactor.

I didn't know much of anything about that whole topic. Didn't know what situation she'd needed out of so badly, didn't know who she asked for help, and didn't know what she paid for it. But favors like that usually came with a serious price tag. And, really, the fact that she hadn't talked about it *at all* was a statement in itself. I highly doubted she liked to be reminded of them.

But it was where her house was. And, as a result, it was where her connection point was. My understanding was that Otherside portals could be opened from anywhere, but the destination point had to be somewhere you knew very, very well. Otherwise, they had a tendency to fail, and that apparently did Very Bad Things to someone. So, Saori only had a limited number of places she could travel to this way, and she only had one in Pittsburgh, which she'd learned to use as soon as she moved here.

I got there early. It was still distinctly morning, and I wasn't thrilled by that. But I was also already awake; the nightmare last night had made sure of that. And I had no particular reason to stay at Derek's for a few hours longer. Raincloud and I just left once she'd woken up properly, and went to wait on site.

It seemed like a pretty odd place to have chosen. Just some random back alley behind a hair salon, it had nothing to distinguish it from any other alley in this neighborhood. But Saori had made a point of showing me where it was, and I was sure this was the right spot. Raincloud and I checked to make sure there was nothing obviously wrong, and then settled in next to the dumpster to wait. I would rather have been further away—waiting directly at the meeting point made me nervous, and I'd rather have been a short distance away from it, somewhere I could have a view of the alley without being obvious to anyone else surveilling it.

Unfortunately, in this case that was...challenging. There weren't a whole lot of places that *did* have a line of sight to this spot, and most of them were very visible. Not only did that defeat the purpose of hiding, it was also liable to cause me other problems. This was not a neighborhood where a heavily tattooed girl in a trench coat and jeans could loiter indefinitely without attracting attention, and "walking my dog" was not an excuse that would work for very long when we weren't moving.

So we sat in the alley, where the dumpster would hopefully keep anyone from seeing us. This wasn't a neighborhood where people paid attention to alleyways much, and this salon didn't seem to use it very often, so I thought we had good odds. I could feel Raincloud chiding me for not thinking to bring any dice as we settled in to wait.

And wait. And wait some more. Saori had texted me yesterday (I had to assume she was ducking back to the mortal world to do so, though some of the photos she had sent me were definitely not taken here) to confirm, but the window of time she gave me was pretty broad, from late morning until well into the afternoon. Apparently lining up time between domains could get very strange at times, and she hadn't been sure how it would go. I was pretty far into that window, Raincloud having long since fallen asleep from boredom, before anything happened at all.

But just when I was starting to actually worry, I felt...something. I couldn't really identify it, but there was a sort of energy stirring, one I didn't recognize. It had no obvious physical source; nothing was overtly happening. But I could feel it, faint traces like the brush of a cobweb against my skin. Even with how finely tuned my senses were, I could barely tell it was there.

At first it felt aimless. It wasn't really doing anything that I could tell, wasn't moving in coordinated ways. It was centered on the spot where the portal was supposed to happen, but not centered very tightly. Over about the next five minutes, though, the magic started to get stronger, and started to feel increasingly tightly focused on that spot. I could see it there, barely, a trace of not-light playing over the surface of the wall in ways that felt slightly *off,* as though there were a pattern in it, but not one I could see.

It didn't feel like Saori's magic. Not at all; there was nothing like kitsune in this, no scent of fox or spice, nor was there any of the smoke and wild laughter that I associated with her more specifically. This felt strangely anonymous, energy without any of the identifying marks or emotional overtones I normally perceived when someone was using magic. It felt so pure, so completely lacking contextual meaning, that it was kind of creepy. I'd never encountered anything quite like this before.

I nudged Raincloud awake and stood up, eyeing the brick wall of the hair salon warily. There was still no physical effect happening, and the energy still wasn't all that strong, but I could tell that something was building. I didn't like how much it didn't feel like Saori.

After about another minute, the structure seemed to snap into position fully. Now it clearly was forming patterns, though I was only seeing parts of them, like looking at a three-dimensional cross-section of a four-dimensional object. And it did smell, just a tiny bit, like Saori. And there was, finally, a physical effect, though it was very faint. Just a slight distortion in the air, like the heat haze over asphalt on a hot day. I could only tell it was real because Raincloud could see it, too.

Saori stepped out of that haze a moment later, and it disappeared behind her. The kitsune looked...odd, in the moments after the transition. Her eyes were firmly closed, and she was moving in a way that seemed...strange, clumsy in a way she usually very much wasn't. She took a few steps like that, seemingly at random, and then collapsed to the ground.

Is that...supposed to happen? Raincloud sounded spooked.

I didn't blame her. I had my back to the opposite wall of the alley now, and Thorn had shown up at some point, its hilt now in my grip, though I didn't draw it. *I have no idea,* I told her. And then, out loud, "Um. Hi?"

There was no response. Saori was seemingly unconscious, and I was nervous as hell. Nothing seemed to be happening, though. The portal itself, or whatever that had been, was gone, the energy completely dissipated. No one else was showing up. Nothing was happening.

It was five full minutes before Saori stirred. And, at first, that was just to roll onto her side and groan.

"You okay?" I asked, still feeling somewhat freaked out.

"Yes," she groaned into the wall. "Stop shouting."

I was pretty sure I'd been speaking at a normal conversational volume. But I complied with the request, dropping to a whisper barely audible with her hearing. A human couldn't have made out the words at that distance. "What happened to you?"

"A slightly worse crossing than usual," the kitsune muttered, barely audible to my own, similarly preternatural hearing. "Ow."

"They're usually this bad?" I asked, feeling a mix of incredulous and disturbed. I could feel Raincloud echoing that sentiment.

"More or less. It varies. It's too fucking bright out."

"It is," I agreed. "We should complain to the sun, maybe start a petition." She laughed at that, and I smiled a little, relieved. At least she felt well enough for absurdism. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Not really. I'll be fine in a few minutes." Saori pushed herself up to a seated position, though she was still leaning back against the wall, and spat. "First layover on the way back was worse, actually threw up that time. That hasn't happened in a while."

"Do you want me to get you some water or something?"

"Don't bother. I'll be up by the time you'd get back." She opened her eyes, wincing at the light. "And I need something to eat anyway. Can get some soda with that."

I laughed. "Of course soda's the first thing you ask for. Who am I even kidding suggesting you touch water."

"Of course I touch water," she said, in a mock-offended tone that made Raincloud giggle in the back of my head. The husky wandered closer, and Saori obligingly provided ear scritches. "Water's great for swimming. And showers. And shower sex, which is usually disappointing but still. I have no problem with touching water. It's only *drinking* it that counts as cruel and unusual punishment."

"Compared to half the shit you do for fun, I'm not sure water*boarding* counts as cruel, and it *definitely* doesn't count as unusual. Drinking water doesn't even tip the scale."

"Spoilsport. Oh, hey, your coat is longer, you mind carrying this?" Saori produced her carbine (she'd gotten annoyed when I called it a rifle, which seemed strange to me given that a carbine was just a lighter form of rifle, but it was easy enough to humor her) and tossed it to me without waiting for an answer.

I didn't even have to ask to know it was loaded. Which was spectacularly bad gun safety, of course, but this was Saori. And I suppose that in her defense she did know my reaction time and movement speed were better than a human's. Much like her driving, it was still dangerous, but actually much less so than it initially seemed, if you didn't know to adjust for that capability.

Still. A part of me wanted to chide her for it, if only because that habit was instilled in me deeply back in the day. I didn't, of course; even if I actually cared, it would just encourage her. I just caught the gun, checked the safety (it was off, naturally, because this was Saori, which I corrected), and tucked it under my coat. It didn't really do much more to alter my silhouette than the shotgun that was already there.

"I'm surprised you brought this," I commented. "I thought guns didn't work well on the Otherside."

"Mm. It's hit-or-miss, but yeah, a lot of domains they don't. And I don't normally bother, but the last place I had to hit up they *do* work, and it's not hard to carry if I don't have to hide the damn thing." Saori pushed herself upright, slowly, and then shook her head as though to clear it. "Alright, I'm good. Let's go get that soda. Also food, but priorities."

I laughed, and followed her out of the alley.

Saori and I had initially met at a café not far from there. My understanding was that at the time she had been eating lunch there more days than not. I hadn't asked why; it seemed very...out of character for the kitsune, who was normally allergic to routine. I hadn't asked much about those first few months in the city. I knew they were very bad for her, and that it was related to whoever had given her that house. And *that* was a topic she avoided like the plague, so I'd left it alone.

In any case, though, that wasn't where we went now. Topics of memory and association aside, their food was only passable, and I knew better restaurants around here. This time it was a burger place set a few blocks back from the major thoroughfares which we were both fond of. The food was good, and the staff were unusually willing to do things like bring out a bowl of raw beef for the dog who wasn't supposed to be on their patio. It probably helped that Raincloud was ridiculously good at pleading looks, and that we always tipped generously.

"So what did I miss, anyway?" Saori asked me once she'd gone through half a carafe of soda and was thus willing to entertain ideas like conversation. I genuinely had no idea how she could tolerate the amount of sugar she consumed; diabetes risk aside, I was pretty sure trying would make me physically ill.

"Almost literally nothing," I told her. "So much nothing that it's worrying me."

"Shouldn't it make you less worried?"

"No," I told her. "Because there should have been something by now. An attack, a threat, a nasty rumor, *something*. And so if there hasn't been, that means I didn't notice whatever it was."

Saori drank some more soda. “Okay,” she said eventually. “I know you dislike it when people use the word wrong, but I’m pretty sure this time that actually *is* what paranoia sounds like. Treating the absence of threat as a sign that you’re in more danger is pretty textbook, right?”

I paused, and then sighed. “Yeah. Not wrong. And I don’t know why I feel so sure there is, either. I…fuck. I *really* hope I’m not actually lapsing psychotic again.”

Saori paused and looked at me oddly. I could feel much the same feeling from Raincloud, too. “Again?” the kitsune asked me after a moment. “Have you…done that before?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. “I mean, diagnostic criteria are hard to apply when the supernatural is involved,” I hedged. “But…yes, for a while when I was a teenager I was pretty far gone in that direction. Mostly paranoid, a little bit of other delusions, a bunch of actual hallucinations to go with the synesthesia and magic. I think mostly the hallucinations were the product of stress and sleep deprivation, though. I’m *much* closer to sane these days.”

“Considering how sane you are now,” Saori said dryly, “I think I might be glad I didn’t know you for those days.”

I stared at her. “You’re really going to talk shit about insanity? *You*?”

“Okay, fair point,” she admitted. “But when I do insane things it’s fun and exciting, like a building on fire or something. Not being lost in a nightmare inside my own head. That just sounds…sad. Oh, hey, food’s ready.”

The conversation lapsed after that in favor of food. When we did talk, it wasn’t about madness, exciting or otherwise. There were lighter topics to be had, and I once again noticed how much I liked that about Saori. It wasn’t just that she could recognize when I needed to move away from serious topics and divert to a discussion about the practicalities of using molten sugar as a siege weapon. Anyone could do that, though I expected most people would pick a less absurd topic.

No, the impressive thing about Saori was that when she did this, it felt natural. Most people felt awkward or forced when they tried to change the topic that abruptly. Saori didn’t, at least not to me. My tendency to wander through topics was usually pretty noticeable to start with, which probably helped. But whatever the reason, the effect was the same. It felt like a natural, fluid shift, and the cheerful attitude felt sincere, enough so to be contagious.

I really liked that about talking with her. I was prone to depression and liable to dwell on things if left to my own devices. But Saori’s enthusiasm changed that. It was like her intensity and sheer devil-may-care disregard for things like safety and sanity were captivating, and I wasn’t at all the only one who reacted that way. It was sort of like watching a train wreck or house fire, the way you didn’t want to stare at disasters but couldn’t look away.

I was not at all sure that was a good thing in a general sense. All it took was a few seconds of looking at Saori’s…everything to suggest that for her to be that kind of charismatic might not be ideal. She was decidedly the girl one’s mother had (or should have) warned one about, and while that had its appeal, sometimes those warnings were there for a reason. She was a terrible influence by any measure, and I probably shouldn’t have been enabling her.

But that was the general case. For me, specifically, it was just as clearly a fantastic trait for her to have. It's not like I was any less of a cautionary tale than she was, anyway, and when your life is already a train wreck on fire, it stops mattering so much whether you're adding gasoline to it. And her ability to so consistently break me out of that sort of rumination and bitterness was something I appreciated deeply. She might be a terrible person, but she was good for me.

I could feel Raincloud's attention sharpen at that idea. She felt…thoughtful, like she was contemplating something and trying to fit it into words. That reminded me of her question about whether I loved Saori, and *that* was another topic that I just was not ready to address. It was easier to lose myself in a discussion of the chemical properties of nitrocellulose than to consider how I felt about the person I was having it with.

Lunch flowed past quickly. Saori paid for it today; I let her do so without comment, though I did add another substantial chunk to the tip. Shameless bribery could do a lot to keep people on your good side, I had found, and I liked being able to bring Raincloud here. It wasn't until that was done and we were back outside that I finally broached an actual topic.

"So, uh. Were you able to find anything?"

"Mhmm. Took a bit, and I wasn't able to get any information about your mystery ambuscader. But I did find someone who can *probably* be helpful with security things." Saori shrugged. "I haven't worked with him before, personally. But he comes well-recommended."

"Do you know who he is?"

Saori nodded. "Some human mage based out of, uh, I think Cape Town?"

I paused and stared at her. "Cape Town?"

"That or Hong Kong," Saori said, with another shrug. "I forget which of those two actually answered their phone."

"And you got them to come *here*? How much am I paying in travel surcharges?"

She gave me a puzzled look for a long moment. Then she seemed to realize something, and grinned. "It's not an issue. You're only looking at, like, three hours of travel time here."

I was still staring. That stare had not gotten less dumbfounded; her grin hadn't gotten less smug. "Three hours. From Cape Town."

"Yup!" The kitsune snickered. "Your face right now, priceless. So the thing is, Otherside travel changes things. Not everyone can make their own portals, but if you can, travel…doesn't work the same way anymore. He'll open one from Cape Town into some domain over there. Might do one or two more layovers, hop through a couple of different domains on the way, and then open one back here. Thing is, that one can be to anywhere, it's all the same at that point. I think he said Cleveland."

"He has terrible taste," I said dryly. "But okay, that makes…some amount of sense. You have to do those layovers?"

Saori nodded, sidestepping into an alley—she rarely used main roads unless she had to. "Not the layovers, as such. That's what I call it when someone hops through multiple domains to make

the transfers less miserable. But you have to do at least one, trying to open portals to somewhere in the same domain you're in doesn't work. I don't really know why."

"Huh. But you can still cross the planet in a few hours. That is…incredibly convenient. I kind of want to try it now." I wasn't sure of that—the state she'd shown up in sure as hell suggested this mode of travel had its own drawbacks—but this guy was apparently traveling close to ten thousand miles in three hours. That was hard for me to even wrap my head around.

"I've thought about taking you across somewhere," Saori said, turning and grinning at me. "But I've been kinda messed up, still not moving quite as well as I'd like yet, and trust me, you *do not* want to look vulnerable on your first trip to the Otherside. So it will have to wait. Give me my gun, please."

I was impressed by how smooth she was. There was no shift in her voice, no change in her posture to indicate tension, nothing. She kept walking at the same pace, kept her grin the same. She'd already been speaking at a low enough volume that she didn't have to adjust it to be reasonably subtle. All told, it was one of the best performances of "act casual" that I could remember seeing.

Mine was probably…less good. Then again, I hadn't even noticed whatever threat she was responding to, and while it was better to be blindsided metaphorically than literally, it was still…jarring. So maybe it wasn't surprising that I'd stumble a little bit.

But only a little bit. A slight stutter-step was all I really noticed in myself, at least, before I was moving to comply. Stripped gears could be helpful sometimes when I needed to adapt on the fly. Getting her carbine out from under my coat was a little tricky, though; this wasn't something I'd practiced. I fumbled and almost dropped it, but managed to recover and toss it over to her.

By that point, apparently our company given up on stealth. People were moving towards us from the end of the alley, several. Or, I mean, they were probably people. At least a couple I was pretty sure were human, but there were others who looked…wrong, moved in ways that didn't quite fit human anatomy. And there was definitely more magic moving around than humans alone would explain. I wasn't sure how I hadn't noticed it before.

At least five ahead of us. A quick glance showed another group of comparable number closing in behind us to block any retreat that direction. It wouldn't hold up for long—this neighborhood was too wealthy and too strongly inclined towards the cultural trends that wealth brought with it. Sounds of violence would draw attention rapidly here, and the cops would actually care when someone called about it.

But at least for the moment, they had us boxed in. And in case ten people closing in on us in an alley weren't obviously hostile, they'd kindly removed any remaining uncertainty by displaying lots of weaponry. It looked like mostly more bronze age stuff, though at least two of the more human-seeming ones had firearms.

"So you know how I said you sounded like you were paranoid?" Saori said, in a cheerful, conversational tone. "I take that back. Good call." Her voice was light, but she had that carbine in a ready position, one step short of actually lining up a shot. "How do you want to play this one?"

I was moving closer to her by this point, and turning to put the wall of the building at my back. “Doubt they’re open to peaceful resolution,” I said. I had my shotgun out now as well. I wasn’t nearly as good a shot as Saori, but at this range with a sawed-off shotgun that wasn’t quite as important. Raincloud felt very antsy in my head, and was backed up against the wall next to me.

“You’re cute, but I meant tactics.” Saori’s voice had a mixture of affection and exasperation that was kind of funny to me for some reason. It probably was not the best thing to be thinking about at the moment, but, well. Stripped gears *did* have their downsides, too.

The figures advancing on us weren’t moving too quickly, at least. It was, I supposed, probably not trivial to coordinate that many people in this narrow of a space. And they had very little need to rush right now. This blockade was a short-lived opportunity, sure, but they had *some* time to work with. Enough that they could afford to be thorough rather than risk us slipping past them.

I frowned, taking a moment to think. Much the same as them, really; I would rather be slightly slower than react in a blind panic. “I’d like to get at least a little information about who they are if possible. If I engage the group up ahead, can you handle the ones behind us?”

Saori glanced over at them, and then nodded. “Yeah. But it’ll be loud, and it’ll be messy.”

“That’s fine. I’ll try talking first, figure that I can distract them and maybe get a name or something. Then you hit the flankers while I have their attention and we turn and bolt.”

“Sounds good,” she said, and her grin was a little unsettling, too wide and with a feverish gleam in her eyes. “But you’re going to want to bolt forward. Back will be messy.”

I started to respond, but there was no more time; they were closing in, now, and if I waited any longer we wouldn’t have much space to move in. I stepped out from the wall a bit, turning to face the people up ahead of us. “Hey,” I said, a little too loud. My voice sounded strange, at least to myself, and I could feel the adrenaline starting to hit in earnest. “Look who finally showed up again. Been bored out of my mind waiting for you losers.”

They stopped a short distance away, just far enough to be out of realistic lunging distance, and waited. I let them; as far as I could tell, drawing things out was currently to our advantage. From Raincloud, I could feel that the group behind us was maintaining a similar distance, that Saori had sighted in on one of the attackers but her distribution of weight suggested it was a feint, and that Raincloud herself was ready to sprint for it when we made our break.

I was several kinds of impressed by that, and I told her so while I waited for them to make their next move. In the span of a few seconds, Raincloud had assessed the situation, recognized that her capacity to act directly was pretty limited and that the best way for her to contribute was by feeding me relevant tactical data, and prepared herself to evacuate in a controlled way rather than either panic or try to fight a foolish battle. I hadn’t known many people, of any kind, who could keep their head in an emergency this well, and I was quite proud of her for it.

She was beaming at the praise. I wasn’t really sure that word applied to a dog, but I wasn’t really sure what it looked like on a human, either, and it seemed like the correct term for the

moment. I smiled, and watched as the group of people in front of me shifted out of the way while one in particular approached me.

She was the leader of the whole operation, from how she moved and how they deferred to her. And she definitely wasn't human. I wasn't sure what she was, but even if the way she moved weren't subtly wrong, and even if she weren't dressed like she had escaped from a Renaissance fair, the feeling of her magic would have been a dead giveaway. She had none of the shimmering, flickery feeling I associated with humanity. Her power smelled like red wine and amber and fresh blood, and a sound like laughter just barely loud enough to hear.

"Sugiyama," she said, her voice lower and rougher than I normally expected from women. "A pleasure."

"The pleasure is all yours," I said dryly. "You're much more patient than the last girl, gotta say."

"Yes, well. I do apologize for that; Melania's actions were…unfortunate." The woman had stopped only slightly ahead of the others, still just barely out of reach.

"Considering how you're going about things today, you're going to have a hard time convincing me you're not intending violence." I licked my lips, the tense anticipation leaving me nervous and fidgety. As the adrenaline ramped up, the world seemed to slow down around me. In reality, my processing and movement were speeding up, but from my perspective it was the world changing while I stayed the same.

"Oh, no, not at all. We're absolutely here to kill you. But Melania was directed to observe you, not try to attack on her own. For her to do so, as though she were capable of handling you alone, was both stupid and an insult to your competence, and I apologize for that." She sounded sincere in the apology. The words felt like they were slowing down as she spoke, an almost disorienting feeling.

"Well, uh, apology noted," I said. My voice sounded strange to me, the tone slightly off somehow, the consonants a little slurred. This whole situation felt surreal even by my standards. "As recompense, mind telling me your name? Seeing as you clearly know who I am, it seems fair."

"I am Ekaterina," she said. It was almost creepy how much her voice lacked any menace. She sounded, if anything, friendly. "Daughter of Coronis. Now, we do have some business to conduct. Your companions are free to leave; I have nothing against them."

I could practically feel Saori hesitating. The kitsune shifted her weight slightly, looked around like she was weighing her odds. I could catch enough of what Raincloud was seeing to know that. She hesitated, looking unsure of herself, lowering the carbine a bit so that it was no longer in a ready position.

It was a magnificent portrayal of a woman agonizing over a dilemma. Saori really was a fantastic actress. I knew the plan, knew more or less exactly what she was about to do, and I *still* had a moment of uncertainty, worried that she might genuinely be about to walk out on me. But as she lowered the gun further, I could feel a different tension in her, a sharpness. She still felt like

she was on the precipice, but rather than an agonizing dilemma, it was anticipation, a tension that felt hungry.

And yet even with all that warning, there was still a moment of shock when she grabbed a grenade off of her belt and tossed it at the people closing in behind us.

I'd seen Saori use one of these grenades before. I hadn't gotten a very clear look at it then, and I wasn't watching at all right now, but I could make a pretty good guess at what was going on behind me. There would be an immediate blast of flame, and then waves of choking, disorienting black smoke. The flame wasn't normal fire, though I wasn't sure what the difference was, chemical or magical or both. Whatever the means, the result was terrifying, fire that clung to flesh, that refused to go out, accompanied by smoke that scrambled vision in a way smoke usually didn't.

Within a second, I could hear screaming behind me. I could smell charring flesh, noxious and disgusting, and that spoke volumes about just how intense the fire was. Normally, flesh took time to burn, and in the process it smelled like roasting meat, appetizing regardless of my feelings on the source. This skipped cooked and went straight to charred, and it smelled *vile*.

And in that instant, as soon as I heard the screams, I was taking off at a run. Saori had said it would be messy behind us, and even if I hadn't fully understood why, I'd trusted her judgment. I had been ready to bolt forward, through the group ahead of us. Between the advantage of surprise —what hunter expects the prey to sprint *towards* them?—and having known what was coming, I was quicker off the line than they were.

These people were, some distant part of my mind noted, quite disciplined. Fire is terrifying even when it isn't that sort of hellish incendiary weapon, and almost everyone reacts to a sudden fire breaking out with alarm. It speaks to a part of the brain that doesn't care about things like rational planning, that just wants *out*. For them to stand their ground spoke to a significant amount of discipline and training. I could respect them for that.

The rest of me was busy trying to survive it. The people behind us, I was guessing, were not going to be a problem. They might survive, I wasn't sure, but they weren't likely to recover and advance forward out of the smoke before we were gone. That left just the five in front of us. If we could get past them I was pretty sure we were safe; the fire would *definitely* be bringing in that emergency response now, and they were unlikely to chase us out onto the street while the cops were coming at speed.

One, towards the back, had a gun. It looked a lot like my own shotgun, and it was already aimed in our direction. But we were all pretty hard targets. Saori was quicker and more graceful than any normal human, Raincloud was a Siberian husky who was also both small and far more intelligent than any normal dog, and I was...well. The phrase "quick as lightning" didn't exist without cause. I wasn't remotely as agile as Saori was, but I was comparably fast, and the world around me seemed like it was all moving so slowly by comparison.

I had plenty of time to watch him aim, in those first few seconds after the grenade went off. He was trying to track my movement, but he just wasn't prepared for how fast we were moving, and the shot wasn't even close to hitting me. The sound of the shotgun was deafening in that small alleyway. Saori darted forward into the cluster of people, ducking under one sword and twisting

past another so smoothly it looked like the fight was choreographed. She slashed at someone on the way past—I hadn't seen her draw the knife, wasn't sure where she'd been carrying it—and took her hand off at the wrist, then lunged forward and stabbed the gunman in the chest.

Two down and the flankers disabled left the numbers almost even, but I had no intention of staying and fighting. This was still an ambush, after all, and we had no way of knowing what else they had prepared. Not to mention that Ekaterina was still up, as was another woman who was nothing like human, and I wasn't at all sure that I could take either of them in a fight. I ducked aside instead, hugging the wall and sprinting forward.

Chaos and speed were doing a lot of work for us. I almost made it through before they could react.

Almost. But as I was slipping past Ekaterina, she twisted, quick and flexible as a snake, and slashed at me. She was using the same style of bronze sword as the first attacker had, and she was both faster and stronger than the human woman had been. I tried to dodge, but there was very limited room to maneuver, and I could feel the blade bite in, just above my hip. I couldn't feel the pain right away through the adrenaline, but that leg felt weaker, and I was dimly aware that I was bleeding.

Somewhat frantically, I lunged forward and twisted to the side, feeling the blade slide back out of my flesh. Ekaterina tried to keep up, but I was behind her at this point, and the ground was slick, and I was still pretty damn fast. Another step forward. There was only one of them in front of me now, and while he was huge, damn near seven feet tall if I had to guess, I was pretty sure he was mostly human. In this crowd, that was...problematic for him.

He slashed at me with what looked like a larger, heavier version of the same sword. It was a good strike, but his swing seemed so *slow*. I was short enough to duck under his attack easily, and step up inside his effective reach.

The shotgun would be useless in such close quarters, and I didn't even try. I didn't have a knife handy, and drawing Thorn would have taken too long. I just stepped forward instead, setting my shoulder against his hip, and pushed.

He was huge. Even with how much stronger I was than a human of my build could be, I doubted I could have lifted him on a good day, much less with a hip and a shoulder both injured. But this wasn't a simple contest of strength, and I wasn't trying to lift him off the ground. He was off-balance from his swing having missed like that, I was under his center of mass, and I was pushing with my whole body against a leg that wasn't braced well. It was almost the same, in terms of body mechanics, as a classic floating hip throw from judo, and it was comparably effective. He overbalanced and started to fall. I slipped to the side and ducked past him as he did, and now his bulk was an advantage for me, keeping Ekaterina from following me readily.

Not that she was trying to. The whole group of them was falling back now, in response to some barked command from her. I didn't recognize the language, didn't wait around to see what they were doing. I just kept running, almost out to the street now. Saori was keeping pace next to me now, and after a momentary pang of anxiety I realized Raincloud was right behind me as well.

We got out to the street. Saori turned, and I followed her. Half a block forward, then we turned onto a different alley. I glanced back, half-expecting them to be pursuing us, but nope. Nobody was behind us, and I could already hear the sirens. We were probably in the clear.

I let myself slow down a bit, now. I was panting, more from adrenaline and reaction than exertion, and my leg hurt. I went from a run down to a jog, and then a walk, starting to calm down a bit.

"That went pretty well," Saori said. She was not panting, from reaction or otherwise. She was just grinning at me.

"Not bad," I agreed. "Looked like you probably killed at least one, too."

"At least two," she corrected me. "Pretty sure at least one of them died in the fire."

I nodded. I wasn't surprised by that. I hadn't watched, but the smell of burning flesh was intense, and I had an idea of what those things did. If one of the humans had been in the direct splash zone, they were probably going to die.

Saori had just killed two people for me. Maybe more. And hadn't even flinched at the thought of doing so. I wasn't sure how to feel about that. Should I be uncomfortable that she took someone's life that casually? Maybe, but...they'd been planning to do the same to me. Saori was probably a terrible person, but good *for me*, and she clearly cared about me far more than she did most people. I felt touched by that much more than actually disturbed.

"How much property damage was that, anyway?" I asked after a few moments. We were still walking, but it was a casual pace now, calm.

"Less than you'd expect. Those things are pretty controlled, the fire doesn't really spread." She shrugged. "Some, though. Sorry about that, I know you try not to do arson things in this city. Didn't really have another way to deal with them available."

"No, it's fine," I said. "They earned it. Sucks for the shop owners, but don't know how that could have been avoided."

"Pretty much, yeah. You didn't go fuzzy."

"I didn't?" I blinked. That hadn't really occurred to me. "I didn't. Huh."

She gave me a sidelong glance, which was an excellent gift, really; I didn't get many opportunities to use that word. "You didn't notice?"

I shrugged. "I keep the same body plan. And it's a bit...I mean, I *can* do it on purpose. But a lot of the time, it just sort of happens when I get stressed enough. I don't really notice it until after."

"Huh." She considered that. "That's got to be hella awkward sometimes."

"A bit," I admitted. "It's mostly the tail that I have to adjust for."

"How do you manage that?" she asked. "I've never actually thought about it before."

I shrugged. "I wear high-waisted jeans a lot of the time, and shirts long enough to overlap. Cut a slit in the right place, and a tail can fit through, but the shirt covers the gap."

Saori took a moment to absorb this. “Are you telling me,” she said eventually, “that you’ve been wearing clothes with easy access to your ass this whole time, and I didn’t notice?”

I grinned at her. “Yup. Though it’s more tramp stamp area, tails attach further up on the spine than people often think. And to be fair, I don’t always wear those.”

“Still. I haven’t been this embarrassed in a *while*. And this works?”

“More or less. It’s mostly only happened during fights, which is manageable. Once by surprise during sex, though. That one was *very* awkward.”

She winced. “Yeah, I bet. What happened?”

I sighed. “It was with some guy, vanilla human and kind of a douche. At first it seemed…extremely awkward, but relatively harmless. But the breakup was messy, I had terrible taste in men back then, and he uh. Decided to post it as revenge porn online.”

Saori stopped in her tracks and turned to stare at me. Hell, I could tell that Raincloud had picked up enough of what I meant to be staring at me too. “You’ve got to be shitting me,” Saori said, sounding almost dumbfounded.

I snickered. Saori was usually the person who caused that tone of voice, and I was strangely proud of getting her to *use* it. “I guess I’m on a roll today, huh? Oh, and no, he really did. Like I said. *Terrible* taste in men.”

“That might take understatement of the week,” she said dryly. “Fuck’s sake. What happened?”

I shrugged. “I talked to a friend. Werewolf in New York, I think I’ve mentioned him to you before? Yeah. I don’t entirely know what happened to that guy after that, but I’d be shocked if he survived it. Didn’t really cause me any issues. The video circulated a bit, but nobody took it all that seriously. You know how these things go, it got dismissed as special effects.”

“Still, though. That’s pretty shit. Sorry it happened to you.”

“You know,” I said, “weirdly enough, in hindsight, I think I’m glad it did.”

Saori started walking again. “Why’s that?” she asked, with an odd sort of curiosity. It was like she was trying to figure out what her emotional response to my answer might be.

“Because he was a complete asshole,” I said. “It’s a bit….” I trailed off for a moment, trying to find the right words. This wasn’t something I’d ever explained to someone before. “There are certain rules, right? Pieces of advice that people in my sort of situation, on the periphery of humanity, all tend to hear. I think for most people, there’s a temptation to think those rules don’t apply to you. That you’ll somehow be the exception.”

“Yeah,” Saori said. Her voice was soft, and her eyes were distant for a moment, almost haunted. “I can understand that.”

I chuckled, though it didn’t have much humor in it. “I know I thought so. I’d been told that entangling myself too closely with a vanilla human was a bad idea, but I didn’t care about that. I thought I could ignore those rules. I’m pretty sure it was inevitable that something awful was going to happen in the process of me learning otherwise.” It was something I’d thought about a lot of

times, and that conclusion was inescapable. I was too stubborn to listen otherwise. I was self-aware enough to at least realize that.

"Ah," Saori said, nodding. "And this way it happened to him."

"Yup." I shrugged. "He was enough of an asshole to post revenge porn and enough of an idiot to think using *that* clip for it was a good idea. I don't feel terribly guilt-ridden about him dying as a result."

"Yeah, good riddance. Anyway. Why do you think you didn't get all furry this time? Seems like fights usually bring that out in you."

"I don't know," I said slowly. "And you're right, it *is* a little weird. Violence usually does evoke that response. I'm not sure why it didn't this time."

"Something to think about, then," she said, grinning. "I'm parked around the corner, by the way."

"Cool." I tried to think of what to do next. It was challenging; I hadn't slept much, and right now that was very apparent to me. My head hurt, and it felt very much like I had gotten absolutely nowhere over the past several days. It was frustrating as hell, though I did at least have a name now. It was meaningless to me, but from how the rest had deferred to her, I was guessing Ekaterina, daughter of Coronis was a reasonably important person. Asking around, then, might turn something up. Today was, I reminded myself, not a total loss.

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

"Hm. Not sure where would be smart at this point." I paused as something occurred to me. "How did they find us, anyway, you think? They didn't manage any attempts over the past few days, and I kinda doubt it was because they needed time to set up."

"They don't seem like the type for that," Saori agreed. "Too impulsive, and I would know. Hm. Known location, maybe?"

"From tracking you, you mean?" I frowned. "I mean, I guess it's possible. But I've been staying with Derek, and that's at least as much of one. Maybe more; I've got a longer history with him, and it's a stationary target."

"Sure, but he's a werewolf," Saori said.

"Why would that matter?"

The kitsune shrugged. "I mean, he's very...local. Very rooted in this city, and I doubt he's ever set foot outside this world."

"Ah," I said, realizing what she was getting at. "And you think these people were from the Otherside?"

"I'm guessing so," she said. "They had a halfway decent veil up, so they've got magic to work with, probably enough for portals. And it would explain why they'd think to target my crossing point, but not a local's house. It's easier to find information about me in those circles than here, and for a werewolf it's the inverse."

"Right," I said. The veil explained why I hadn't noticed them, too. I'd never really been around that kind of magic, and Saori obviously had. It tracked that she would see through it more easily. "Ringleader didn't smell human at all, either. Okay, yeah, that makes sense. Um. Sorry about getting you targeted, I guess?"

Saori snorted. "Sorry? The hell for? That was exciting. I mean, I'm annoyed that my leg's still a bit fucked up and I had to go easy because of it, but otherwise that was fun."

I sighed. "Right. What am I thinking, I must have forgotten who I was talking to. Okay. So, the only people I really know with strong ties to the Otherside are you and Capinera. So it seems like it should be...relatively safe otherwise?"

Saori shrugged as we rounded the corner to the random back alley where she'd left her car. I wasn't really sure why it was this far away from her transfer point, but then again, I had no experience with what she had been doing. "Relatively and temporarily, yes. But not every group active in the Otherside is as clueless about mortals as those clowns seem to be. Some of them know how to navigate human society and use tools within it."

I nodded, and then paused. Something about what she'd just said was itching at me. It felt like I was missing something obvious.

It was actually Raincloud that noticed the discrepancy first, and I caught the echo of the realization from her mind. There were no words, she didn't take the time to fit this into language. But there was sudden wariness, and there was a scent she didn't recognize and didn't like. I hadn't noticed it myself; my sense of smell is good, but I'd been distracted, and it wasn't usually the focus of my awareness. Raincloud was fundamentally a dog in many ways, with all that implied, and she was *always* aware of scents.

Once I parsed out that mental impression, I didn't so much pause as freeze. Saori hadn't noticed anything either, but when she saw me stop like that, she stopped too, and she was reaching for her gun. The kitsune had not survived this long with her lifestyle by being slow on the uptake. And when someone freezes up like that, it's best to assume there's a reason. Situations like this were...pretty much exactly why.

"Saori," I said slowly. "Why does your car smell like a stranger?" I concentrated, trying to sift through the scent. It was hard; I was working through the perception secondhand, and while Raincloud and I had mentally shared enough experiences to be able to do that, it was still tricky. It took me a moment to figure out what felt wrong about that scent.

And then I went from frozen to backing away warily. "A stranger who smells like gunpowder," I amended before Saori could answer. Raincloud didn't know the smell well enough to recognize it, but it was distinctive enough that I did.

Saori didn't answer the question. She didn't back away, either. She turned and *bolted* back down the alley at maximum speed instead.

I hadn't survived this long by being slow on the uptake, either. And one of the most important lessons I'd learned in life was that when someone who knew what they were doing is reacting with that kind of urgency, you don't ask questions. When the bomb disposal technician

starts running, you follow them without waiting to see why. When the head engineer goes pale and starts barking orders, you do what they say now and ask why you did those things later.

Similarly, when Saori started sprinting away, I didn't hesitate a moment before I joined her. And while Raincloud hadn't survived a particularly long time, she was an extremely quick learner, and she was right there with us.

None of us hesitated. We were all pretty damn fast, and we'd still been a relatively long way from the vehicle when we turned and ran. And so, between all these factors, we were pretty far back down the alley when the bomb went off.

Chapter Nine

Explosions are intrinsically loud.

This was not exactly a startling, original observation. It was also an understatement of comical proportion. Even the relatively small explosions involved in gunfire are spectacularly loud, far more so than most people would imagine. Something smaller like a twenty-two gauge rifle or nine millimeter pistol round might be in line with their imagination. Those are still noisy, but they're not incredibly so. Larger firearms, though, are loud enough that the shotgun blast earlier had been physically painful and left my ears ringing.

I discovered now that this did not in any way prepare me for the experience of a car bomb. The noise alone was miserably painful, and between that and the pressure wave, I lost track of my surroundings for a few moments. The world went white, and I was falling. Or maybe flying through the air; I couldn't tell which way was up, so it was kinda hard to tell. Everything hurt and I had no idea what was going on. I might have outright lost consciousness. It was hard to tell.

When I became aware of the world again, I was lying on the asphalt. Everything hurt, and my ears were ringing so much I might as well have been deaf. It took me a moment to work up the energy to look around.

Saori and Raincloud had apparently run faster, or maybe just gotten luckier. The former was sitting up watching me, and while she was leaning against the wall of the alley, she didn't look to be in much pain. The latter, I could feel, was conscious, only mildly bruised, and feeling a very strong surge of relief.

Granted, that last bit didn't exactly take a telepathic link to identify. When I managed to sit up, she was in my lap almost immediately, making happy canid sounds and nuzzling into me. That was a bit of a clue. But still, it was good to know she was okay.

"The fuck was that?" I asked, once my ears had recovered enough to at least hear myself.

"Car bomb," Saori said promptly. "Not a huge one, but pretty good. We should get moving if you can, emergency services will be here…very soon."

I laughed. "Yeah, this alley's going to be crawling with cops in a minute or two. You have an exit in mind?"

"Yeah," she told me, standing up and then giving me a hand up as well. "Back door of a restaurant over here. They evacuated already, I think, so we should be able to slip out. I can manage enough of a veil to get us through the cordon or whatever."

"Cool. Let's go." I felt weirdly enthused about that. I'd never seen this kind of magic in use, and while Saori had implied that she could do it before, she hadn't actually told me much about how.

The reality proved to be…a bit more boring than I might have hoped. She already had the door unlocked for us. I was entirely unsurprised to learn that Saori could pick locks, though to be

fair, so could I, an artifact of my extremely misspent youth. We stepped through (I remembered to lock it behind us) and wandered out through the kitchen of what smelled like a decent Italian restaurant. Raincloud gave me a mental nudge on the way through, and I grabbed a steak out of the fridge for her. I rolled my eyes a bit, but honestly, relative to having just set a bomb off less than a block away, I figured petty theft wasn't going to bother the staff much. And she *had* just saved our asses, so.

Saori's veil was so subtle I didn't even realize she was doing it at first. It smelled like fox and spice and smoke, but not much more so than her baseline aura. And from the inside, there was almost no change. Things looked a little bit darker, and there was a faint red tinge in my vision, like I was wearing tinted lenses. Nothing else to show that it was happening.

But she walked out the front door like it was just an average day. I followed her, not saying anything, and we just kinda...walked right through a police line. There were probably almost twenty cops there already, accompanied by a fire truck and two ambulances. All of those people, and we walked past them without interruption.

It felt eerie, really, the way they were looking straight at us and not responding. I could hear them talking to each other, and the terse, jargon-laced conversation happening over the radios. I could see them milling around. But they didn't see me at all, not one of them reacting to us. I didn't say anything, because I didn't want to push my luck, but I was absolutely fascinated at how *easy* this was. We ducked under the police tape that was already up around the scene and slipped out into the crowd of bystanders, without even a pretense of mundane stealth.

Once we were in the crowd, and safely lost as just two more faces among many, Saori dropped the veil. I could tell because things got brighter, but there was no more change in the energy patterns around me than when she put it up.

"So," she said. "That was...bracing." The kitsune was grinning. I wasn't sure whether it was sincere. I could barely hear her through the ringing in my ears, which made it hard to gauge tone.

"That's one word for it. You two are okay, right?"

"Yup! You definitely took the worst of it this time around. You passed out for almost a minute; I was starting to worry that I'd have to carry your ass out."

"Yeah, not having a great time. I think my ears are...starting to recover, at least." I winced as yet another police cruiser went by, siren blaring at an unholy volume. I was almost flattered by the intensity of the emergency services response. Though I suppose that we *had* just gotten into a minor gunfight, used an incendiary grenade, and then detonated a bomb, so it probably wasn't all that surprising.

"That's good. On which note, remind me later that I definitely owe 'Cloud a steak."

"I already grabbed one," I said dryly. "But I'll try to remember. This *was* a pretty nice save, thank you." That last comment was directed towards Raincloud directly, and I could feel her happiness and pride, mixed through with a thread of anxiety.

"Yeah. Catching the gunpowder was impressive. That definitely wasn't the bomb itself, more likely the person who planted it had a lot of guns on them." Saori grinned. "Lucky as hell, really. That was a close one."

"No shit." I didn't sound nearly as excited as she did. "How did we trigger it, do you think? We didn't touch anything, and I find it hard to believe it was a proximity sensor that sensitive without it having triggered before this."

"Same." Saori was quiet for a long moment. Eventually, in a much less cheerful tone, she said, "My guess is it was a proximity sensor, just not the kind you're used to. It was probably rigged to detect a specific aura. Wouldn't have gone off for a human."

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned towards her. "You can...do that?"

"I mean, I can't personally, but it can be done, yes." Saori shrugged. "You aren't the only one who can detect these things, you know."

"Sure, but...how does that even work?" I still wasn't moving. This was...a discovery that was several kinds of unsettling to me. It wasn't just that it implied things about whoever was behind the bomb. It also felt strangely uncomfortable to learn that the signatures I was accustomed to using for identification myself could also be used for something like this. I wasn't sure why.

"It's delicate and I don't know exactly how it works," Saori hedged. "But the basic idea is that you have a spell already in place with a structure that's not *quite* complete. People do that all the time; you set the spell up, and then when whatever trigger you built into it happens, it shifts the structure enough to complete the working. In this case, the spell was linked to a detonator."

"I'm familiar with the concept, at least vaguely. But that's one hell of a sensitive trigger. We didn't even use any magic near it." I started moving again, though it was slower now, and I could feel Raincloud picking up on how disturbed I was by this. She didn't like the implications either once she sorted through them.

"Yup. That's...kind of the hard part with this sort of thing." Saori shrugged. "It has to be very, *very* sensitive for passive auras to set it off. And you get a few false positives, probably would have triggered on any kitsune rather than just me for example. It's not common, but it's a thing. Rigging it to a bomb was clever, though, very stylish."

We walked quietly for a few moments. We were starting to get far enough away from the scene of the explosion that the sirens were quieter, which was a relief. My ears still hurt, and the bruises hadn't helped the cut on my hip in the slightest. I hadn't even had time to look at that yet.

"That sounds like a hell of a trick," I said eventually. "I can't imagine there are many people who could pull that off."

"Nope!" Saori sounded chipper again. "It's hard to put that kind of latent spell together, the trigger is very delicate work. And then they also apparently know how to use explosives pretty well. Guessing that was C-4, not totally sure but it seems likely. So, looks like you've got a high-class secret admirer."

"I'm flattered." I did not sound chipper. I sounded calm, in a way that was never a good thing with me. "I think this time it actually does make sense to apologize. That was a nice car."

"Yeah, I'm pissed about that one. Explosions are fun and all, but this was just rude." Saori paused. "And it wasn't a whole lot like Ekaterina's thing."

"No, not especially." It was a thought I'd already had, and I didn't like it at all. That first attack had been impulsive, clumsy, and simple. The ambush by Ekaterina today hadn't been a whole lot different, really; it was better-executed, but it wasn't exactly a genius plan. It was just a bunch of people with weapons attacking us face-on. Simple, direct, and from what Saori had inferred about their targeting, probably not all that strongly grounded in the mortal world. She might be wrong, but it seemed like a reasonable conclusion.

This assassination attempt was nothing like that. This was smooth, professional, impersonal, and used mundane explosives to great effect. It was far scarier to me, too. Someone coming at me with a sword might not be something I was used to, but it was a problem I at least knew how to solve. This…wasn't. We'd only survived that bomb by the thinnest of margins, and they hadn't exposed themselves to any danger at all in the process. This felt like the work of an actual, highly skilled assassin, and if they kept trying things like this, it was only a matter of time before it worked.

"You really are fucked beyond belief," Saori told me, grinning. "It's fun. I barely even need to pick fights lately with how much excitement you're providing."

"You're welcome, I guess. Also insane, but I'm glad *someone* is finding this fun."

She laughed. Raincloud did, too. I sighed, and kept walking.

"So what are you doing next, do you think?" she asked me after another block of random side streets.

"Not totally sure," I admitted. "I'm pretty seriously out of my depth at this point. I mean, already was, really, but at least with Ekaterina's crew I have some idea of what I need to do. I'm just struggling to do it. This…I don't even know where to start."

Saori nodded quietly. There was an odd look in the kitsune's eyes now, one I couldn't name and wasn't entirely comfortable with. "You could ask VNC," she said.

I imagined what that would cost me, and shuddered. The consulting firm might be an ally of sorts, but they were *not* my friends, and this was just about the worst bargaining position I could be in. The idea of what I would have to pay if I went to them this desperate was not pleasant even to contemplate.

"Even if I could afford that," I said after a moment, "I don't think it would do much. They aren't local enough for this kind of thing. I really wouldn't expect them to have anyone on hand who could offer much insight about a local-scale threat with no notice and almost no information to work from."

She nodded again. She still looked just…odd, her eyes fey and distant. "If you want," she said after a moment, "I can contact the people who…got me out of the trouble I was in."

It was my turn to be quiet for a few moments. I knew almost nothing about that whole topic. I did not know who that benefactor was, or what they had done. I didn't know why she had needed it, and while I had the sense that the price of their help had been a heavy one, I didn't know any details about that, either. She'd been so cagey about it that it was telling in and of itself.

"You think they'd be able to help here?" I asked after a few steps.

"Yes. They could." Saori sounded entirely certain of that, a sort of bedrock confidence so complete that it was kind of spooky. It was like the possibility that they *couldn't* help in some way didn't even cross her mind, and all things considered, the implications of that were...unsettling.

"People who can do things like that," I said delicately, "rarely do them for free." I wasn't sure how direct to be, right now. I didn't want to come across as harsh, given that Saori herself had made this sort of bargain. I also didn't want to outright mention the toll it had taken on her. Again, details were unclear to me, but her first few months in Pittsburgh had apparently been...pretty fucking rough. Bringing that up seemed rude, but I'd have to be an idiot not to be thinking about it, under the circumstances.

"No. They do not. You would hate it. You'd probably hate me for doing it. But if you want me to, I can call them." There was almost a pleading note in her voice now, as though she were desperately hoping I would make the right choice. I wasn't sure which one she wanted, though.

I sighed. "I'm not quite that desperate yet. But...thank you for the offer. That means a lot to me."

Strangely, I wasn't being sarcastic at all. In a weird way, this was genuinely touching. Saori clearly wasn't comfortable with any part of that history, and I highly doubted she was thrilled about the thought of contacting them again. That she was willing to do so for me was, in its own dysfunctional way, a way of showing that she cared. I'd have to be insane to *take* that offer, but still, touching.

It did leave me in a rough position, though. I was lost *before* I added high explosives to the list of things I had to worry about. Now that the danger had escalated even further, I was starting to feel more than a little desperate. Not enough so to take Saori up on that idea, but...well. I was clearly going to have to do *something* I didn't like, here. And there were milder options than hers.

"Let's go somewhere I can make some calls," I said quietly. I had some devils of my own, and deals to make.

It wasn't quite that simple, of course. It seemed like nothing was ever that simple, particularly with me around. But in this case, the complications were less the product of my tendency to attract bizarre complications, and more just a matter of scheduling. I had a few people to call, and between time zones and their scheduling patterns, none of them were going to be available for a while.

I ended up sitting at a diner to wait. It was a cheap greasy-spoon style of restaurant, just barely on the right side of trashy—the kind of place you go to because the bars are closed and you aren't ready to go home yet. It was almost empty at this hour, and the building layout obviously hadn't been intended as a restaurant, leaving some tables in very out-of-the-way corners.

It was, in short, perfect for my needs. I wasn't hungry, but as a place to sit and call shady people, this was pretty good. I ordered something to pick at, found a small table in the corner, and settled in to wait. I was alone, and it was quiet. Saori had gone to acquire a car, something she phrased in exactly that way. She hadn't said how she planned to do that so casually, and I hadn't asked. Once Raincloud heard how long I was going to take here, she'd opted to go with Saori without an instant of hesitation.

For the first time in a while, I was genuinely alone. Maybe that's why Thorn showed up on the bench next to me, to keep me company.

The staff were watching the news, since there was so little work to do, and it was covering the explosion live. Made sense, really; it would be surprising if the local news *weren't* covering a recent explosion of that scale. The cops hadn't yet released a statement, but I did learn that two people had been confirmed dead and at least ten injured, all in the adjacent businesses.

That pissed me off in a way that Ekaterina's gang hadn't. Oh, I was angry at them for trying to kill me, but they'd been very fair about it. Hell, she had outright given me warning before attacking, about as clean and honorable as assassination attempts got. Using a bomb in a semi-residential neighborhood, when there was only a passable chance I'd even be there, was...not. Honestly, for as slick and professional as the bomb design had been, the attack itself had been messy, almost sloppy in its planning.

I didn't feel guilty about those people dying. Not as such. It was not me that planted that explosive, and I didn't have enough of a hero complex to take on the weight of their deaths anyway. But still, it pissed me off in a different way, one I couldn't quite explain or put into words. It was a relief when they switched the channel to a football game—the kind you play with your feet, not American football, thankfully.

I could only do so much from here, but I wasn't idle while I waited. I started by digging up what I could about Ekaterina, a task which proved shockingly easy. Her name wasn't that meaningful, but she'd said she was the daughter of Coronis, and *that* name was easy as hell to figure out. There were a number of mythical figures under that name that I could find easily, but the one that stood out to me was a maenad, a nymph who was closely aligned with Dionysus.

That fit the blood-wine-amber scent of Ekaterina's signature very well. And it explained why they seemed so impulsive, too. Followers of the god of abandon, intoxication, madness, and bloody revelry were not all that likely to be patient, calculating people. I was pretty sure I knew what she was now, and it scared me.

Coronis was famous, one of Dionysus's closest companions in the old myths. If someone was famous and powerful two thousand years ago, and they're still around, it seemed best to take them *very* seriously. Strictly speaking Ekaterina might have been talking about some other maenad named after the one in the myths, but I highly doubted I was that lucky. No, she was one generation out from *that*.

Once I'd figured that lovely little tidbit out, I settled in to make plans. Clearly, there were a whole lot of skills I needed to learn, and equipment to pick up. I started making an actual list of things, now. It was a long list, and then I went back through and added notes about possible sources.

A lot of it I definitely couldn't do anything about right now. Learning to track someone by scent, for example, had obvious value, and Raincloud's demonstration today had done an excellent job of showing the importance of noticing scents in general. I fully intended to call Cassie and see if I could get any pointers or training, given that the old werewolf was to my knowledge the best person in the city for sent tracking by a fair margin. That would be helpful, but it seemed very unlikely that I'd be able to learn the skill quickly enough to matter to this crisis.

But if I only planned to the end of the crisis, I would just ensure that the next situation became a crisis too. If I survived the month—admittedly a much less confident prospect than it had been last week—these things would be essential. And I had a bit of time to work with right now, in which I had nothing immediately productive to do anyway.

So I sat in the diner and made plans. I had a small notebook, and over the course of the next two hours or so I filled it with notes and lists and ideas. I'd transfer it to electronic storage later, but for the moment this would work. In some ways it was easier to do on paper, anyway, with how much I was going back to revise or cross out entries.

Plus, it might be encrypted better than my phone connection could manage. I had never yet met someone who could easily read my handwriting. It was an incoherent scrawl, letters running together and none of the spacing quite lining up right, missing letters and crossed-out words, and penmanship so bad people usually had a hard time telling which sections I'd randomly lapsed into Japanese for. If someone knew my writing, and they already knew the general topic, they might be able to eventually parse out parts of it. But even then, there was almost always a fair amount of uncertainty. I'd never felt the need to work on improving it; after all, *I* could read my writing just fine.

The diner staff left me alone, aside from the occasional stop to give me more tea. Normally I would expect a restaurant to kick me out after this long, but this place was dead right now, so few customers that the staff was sitting and watching sports. Nobody cared that I was taking up a table. It wasn't until well past sundown that I finally called it good and put the notebook away. I didn't

normally like to carry a bag, mostly because I knew that if I did I'd end up carrying so much random shit I couldn't keep track of it all. But I was smart enough to bring a backpack when I was planning to be away from home for at least a few days, and I had plenty of space for a notebook.

Once I stowed it again, I took out a small pouch of business cards. I was in the habit of keeping phone numbers written down, because I fried phones often enough to make maintaining contact lists a little awkward. But this set of numbers, in particular, was one that I had no intention of adding to any contact lists. It was a single, small stack of cards, each with just a number and a small note to suggest who it was for. No other information. They were the kind of numbers where if you needed to ask who would pick up, you didn't need to know. I sifted out one in particular, checked the time again, and then dialed.

The girl who answered sounded young, Japanese, and cheerful. The first of those was plausible, and the second guaranteed; this was not a conversation where English would be used. The third was almost certainly a lie, but she sold it well. Receptionists tend to be good at that, no matter who they worked for. She answered with a very simple "Hello?", unusually simple for that culture.

"Good morning. I'm calling for Mr. Saito."

I'd been half-expecting her to play at not knowing who I meant. But this was apparently a restricted enough number that she didn't feel the need. "Mr. Saito is unavailable currently, unfortunately."

"That's fine, I can wait. If you could tell him Sugiyama Kyoko called, that would be appreciated." I didn't like using the family name, but it really wasn't optional. It would be too culturally inappropriate to use just a personal name for myself, or use his at all. Japanese just didn't work that way.

"Of course, with my apologies. One moment, please."

I had been expecting for him to call me back later. All else aside, the time zone difference was large enough that it was still appallingly early in the morning there. Saito was a morning person, among his other poor lifestyle choices, but this was early even for him. But apparently Saito was in the office especially early today, because I was on hold for less than fifteen minutes, and when the call reconnected he was on the line himself.

"Sugiyama! Are you well? It has been too long since we spoke." The old gangster sounded exactly the same as I remembered. His voice was higher than most guys, but rough, a little hoarse, the product of a long-ago injury to his throat that had never fully healed.

Despite myself, I found myself relaxing a little at the sound. Saito Ryosuke had been...well, it was a lot like what I'd observed about Saori earlier today. Saito was, by almost any standard, a bad person. He was a major, long-standing figure in an organized crime family, and you don't hold a position like that without doing some terrible things. He might be less predatory than most of the Yakuza, but I knew perfectly well he had still done terrible things. Hell, I'd *been there* for some of them.

But he had been good *to me*, at a time when I'd desperately needed someone to be. Sure as hell a better mentor than my father ever managed to be. And even after all these years, his voice still made me feel safer somehow, a feeling I welcomed even though I knew it was a lie. "Only a few years," I said, and suddenly realized it was close to ten now. I'd barely spoken with him at all since I left, in fact. "But yes, too long. And I've been well enough. How about you, are you doing well?"

"Oh, I try. Honestly, Sugiyama, the young blood has been driving me insane. I wish these kids had half the skills you did."

I laughed. "You flatter me, sir. I'm guessing you aren't complaining that they don't attract half as much trouble, though." The respectful mode of address came surprisingly naturally to me. I couldn't easily think of the last time I'd used honorifics with anyone, in any language. But it had been habitual, when I was essentially working for him, and it was like as soon as I heard his voice I fell back into that habit.

"You always did have a gift for that," Saito agreed. "Is that why you're calling me, then?"

"It's not the only reason, but I am in some significant trouble, yes. And I am finding myself in need of certain tools for resolving it."

"Tools for our kind of work, then, no? Hm. I will warn you that my connections there are limited."

"That's fine," I said. I'd been expecting that, really. Saito's family might have international interests, but the Yakuza was ultimately a firmly Japanese institution, and I was on the other side of the planet, now. "Anything you can turn up would be helpful. Mostly, I need to talk to an arms dealer, preferably one who carries unusual weaponry." It was probably stupid to say that so openly, but I really wasn't concerned. The diner was very empty, and the chance anyone present could both hear me and understand Japanese was virtually nil. And besides, the vibe in here was...well. I doubted I was the first person to sit at one of these tables calling up friends in low places. The staff knew better than to be too interested in such things.

Saito was interested, though. He was *very* interested. I could hear it in his voice. "Unusual in what way?"

"Several. I'm trying to find a source for C-4, first off. And armor would be good, preferably something that works for swords."

"Someone has been trying to cut you with a sword?" Saito's voice was sharper now, concerned. It was touching, in a way. He'd always been very protective towards his kids, as he called the younger Yakuza affiliates he managed. And while I was well into adulthood now, I expected he would always see me as one of his kids on some level, still remember me as the angry, broken teenager who had been working for him a lifetime ago.

"Someone has been succeeding," I said dryly. "But so far I've given better than I got. The explosives were much more dangerous."

"Armor is not enough. You need to be able to protect yourself."

"Yes, sir, I know. But I'm mostly already prepared for that. And blades are…." I glanced over at Thorn, quietly resting in its sheath next to me. "I have sufficient blades," I finished after a moment, and managed not to laugh hysterically at the understatement. "And I'd ask for guns, but my aim has not improved."

Saito laughed. My terrible aim was a longstanding joke between us. Saito used to say that if I could shoot as well as I brawled, I'd be the best soldier in his employ; but unfortunately, if it weren't for gravity I couldn't hit the ground. "I'll see what I can do. Is there anything else? Unfortunately I have to go, I have…another engagement this morning. But I'll look into it, and we can talk later, perhaps?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you, sir."

"It's nothing," Saito said dismissively. "Until later then."

He disconnected. I returned that card to the pouch, and took out another, staring at it. Like Saito's, it was very simple. Just a phone number, and the name Fleischmann—a traditional German surname, meaning butcher. Unlike the previous, though, I'd never called this number, not once. I'd never been desperate enough.

I tried to talk myself out of it for a moment, and then sighed and called. I was more than a little spooked, a feeling which did not improve when someone picked up and said absolutely nothing. I waited a moment, and then said, "Um. Hello? I'm looking for Silas Fleischmann."

"I don't know who you're talking about." The person who answered sounded very little like the last in every way but one. His voice was masculine, lower, less cheerful, and speaking English with no discernible accent. But the artificial, practiced calm was the same. Receptionists really did have some things in common the world over. He had a good voice for it.

He was also giving me the runaround. I was fully expecting that, given that from what I knew vampires were even more secretive and paranoid than gangsters. But I had very little patience at the moment. "Tell you what," I said. "If you happen to remember such a person, tell him Kyoko Sugiyama called from this number. I promise he'll want to know." I left the implicit threat of what Silas might do to this guy otherwise unstated. He would know better than I did, anyway.

"I'll keep that advice in mind."

"Good. Have a nice evening." I hung up and glowered at nothing in particular. Honestly, part of me was glad that I had to leave a message there. It meant I didn't have to talk to Silas yet. I'd met the vampire exactly once before, and found it a deeply uncomfortable experience. Sure, he might owe me, and he'd seemed to like me. But the fact remained that he had spent centuries as a powerful predator who ate people that looked a lot like me. It was hard not to be aware of that.

But he *was* powerful. And I needed a different kind of local connection. I had friends in this city. I did not have any particularly powerful allies, no connections or informants. All my really powerful allies, or sort-of allies, were elsewhere. I was hoping the latter group could provide the former.

I was pretty sure it would work, too. Saito could downplay his ability all he wanted. And to be fair, he wasn't lying; his connections would definitely be thin here. But I knew quite well how resourceful he could be. And Silas might not live here, but Albany wasn't that far away, and he was too old and canny not to have any greater reach than just the city he controlled. It seemed very unlikely to me that there was nothing he could do. I'd been saving this favor for a rainy day, and I'd have liked to keep saving it, but it wouldn't do me any good if I were dead. A good card you can't bring yourself to play is no better than a bad one.

Saori had texted me a few minutes ago, which was good timing on her part, though admittedly she had known the schedule I was working on. Regardless, it was good timing, and even better, I'd decided on the next thing I needed to do, now. From that list of skills and resources I needed to develop, two stood out particularly clearly.

One was a better place to stay. Clearly, Derek was no longer an option. If the people after me were willing to use tactics like a car bomb in a residential area, relying upon relative obscurity and public attention to keep myself intact was a bad idea. The other was a crash course on the topic of highly skilled assassins. The rest all mattered, but those two were the things that I needed *now.*

And fortunately, I knew somewhere I could find both.

Chapter Eleven

"You stole this." I sounded incredulous, probably because I was.

Saori grinned at me lazily. "I prefer the term 'liberated,' actually," she told me. She sounded smug, probably because she was.

"Sure," I said. "But out of all the cars you could have picked, you liberated *this*?"

Saori looked at the car. It remained the same. The overall structure was ordinary enough, a sedan with pretensions of being a sports car. But I wasn't sure how she'd even *found* a car painted quite this eye-searingly neon green.

"Yes? Are you surprised?" the kitsune asked me.

"Not really," I sighed, getting in. Raincloud managed to fit herself into my lap, an impressive feat of acrobatics. "But I remain hopeful that someday, just maybe, you might do something sane enough to shock me. You aren't afraid the original owner will recognize it?"

Saori sniffed. "Bitch, please. Getting caught is for amateurs." She peeled out of the parking lot at an impressive speed. It had not taken her long to start driving this thing with the same devil-may-care attitude she'd had with the previous car. Apparently, in addition to her other talents, she was able to learn how a new car handled rather quickly, though at least this one didn't yet have the aftermarket adjustments that had made that vehicle's acceleration so intimidating.

I wasn't sure how she was planning to keep a car this obvious from being noticed. But then again, I also wasn't sure how she'd kept anyone from noticing as we just walked right through a police cordon. However strange her methods, there clearly *were* methods in Saori's madness, and I decided to just trust her on it. "Alright. Well. I think the Blackbird is my next port of call."

"Makes sense," Saori said. The kitsune sounded slightly reluctant. I wasn't entirely sure what the relationship was between her and Capinera, but I got the impression of almost a friendly rivalry when it came to their respective shady histories. Which was almost certainly one-sided, with how much Capinera wanted to leave hers behind. But when she killed for her father it hadn't exactly been on the field of battle, and she was by far the more experienced of the two when it came to assassination. I thought Saori might be a little jealous of that.

I wondered, as she drove, what it said about me when my friends had a rivalry over who was better at which types of criminal activity. The question wasn't asked in a wholly negative way—I did like these people, and their skills were undeniably useful ones. But it definitely felt like my life had ended up in a very strange place.

Saori blasted what sounded like circus music crossed with death metal at an obscene volume. Raincloud had her head out the window the whole way across town, and I could feel her exuberant laughter in the back of my mind.

Saori parked two blocks away from the Blackbird Cabaret, and we watched the crowd filtering in from the parking lot. There was a show tonight, then, which was good. It was a pretty decent bet that there would be something going on here, but Capinera did take nights off, and I couldn't remember the schedule offhand. I couldn't readily check, either. Capinera had a phone, but it was anyone's guess whether she would remember to answer it. Growing up among the Sidhe hadn't gotten her accustomed to mortal technology, and it was pretty clear sometimes. But I supposed that I was just as obviously naïve when it came to the Otherside, so I probably wasn't in a position to throw stones.

The three of us sat there for a few moments, just watching. Eventually, I asked, "You coming with?"

Saori hesitated, several emotions flickering across her face too quickly for me to parse them before she settled on something like regret. "I shouldn't," she said, sounding reluctant. "Leg hurts like a bitch, think I might have pushed it a little too hard on that sprint. I mean, not complaining, but still, probably ought to rest it tonight." She paused, then added, "I suppose I should also get some more grenades."

I nodded. "Where the hell *do* you get those, anyway?" I asked, idly curious. I'd been wondering for a while, even before she used another today. They obviously weren't commonly available. And granted, she and I both had our fair share of things that we weren't legally allowed to possess, but these grenades didn't even look like military hardware. I'd browsed a bit online, and I hadn't found anything that looked quite like them.

Apparently, I'd just said something *very* funny. I didn't know what it was, but Saori looked at me for a moment and then just broke down laughing. Her laughter, as usual, felt golden and flickery and pleasant on my skin. It was good that I enjoyed the feeling, because I had plenty of time in which to appreciate it. Saori was laughing so hard she couldn't catch her breath, and it took a solid minute for the kitsune to get the laughter under control.

"You don't want to know," Saori said, wiping tears from the corner of one eye and still a little breathless. "You *really* don't want to know."

I was not sure I believed that. Oh, I had no difficulty believing that I wouldn't *enjoy* knowing. If Saori thought that, I had total faith that she was correct. But that wasn't the same thing as not *wanting* to know. This reaction was...a bit unsettling, and between that and the extremes of behavior I knew she was capable of, my interest was more serious now, concern rather than just idle curiosity.

I didn't say any of that, though. For one thing, pressing her on it would be rude. But more to the point, it just wouldn't work. I'd figured that out about Saori at this point. She could be coy or cagey, and she was happy to keep giving someone answers that only left them with more and increasingly concerning questions the further they followed her down the rabbit hole. But when she actually declined to talk about something at all, that boundary was not negotiable. Pushing would just make her close down and withdraw further.

So I just grinned, a little too wide, and rolled my eyes at her. “Yeah, well. Try not to get blown up, then.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but no promises. Try to keep your blood inside you, that’s where I want most of it to stay.” Saori’s grin was also too wide, and it didn’t *quite* cover a flicker of something else beneath. I wasn’t sure what emotion it was, but it was there.

“Alright, but only because you asked nicely.” I hugged her, and got out, and watched the lime-green abomination drive away. I wondered whether she really had stolen it. I wondered what it suggested that I couldn’t make a confident guess one way or the other.

Then I shook my head and took a deep breath of the cold December air to clear my thoughts, and turned away.

I sat in my normal corner, in the closest thing this theatre had to permanent furniture, and watched the show. Well, for a certain value of “watched,” at least. I was there, and I saw the show, but I was barely aware of it. The fatigue was really starting to wear on me now, and it showed. I wasn’t unaware of my world; on the contrary, I felt alert, twitchy and hypervigilant. But that awareness didn’t encompass *meaning.* I was attentive to my environment, but I couldn’t bring my focus to the performance itself enough to even say what it was. Some sort of acrobatic dance thing, but I didn’t register more detail than that.

Instead, the time drifted past me in a sort of dissociated fugue, alertness without clear thought. What thoughts I did have were quiet and distant, disconnected from my immediate surroundings. It felt almost like I was watching my body from the outside, my cognitive and language functions at a distance from things like movement and sensation.

I’d had this feeling before. It wasn’t something that boded well. In the past, this kind of distant, dissociated feeling had been associated with some of the worse mistakes I’d made in my youth. I was concerned about that comparison, though the worry also felt slightly detached.

It really wasn’t until the applause started that I snapped out of it. I blinked a few times, clearing my head, and then joined in with that applause. I was moderately enthusiastic about it; I might not know whether the show was any good myself, but I could tell that Raincloud had enjoyed it. Given she couldn’t really clap herself, it seemed appropriate for me to do so by proxy.

And then, just like it had not so long ago right before this all started, the crowd started filtering out. Just like I had then, I stayed where I was.

But apparently I looked a little worse for wear, because as soon as the room was otherwise empty, Capinera was walking over and leaning against the wall next to me. “Kyoko,” she said. “Are you okay? You look stressed.”

I sighed. “No, not really. I’m…in a bit of trouble, at the moment. I was actually hoping to ask you for a favor. I need somewhere to stay tonight, maybe for a few nights. And I have some questions that you might be able to help with, though I doubt you’ll enjoy the conversation.”

"Of course," Capinera said. Just like that. There was no hedging, no reluctance or hesitation. I'd been expecting at least a little bit of pushback, and apparently my surprise at not receiving any showed, because Capinera smiled. "I know this may surprise you," she said. "But you're my friend and I would prefer that bad things not happen to you. Let me lock up, and then you can tell me what's going on."

She walked off without waiting for an answer. I stared after her. *You know,* I commented to Raincloud, *I think that might be the first time she's gotten snarky with me.* I felt almost proud of Capinera for it, really. Even that slight sarcasm was sharper than she normally got.

It took a while for her to lock up. It was a bit more complicated than that phrase suggested; the locks only took her a moment, but rearming the wards was more involved. I didn't watch too closely. It would have felt rude to display too much interest in someone else's security system. And I wouldn't have understood, anyway; I had no idea what was involved in the task, no background knowledge. Clearly, that was going to have to be a high priority on my list.

But I could feel it, when she finished. The structures of the spell snapped back into position, and suddenly the wards at my back felt a whole lot sharper. The magic woven into the Blackbird Cabaret always felt both strong and dangerous, and my understanding was that those wards weren't fully disarmed even during shows. She had measures still active to dissuade troublemakers. But now the more powerful spells were active as well, and I could feel it, a higher tone to the vibration in the wall, the scent taking on more blood to go with the blackberries.

It was soothing. Sure, those wards were a dangerous weapon I didn't understand. But having them between me and the outside world felt pretty damn nice right about now, and I relaxed as Capinera walked back over to me. She looked relaxed, too, despite having her rapier in hand. It didn't mean that she was tense. Capinera just kept that sword so close that it might as well have been magically attached to her, the way Thorn was to me.

"Okay," she said. "Now, what's going on?" She opened the door to her living quarters, gesturing for me to follow. I did.

Capinera sat on the chair, which left me sitting on the bed. There just...wasn't enough room for any other arrangement. Capinera's personal space was tiny, not much bigger than a closet. She had one chair, one small table, a minifridge, a bed, and not a lot else. She cooked over a camp stove, because there was no room for anything larger.

I couldn't understand why she chose to live this way. And it *was* a choice, too. Even discounting all the other factors, Capinera was a virtuosa, easily the best singer I'd ever heard. If she wanted to, she could be living a hell of a lot better than this just because of that. There were a lot of things about Capinera that I didn't really understand.

But I trusted her. And I couldn't think of a reason to hold anything back from her, not really. There was nothing actually secret about what had been happening in my life lately, and I had no idea which details might be important. So I told her the whole story, in fair detail, starting the night I had left here and gotten ambushed on the way back.

It took a while. She listened quietly throughout. Occasionally she would ask a question, clarify something, but otherwise she seemed content to just listen. Raincloud managed to work herself onto the bed in a way that left her head close enough to Capinera to solicit ear scritches, which she received.

When I finished, the room was quiet for a few moments. "Well," Capinera said eventually. "You're quite good at understatement. This is much more trouble than most people would refer to as 'a bit,' I think."

"My scale might be broken," I said, and my grin felt rueful. There was a reason Saito had agreed that I caused twice as much trouble as the current batch of recruits. I'd always had a gift for attracting…complications. "But yeah, I'm in over my head here. I've been finding that my life…has not exactly left me prepared for targeted assassination attempts as a topic."

"And mine has. Yes." Capinera was quiet for a moment. "Unfortunately, I don't have all that much advice. It's…part of the reason that you don't see good responses is inexperience, but some is because the attacker is favored in this situation. All else being equal."

I frowned. "How so?"

"Well, in part this is survivorship bias," she admitted. "I was always the attacker, and so if I'm here to talk to you about it, I must have seen the attacker winning, no? But another part is just the nature of the situation. Mostly, it has to do with determinacy, and with asymmetric knowledge in a game with imperfect and incomplete information."

I blinked. That was…unexpected. I'd been expecting Capinera to be sad or reluctant when asked about this topic. Instead, she seemed actually to be more animated than usual. And she was analyzing it in an interesting way. I was having to dredge up memories from old college classes on game theory to keep up right now. "Determinacy," I said after a momentary delay. "You mean the outcome is already determined? I'm in a losing position?"

"Not exactly," she hedged. "The attacker doesn't likely have a winning strategy, in a formal sense. But you can look at win conditions, and it's clearly asymmetric. The attacker only has to win once in order to definitively win the game. You have to win every single encounter." She shrugged. "Sooner or later, anyone will get unlucky."

I frowned. "Because I don't have a clear win condition," I said slowly. "I mean, I guess there's the potential to kill the assassin. But they didn't exactly leave much room to do that."

"That," Capinera said, "and it might not matter. It's…well, again, bias. This is informed by living among the Sidhe, where cat's-paws and indirect action are very common. But when you are cut, do you blame the knife, or do you blame the hand that's holding it?"

"You think that the person who planted the bomb was just working for someone else?"

She shrugged. "I think that evidence suggests the attacker doesn't like to expose themself to danger. Why would they handle the explosive personally when they can maintain an additional layer of separation?"

I nodded. It made sense, really. And like she'd said, some of it might be that she was coming from a very twisty culture. The dvergar, for example, were much more inclined to direct leadership and honor codes, and I'd heard stories of even more rigidly honor-bound cultures existing in the Otherside.

But then again, by the time you're planting bombs in a civilian area, honor's pretty fucking far down your priority list already. And it would, I realized, also explain something else. I'd noticed immediately that there was a difference between the trap itself—an elegant, cunning design, something that would require an expert in several distinct and challenging skills—and the almost crude way that it had been used.

That felt significant. I wasn't sure why, couldn't put the thought into words yet, but it felt important.

"Okay," I said. "I think I follow. And then you also mentioned information access?"

"Yes. Although there's a difference there, in that the information is asymmetric, but not entirely in the attacker's favor. The attacker has the advantage of knowing, *a priori*, roughly what the target is and what they are capable of. They know that an attack will happen, and when, and they have a guess as to the defender's resources. But the defender can even many of those gaps, given time. And other things, like the extent of the defensive resources and positioning, are intrinsically weighted towards them."

"Right, yeah. The attacker always has a degree of uncertainty." I was fascinated at this point, by the content of the conversation and Capinera's demeanor during it in roughly equal measure. I wasn't sure I had ever seen her this animated before; her voice was quicker and lighter, her overall bearing alert in a way I wasn't used to.

It occurred to me that she'd been calling this a game. I had, too, but in my case it was because I'd learned this kind of formal analysis as part of game theory. I was wondering whether Capinera was just used to thinking of things like this as games. This, too, felt significant in a way I couldn't entirely pin down yet.

Regardless, she was nodding now, and smiling. She didn't do that often, for obvious reasons. Her teeth were significantly sharper than human, in a way that made me think of needles. To the best of my knowledge, she and I were equally far from human, and in some ways we showed it to a comparable degree physically. But it was different in this respect; I looked entirely human, except for when I looked nothing like one. Capinera always looked almost like a human, but never quite.

"Yes, exactly," she said. "You can estimate, but you're never going to be *certain* that you haven't overlooked something crucial, some secret or detail. But I tend to think that on the whole, the balance favors the attacker. The specificity is the big thing, I think. The attacker only has to prepare for one target, while the defender has to prepare for an arbitrarily large range of attackers."

I sighed. I couldn't find any real hole in her reasoning there, and while she was making some assumptions, they felt fairly plausible to me. And, ultimately, the biggest factor was also the most basic, the difference in win conditions. Seen through that lens, I didn't even need the formal

game theory to work it out. They could play to win; I could only play to not lose. The advantage was obvious.

It was not possible for me to win this game. Which meant I had to change the rules. If I was lucky, maybe I'd live long enough to figure out how.

We sat there in comfortable silence for a few minutes. The only sound in the room came from Raincloud, who was happily asleep next to me. Eventually, Capinera said, "You should get some rest."

"Probably, yeah." I didn't like the idea; it felt like I should be up and moving, doing something useful with the time. But as my dissociated experience of the show earlier had demonstrated, it wouldn't be a good idea. I was tired, stressed, and injured, and trying to keep moving right now was a poor choice. It would just result in things being done badly and me being even more tired later. I could recognize that, even if I didn't like it.

"Definitely. 'Cloud has the right idea here. You should sleep." Capinera stood up, got a second blanket out from under the table, and laid it out on the floor. Her attitude while doing so made it pretty clear she was expecting to be using it herself.

"I don't want to put you out of your bed," I said. It felt rude to me to do so; she was already doing me a significant favor, after all.

She just looked at me. Her eyes were a deep, vivid blue, enough so to be right at the edge of human range. They were also, at the moment, rather exasperated. "Kyoko," she said, with the patience of someone who really doesn't know why she has to repeat herself. "You are my friend. I can sleep restfully on the floor; you can't. Now shush and rest."

Chapter Twelve

Sleep sucked. Sleep sucked hard, with great enthusiasm and impressive creativity. I'd always been prone to nightmares and assorted other issues with sleep, for as long as I could remember. I thought that probably made sense, all things considered. It wasn't every night or anything, though there were times that it felt like it. But they were frequent, and I'd never really found anything that helped. I'd tried a wide array of medications when I was younger, along with every kind of meditation, sleep hygiene pattern, and lifehack I could come up with.

None of it had ever done much. The nightmares still happened, with about the same frequency, severity, and surrealism regardless of what interventions I had tried, until eventually I gave up on preventing them and focused more on just making the surrounding experiences tolerable, adding various sensory comforts. I mostly didn't have those here, but Raincloud was helpful with that; an actual dog was often better for tactile comfort than a plush one.

But the nightmares themselves hadn't gotten any better, and this was a bad one. It was dark, and I was lost, and there was something else in the darkness with me. I didn't know what it was, and I had no idea *where* it was at all. But it was harrying me, sometimes just a menacing unseen presence, other times suddenly closing in and tearing at me with long, vicious claws.

I'd heard that you weren't supposed to be able to feel pain in dreams, but apparently my subconscious was a prodigy, because it never seemed to have any difficulty. It hurt, and I was bleeding, hunted and alone in the dark, for what felt like days on end. My subconscious was also pretty good at the time dilation bit; I'd had nightmares that felt like they lasted weeks, packed into a single dream.

I was woken up not long before dawn by my phone, and I hadn't really gotten much sleep, but I was *not* complaining about getting woken up. I wasn't thrilled with the method, though. I wasn't a fan of phone calls to begin with, much less waking up to one like this. And that feeling only grew, considerably, when I saw the number. I didn't recognize it, but there were only so many plausible reasons for me to get a call from an unfamiliar number with a New York area code right now.

I hadn't been expecting Silas to contact me tonight. It hadn't even really crossed my mind that he might. Even if the flunkie I talked to had passed the message along immediately—which I doubted, even with the threat I'd included—it would take time for him to then reply to it. And Silas was a very busy vampire, one who had a lot of things to do. I had been fully expecting that he wouldn't get to this until tomorrow night at the earliest.

But ready or not, I couldn't ignore this call. It might register as an insult, and that was a *terrible* idea. So I swallowed a couple times, trying to get my throat and my language centers in touch with each other after the nightmare, and then answered it with a simple, "Hello?" I still sounded a bit thready, but there was no way around that; I didn't have the time to fully recover from that dream before speaking.

"Miss Sugiyama, a pleasure." It was Silas's voice, dispelling any lingering hope this would be a minion. I had only heard it once before, but it was distinctive, crisp but with a dry, rasping tone. "I apologize for the delay. I would have answered sooner, but my employee took a while to give me your message." His tone suggested he was serious about that apology. My anxiety grew further.

Silas might—and only *might*—be an ally. He wasn't a friend, and he was dangerous. A response so quickly might be a very bad sign for me. Or a good one, but I didn't trust my luck remotely that far.

"I'm surprised it would be that much of a priority," I said, buying time to think more than anything.

"It's an interesting situation," he said, and I was vaguely impressed at how much every exchange was making me more nervous. The vampire was interested. I'd say god help me, but inviting the attention of one of those too would be an even worse idea than this one. "I imagine you contacted me for a reason, after all."

"You owe me a favor," I said. Possibly too blunt, but my mind just wasn't working smoothly enough for niceties. And he struck me as someone who appreciated directness, anyway. "I'd like to call that marker in."

"I expected as much," Silas said. "You've been sitting on that favor for almost twenty years, you know."

My grin felt tight and forced. I wasn't sure why I was faking a smile even though no one could see it. Capinera was already up and out of the room when I woke up, and while the noise had woken Raincloud, she was more likely to feel my emotions directly via the link we shared than observe my expression anyway. "I've never needed it."

"And now you do. So clearly *something* interesting is going on. I'm curious what changed."

"There have been several attempts on my life recently. And I've been having a hard time addressing the attacker."

Silas was quiet for a few moments. When the vampire did respond, he still sounded interested, but it had a more analytical tone now. "My capacity to help in that arena is limited. I don't specialize in personal safety."

This did not surprise me. As the joke about vampire bodyguards went, if vampires were good at keeping people alive, they wouldn't have died themselves. That was a little disingenuous, and I was sure his own security was excellent, but I really hadn't expected him to offer me much.

I had a good sense of what I needed, and I was pretty sure it was commensurate with what I'd done for him, or I wouldn't have called to begin with. But it was the lingering shreds of the nightmare that let me put it into words, as a bunch of different ideas all snapped into place at once.

"Understood," I said slowly, choosing those words carefully. "My request is relatively simple, though. I require the services of someone who is very good at hiding, who has no known relation to me, and who can reliably surveil a scene and tail an assassin following a failed attempt

on my life. I'll need them in Pittsburgh for about a week. The situation has some intrinsic danger, but I'll attempt not to place them in undue risk.

His pause was longer than mine had been. "An interesting choice," he said eventually. "And…yes, I think a reasonable request. I can send someone who meets those criteria, though it will take time. I wouldn't expect her to arrive before Monday. You have her services, within reason, for a week."

I hesitated, mostly because my voice wasn't working very well. That was a rough nightmare even for me. Once I got it working again, I said, "Monday is fine.

"Good. And this balances the scale between us. Now, I believe I have some arrangements to make. Have a pleasant day."

"I'd wish you the same," I said dryly, "but I think it might be unrealistic."

He laughed, dry and dead, and hung up.

I wasn't getting back to sleep after that. In several ways, it was just not a thing that was going to be possible. So I grudgingly dragged myself out of Capinera's bed, and got ready for the day.

There wasn't a lot to get ready for. The problem was that now I actually was pinned down. Staying with Derek I'd been willing to go outside and do things. But the car bomb changed things a lot. I was relatively sure that the people with swords weren't going to find me if I happened to go outside, and I had a sense of what to do in response.

The other assassin, though? Not so much. The methods used there had been much more calculated, they understood mortal technology quite well, and they had targeted me via Saori, so it was a sucker's bet that they were monitoring my known contacts and locations. The Blackbird was too prominent, and I was too well-known there, for it not to come up on that list.

I was probably safe while I was in here. The wards were not a guarantee of safety, but they made an attack riskier, and the bomber didn't seem like the type to take risks. They would wait. The maenads were impulsive enough to try their luck, but pretty unlikely to find me based on their approach so far. I was safe here.

But I was also certain that this building was being surveiled, and that safety was likely to evaporate the moment I left. I wasn't planning on staying here forever, and if I stayed too long they'd give up on waiting for a better opportunity. But for at least the next few days, trips anywhere were something to be undertaken cautiously and for good reason.

I at least had the start of a plan now. It was still incomplete, and it was also dangerous, stupid, and insane, but it was there. Not only was I starting to have an idea of what I needed to do, having now spoken with Silas I even had a rough timeline. Not before Monday, he had said, and Silas struck me as the kind of person with whom that meant Monday exactly. He wasn't the type to tolerate his minions being less than punctual.

It was currently very early Thursday morning. Roughly four nights until I had a vampire on retainer. Saori's contact was supposed to show up before then. Probably tomorrow, so he would have a few days to work before the vampire arrived. That was good for me, I was pretty sure. I would only have Silas's agent on hand for a short time. This mage might specialize in wards, but I imagined he would still need a bit of time to get things set up.

Raincloud was even more grudging about dragging herself upright than I was this morning, but she also wasn't willing to be left out. So I ended up waiting for her to be actually conscious before I went out to see what Capinera was doing.

The answer, it turned out, was sweeping. The floor of the main room was already pretty damn clean, as far as I could tell. But she was sweeping it anyway, with a sort of quiet, patient contentment in her bearing.

Holy shit. She wasn't even just up before me. She was already up and cleaning, at the business which she was the sole proprietress of, and the sun hadn't even risen yet. I wasn't sure I'd *ever* had that much in the way of industrious diligence.

"You didn't get much sleep," she commented to me as I walked out into the main room. She didn't pause her sweeping.

"Neither did you," I pointed out. I was pretty sure she was still awake when I fell asleep, and she was already up cleaning.

"Maybe. But I don't need much."

"Why is that, anyway?" I asked idly, wandering over and sitting on the edge of the stage. Raincloud sprawled across my lap almost before I'd sat down.

"I don't know. Trying to make sense of magical inheritance patterns has driven wiser women than I to madness." Capinera shrugged. "I've never needed much sleep. A few hours here and there, but nothing like as much as a human. It's just…a part of what I am, of what I inherited from my father."

I nodded. "Yeah, I can understand that." Hell, it wasn't like I could make sense of what I'd gotten, either. Some of it made sense, the electricity and bestial form were easy to explain by my mother being a raiju, but why could I talk to plants and smell the emotional echoes in a room? Hell if I knew.

"I imagine so, yes. Those born on the boundary between two worlds rarely lead simple lives."

"Heh. True." I was quiet for a few moments, the only sound in the room the steady swish of the broom over the concrete floor. Eventually, I said, "Sorry about the trouble. I didn't mean to bring this kind of thing onto you."

"You really do struggle with the idea that I care what happens to you, don't you?" Capinera's voice was interesting as she said this. It wasn't accusatory at all, just an actual question.

I sighed. "Yeah, I guess I do. Though it's not specific to you. I'm just…not used to thinking of myself that way, I guess. Haven't really had all that many close friends in my life. And most of

the ones I *have* had were there because they wanted something from me." Life among the Yakuza, first running with their lackeys and pawns, and then with the actual members of the organization, had some good parts, some good experiences. Trusting, unconditional bonds of love or friendship hadn't been among them, and my father was even worse.

"I will keep reminding you, then, until it sinks in." Again, Capinera sounded entirely sincere. There was no teasing, no impatience. Just a serious, direct statement of intent. It was weirdly adorable, really. "Though in this case, I think you're also overestimating the problems you're causing me."

"How's that?"

She shrugged. Apparently she was satisfied that the floor was finally clean enough, because she set the broom aside and sat on the stage a short distance from me. I hadn't noticed her grabbing the rapier, but it was there next to her, like it seemed to always be. "For one thing, assassination attempts are already something I have to be aware of. My father's resources in this region are limited, but one of his servants does occasionally try something. For another, I find it unlikely that your assailant will want to entangle me in these attacks without good reason."

I paused. "Why's that? I am…not sure you're powerful enough to make them nervous." I'd seen Capinera fight once. She was undeniably skilled, and some of her talents were unusual enough that she could be pretty damn hard to defend against. But at the end of the day, she was close enough to human that a sufficiently large explosion would do the trick. It really didn't matter how skilled she was at that point.

"Myself? No, not at all." She shrugged. "But it would risk complications. It would risk making other enemies that *are* concerning in that way."

"You mean Clíodhna?" That seemed pretty reasonable, on the whole. Nobody sane wanted to pick a fight with the queen of banshees.

"My godmother is one, yes," Capinera agreed. "But also others. My father, for example, may not be as dangerous as she is, but he's not far behind."

I turned and stared at her. "Why would he be upset about it? Isn't he trying to kill you himself?"

She shrugged again. "Yes and no. He sends assassins, but it's as much *pro forma* as anything. They have orders to kill me, and I'm sure that if I allowed them to they would. But he knows perfectly well how unlikely they are to succeed. Doing this satisfies the requirements of proper form following my departure, while also ensuring I remember where I came from." Capinera's lips twitched into a faint smile. "A sane family might just send a letter. He sends knives."

I was still just staring at her, and it took me a solid five seconds to put words together for a response. "Are you telling me," I said eventually, "that he sends assassins after you as a form of *greeting card?"*

"Essentially, yes. I'm sure that he does feel genuinely slighted by me leaving, among other things. If I let them kill me they would. But if he truly wanted me dead he would do something that might work."

I was still just…staring. "Wow. That family dynamic might be more fucked up than mine, and that's saying things."

Capinera laughed softly. "Thank you. In any case, even without knowing that, there's always the chance that he would be upset he didn't get to kill me himself. And there's the rest of the Midnight Court to keep in mind, as well. It's always hard to be certain of things with the Sidhe. I might be as estranged as I seem, or I might be playing some elaborate game and still deeply enmeshed."

"That sounds maddening. Like, trying to navigate that society."

She shrugged. "I suppose it's like anything else. You get used to it. In any case, while this is not a perfect shield, I would expect it to suffice for a time. I suspect your attacker is likely not mortal, and they may be quite old. When you've seen centuries roll past, waiting a few days to attack a vulnerable point and avoid risking complications doesn't mean much."

"Makes sense." It was the same thought I'd had about being here, really; attacking the Blackbird Cabaret despite the defenses on it was possible, but why risk it if you didn't have to? I just hadn't extended it to as abstract a range, which was actually an interesting novelty given that I was usually the one who was removed from concrete associations.

"So, on the whole, I doubt I need to do more than my standing precautions. This is not much trouble." Capinera smiled. "Also, you are my friend and I would prefer that you be safe."

I chuckled. Raincloud did, too, though hers was mental. "Fair. Alright, I'll drop it. So what are you doing today?"

"There's a show tonight to prepare for. Sand painting, I believe, which will…involve some cleanup afterwards, I think. I have no other plans."

I paused. "That's not doing much for yourself, is it? Like, I get that you find value in running this place. But…honestly, as your friend, I'm a little concerned. You need to take some time for yourself, too."

She smiled a little wider, though it looked a little sad, now. "I do. I read quite a bit. Perhaps I'll do that today."

I wasn't sure how, since it wasn't like there was a lot of space for books here. But I ignored that; it wasn't really all that relevant, anyway. "Still, I'm a little concerned. You're already a good person, Capinera. You don't have to spend so much of yourself on trying."

"Am I? I'm not quite so sure." She was quiet for a moment. "Sometimes I wonder whether it's pointless. Trying to change, I mean. At times, it feels like a meaningless charade, like trying to change my own nature is a hopeless task."

I frowned. "What makes you think that?"

She was quiet for a moment, then asked me, "Do you remember what we did in September?"

"Of course." I wasn't going to be forgetting any time soon, I was pretty sure.

"Part of me enjoyed it. The violence, the thrill of it." Her voice was soft, almost hushed, and she wasn't looking anywhere remotely close to my gaze.

I hesitated, then mentally shrugged and took the plunge. "Okay, uh, I'm just spitballing here, and feel free to tell me if I'm overstepping, but. Is that a bad thing?" I asked. I felt Raincloud's attention focus a bit, and absently petted her neck in response.

Capinera did glance at me now. "Is it a bad thing to enjoy killing people?" she asked me. She sounded distinctly incredulous.

"Yeah. I mean, my moral compass is pretty shaky, and I'm biased given part of me enjoyed it too. And obviously I don't know your situation, whether it would be the equivalent of a gateway drug or something. But in terms of that specific event?" I shrugged. "Not really seeing anything wrong. Not in that context."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," I said slowly, "do you think it was the right thing to do? Like, looking back, do you think that what we were doing out there was necessary?"

Capinera frowned a little. "I...suppose so, yes. Those people had to be stopped."

"I agree. And even if you were to say that we should have tried not to use lethal force—which personally, given some of the shit they pulled, I'm dubious about that—but even if you do, I don't think we really had any *options* for doing that. They were using lethal attacks against us as soon as they saw us, and I don't think anyone there had a way to subdue them nonlethally without undue risk. Would you agree with that?"

"I...hm. Yes, I suppose I would."

"Well then. The overall action was pretty much fine, I think. Killing the people who were only there because of a job was a little fucked, but again, didn't really have other ways of dealing with it. We couldn't have gotten out there otherwise. And half the time they shot first, on sight, so not really sure that nonlethal means were an option there either." I sighed. That part I did feel a little bad about.

It wasn't even so much that they'd just been there for a job; that was a choice they made when they got into the line of work, and frankly, if a mercenary didn't feel like dying in combat was an acceptable professional risk, I wasn't sure why they'd become a mercenary. But those people, their employer had basically sent them out to die with no idea what they were up against, just to tire us out a bit. *That* was kinda fucked up, a betrayal of sorts, and that part I did feel bad about. The rest, not so much.

Capinera nodded slowly. "Yes. I don't know how else it could have been resolved."

"Well then." My shrug this time felt apologetic. "Not sure how you were doing anything wrong. You were carrying out a necessary action for reasons that were grounded in prosocial

thought. And, hell, look at what happened to the people out there." I laughed. "You were, like, the best option they had. I saw what happened to the people you killed. One quick thrust, every time. They didn't suffer at all."

Capinera looked away from me again. "That…was not driven by mercy. Not as such."

I shrugged. "Sure. But I promise most of them wouldn't care. They'd just know they died quickly and cleanly. Compare that to, say, the werewolves eviscerating someone and leaving them to bleed to death? Saori doing her death-of-a-thousand-cuts thing? Hell, I'm basically a ball of knives crossed with a taser and Melissa peeled someone open from the inside while he suffocated slowly, so, you know. Pretty sure you were the best-case scenario for those guys."

"Hm." Capinera was quiet for a few moments. "I suppose you have a point. But it still feels wrong to find pleasure in it."

"Ah, see, you're falling into the trap the Kantians do, there. You don't have to hate doing something for it to be moral. If both action and intention are ethically sound, I don't think it really matters how you feel during the process. I don't think it was wrong for me to enjoy it, either."

I chuckled at the sudden mental image from Raincloud of how perturbed she would be, were I to hate giving her a steak as a reward for noticing the bomb. I wasn't sure that was really an accurate comparison point—given the steak in question had been stolen, it seemed like a bit of a stretch to use it as a benchmark for morality—but it was a very funny image.

"This is true," Capinera admitted. "But it seems a very slippery slope. It would be very easy to start doing those things for increasingly poor reasons without realizing it, I think."

"Maybe so." I shrugged. "Like I said, I don't know if this is the equivalent of a gateway drug. And I'm fairly biased, given I thought parts of it were fun myself. But I just…worry that you're pushing yourself too hard, I suppose. And like you mentioned, you might not be *able* to change this part of your nature, sometimes that's just how it goes. But you can choose how you express it, and sometimes harm reduction is a better idea than trying to prevent something completely." I smiled a little. "I am your friend, after all, and I'd rather you not break yourself trying to conform to an impossible ideal."

She tried not to smile at that. But her eyes betrayed her; they were too expressive to fully mask the gleam of amusement. "Noted," she said. "I will consider it. And…thank you."

"Tell me you've got something." I was trying not to sound as desperate as I felt. I wasn't sure how well it was working.

"You're in luck." Toby, for his part, sounded smug. "I've got quite a bit, I think. There's something…odd happening, and I'm pretty sure it's related to your target."

"Great, hit me."

"We're not playing blackjack," he told me. "But if you want to lose, we can later. Kinda busy with something else at the moment."

I sighed, and wondered why everyone I met not only had to be a smartass, they also apparently all learned how from the same style guide. "What did you get, then?"

"There's a group operating in town," Toby said, and the joking tone had faded, too quickly and completely to have been fully sincere in the first place. "Not totally sure who or what they are, not sure what they want. But the word is that they've been throwing money around, not an absurd amount, but there's a decent amount of cash and…other resources…moving, and it doesn't seem to be coming from any of the local players."

I grunted. "What are they buying, do you know?"

"Equipment, muscle, and local transportation."

"Anything like plastic explosives?"

"Not that I've heard about," he said. It sounded like he was probably shrugging. "It's possible, not like I'm prying into every transaction. But I haven't heard about anything close to that. Guns, rented vans, food, more that kind of thing. They want local enforcers, but the one guy I know who signed up said they're so awful to work for that he doubts anyone will. Aggressive, erratic—he quit after two days, and this guy isn't prone to that."

I nodded. That made them Ekaterina's people, almost without a doubt. I'd been expecting that, really; the other attacker seemed too skilled to make this kind of noise, but the maenad's crew? Yeah, they were loud in every sense of the word. "Great. Anything else?"

"Actually, yes. See, they aren't local, I'm sure of that, but their local operations are too extensive not to have some kind of headquarters. And I'm pretty sure I've got a rough location on it. Narrowed it down to a neighborhood, but I think I might be able to get more specific than that within a few days."

I blinked. That one I had *not* been expecting, and I was legitimately impressed that Toby had managed it. I wasn't sure how he'd pulled it off, either. The maenads might not be great at subtlety, but they looked human to most people, and they weren't causing chaos everywhere they went. Ultimately, figuring out where a group of things that looked like humans were in a city full of humans just wasn't easy to do. The werewolves couldn't have pulled it off without a scent trail, and there hadn't been one of those to work from.

And while Toby's contacts had been willing to share some information, there were limits to that. They might push those limits for the right inducement, especially when Ekaterina's crew wasn't local and wasn't doing much to make friends here. But his contacts relied heavily on their reputation, it was inevitable in their field, and nobody wants to deal with someone when they're known for selling out clients. Toby must have done something clever for this.

Then I paused as something else occurred to me. "How much would that information cost me, then?" I asked, not expecting to like the answer.

I was correct, though not in the way I had expected. "Well," the information broker drawled, "seeing as we're such good friends, I was thinking I'd tell you for free."

That was too good to be true, and that usually means it isn't. It put my hackles up instantly. "Yeah, and I've got a bridge to sell you, too. The real answer, please."

"Hey now," Toby said, in a distinctly wounded tone. "That's rude. Am I not allowed to show generosity to a friend? Is it impossible that I would act purely out of the goodness of my heart?"

"My life has left me a bitter and cynical woman, with little trust in the benevolence of others, but I suppose that it's possible, yes," I allowed. "Are you?"

"Well, no," he admitted, "but I might have been. And I *am* being serious. See, as noted, they've been buying some goods locally. They got real aggressive with one of my suppliers in the process, and that pisses me off. Not enough to go kick their door down or whatever, but seeing as you already have a vendetta against them? Yeah, I'd be happy to toss that detail in gratis. Charge you for the general information, but that's all."

"That makes much more sense," I said, relaxing again. Benevolence I had a hard time believing, but petty, vindictive spite? Yeah, that was *very* plausible from what I'd seen of humanity. And, when I thought about it, there was probably also some enlightened self-interest happening. Toby not only got some free muscle to throw at an irritant, he did so in a way that was very unlikely to cause problems for him, might even be good for his reputation if he spun it right.

Plus, he got on my good side. Which was of dubious value given my life expectancy, but still. I was local, and that mattered, because local was the scale Toby worked on. There was a strong possibility I'd want to do business with him again, and a good first impression now would put him on much better footing then. There might be some of that in his motive, I thought, and if so I had to admit it was working.

"Figured you'd get it. Okay, I have to go. I'll send you what I've got for address and equipment. Talk later." He hung up without another word. Not one for long goodbyes, it would seem. Although I supposed it was possible he just had somewhere else to be in a hurry. Toby struck me as the kind of guy who kept a lot of balls in the air at any given time, and the fact that he hadn't even stopped to discuss payment for the pieces of this report he *was* charging me for was suggestive.

I was just as glad for that. I wasn't sure I was ready to find out what this would cost me, even with a vindictiveness discount to soften it. I'd have to have that conversation soon, but for now I was just savoring the novelty of something exceeding my expectations for the *better*.

Raincloud felt thoughtful.

She had for most of the day. It was the clearest impression I had of the day, really. Time had been slipping past in a blur, though at least it wasn't the kind of fugue I'd been having lately. The past few days I'd been slipping into a haze of anxiety and uncertainty, too stressed and tired to fully engage with my world.

This wasn't that. I had a lot more things to do, today, and that made it...easier. I didn't like the free time I'd been having. It had too much room in it for thinking. Planning felt better, even if the plans ere bad ones.

I'd need to talk to Saori before I could really feel confident in some of the details of my scheming, but she'd told me it was better to wait for tomorrow. Her contact was getting here then, and she had plans tonight with an old friend. Dinner and explosions, she said; apparently the two of them hadn't blown up a building together in years. The date had been selected weeks ago, and she couldn't readily reschedule it.

I wondered whether it was true. It was plausible, but it felt off to me somehow. The timing felt suspicious, as did the lack of details. Normally, I'd expect her to include some strange or concerning addendum to bait out questions. And a standing plan of meeting up with an old friend just a few days after she'd gone out looking for such people was a bit of a stretch.

I could believe she was blowing up a building tonight. I could even believe that she was doing it with someone she hadn't seen lately, and that they'd been planning this for a while. But I had a sneaking suspicion it was less "dinner date" and more "payment for services rendered".

I didn't mention it. If I was right, she wouldn't appreciate me commenting on it so directly, pointing out that she'd taken on a debt to help me. We didn't really *do* that kind of thing, for a lot of reasons that ultimately all boiled down to dysfunction. If I was wrong, well, then I'd be asking questions about one of Saori's escapades, and like most people, I hadn't taken long to learn that was a *terrible* idea.

So, I just agreed. I could wait on that part without issue anyway, really. I had other things to do. I spent an appalling amount of time on hold with various companies. I contacted a few of the easier people from my list, and confirmed that yes Cassie would be willing to teach me to track, yes there was a local machinist happy to make a dummy sword of Thorn's shape and size to practice with, and yes there was a hunting store where I could buy, among other things, steel-jawed bear traps. I also confirmed that I still hated phone calls, but that was the cost of doing business.

I did that. There was food; I learned, not to my surprise, that Capinera was vegetarian. Though she did at least seem to enjoy it, so it wasn't some form of punishing herself via asceticism. She, too, had seemed thoughtful today, but I noted that she did seem less subdued than I had generally seen her. She smiled more, with teeth sharp as needles.

The day passed in a blur of varied activity, and throughout all of it, Raincloud was at my side with a thoughtful feeling in the back of my mind.

And then, just like that, it was evening. I'd helped Capinera set up for the show, but I wasn't in the audience; I really wasn't in the mood for sand painting right now. I waited in her living space instead, sitting on the bed with Raincloud wrapped flopped across my legs. I noticed absently that the sheets were satin, something I'd observed before but not really thought about. Capinera really wasn't living like an ascetic in a lot of ways. It didn't seem like something that came that naturally to her, and that made me wonder again whether this lifestyle was healthy.

I probably shouldn't have been so invested in that. I knew I couldn't take on responsibility for Capinera's life choices or happiness. Still, she was a friend. I didn't have enough of those that I could lightly dismiss that concern.

I also couldn't lightly dismiss how thoughtful Raincloud had been feeling. So far, I'd been giving her space to work through it. We practically lived in each other's heads, sure, but she still needed privacy, and I didn't want her to feel like I was intruding on it.

But I also didn't want her to feel like she couldn't talk to me about things. So eventually, I nudged her shoulder. "Hey," I said, out loud. In theory it would risk being overheard, but I didn't really care if I had a reputation for talking to myself, and it was loud enough out there that it was pretty unlikely anyway. That…was a large part of why I was in here, really. "Something on your mind?"

The response was quick and fluid. There was a mental impression, a memory of my conversations first with Saito yesterday and then with Silas before dawn this morning. And there was a question, simply phrased but undeniably *phrased*. Raincloud's thoughts didn't just feel as clear as words this time; they *were* words, a fully verbalized and concrete question. *Why didn't you want to talk to them?*

I laughed a bit. "You really have a knack for asking hard questions, huh?" She nuzzled at my hip with a distinct feeling of pride. I shook my head slowly. "Okay, well, I can explain, but I'll warn you in advance it might take a while. The reasons are different for the two of them, and some of them are kinda complicated."

She curled in around me tighter, and looked at me with her ice-blue eyes wide open and bright. Didn't need any supernatural link to understand the message there. She had plenty of time and nowhere better to be.

I laughed again. "Alright, well, start with Silas because he's simpler. I'm nervous about him because he's a largely unknown quantity for me. I've only interacted with him once before, a long time ago and under unusual conditions. With only that and his general reputation to go off of, I don't have enough of a sense of who he is to make good guesses. And that, combined with the power he has, makes him a dangerous person to call on."

But he owes you. Raincloud didn't sound—or feel, really; however clearly phrased this was, it wasn't being spoken—like she was disagreeing with me. More just…commenting on the situation.

"He does," I agreed. "But in a way, for someone to owe you a debt can be at least as dangerous as for you to owe them. From a purely practical standpoint, if they owe you something, it might be advantageous for them to let you die. That way, you can't collect the debt."

I got a distinct mental image of Audgrim, in the moment before he tried to kill me. Raincloud hadn't been there for that. But the cypress spirit that shared her mind was the only reason Audgrim failed, and the memory was perfectly clear.

I sighed. "Yeah. Exactly. And granted, there are a lot of people, especially in my social circles, who do not feel that way. They think in terms of personal honor. What I know of Silas suggests he's one of those, not transactional about it, but I'm not as sure of that as I'd like to be."

I see. And that's why you never called it in before? The risk?

Clear language, verbal reasoning, working with abstract concepts smoothly. Raincloud was learning so fast it was a little eerie, even to me. I genuinely did love her, but I still had to repress a momentary shiver. It wasn't just that she was learning these things when her species normally couldn't. She was learning and maturing so much faster than human benchmarks it was comical. I tried to keep it from showing, though, and I was pretty sure I succeeded. It helped that the affectionate laughter I *did* show was sincere.

"Yes, more or less. Though what I told him was also true. I've sat on this favor because I've never had a situation come up where the potential reward worth the risk and worth the expense." I shrugged. "I'm prone to stockpiling things in case I need them in the future. Favors are one of the things I like to keep on hand, so to speak."

A moment of thought, and then I got a distinct sense of agreement. *Okay, I understand. But Saito is different?*

"Yeah, with him it's…complicated." I sighed, scritched Raincloud's ears absently while I tried to find words for a relationship that was…complicated was an understatement. Saito and I had a long, complicated history together, almost half my life ago. He had been a lot of things to me. I wasn't sure what some of them even *were,* but there had been a lot, and my feelings on him were…tangled.

I eventually went with, "I knew him very well when I lived in Japan. I'd even say he was something like a surrogate father for me for a while. But it's complex, because that relationship meant a lot of different things, he had a lot of roles and qualities. And some of those things, I've tried to get away from in the time since. He's also very tied up in how I *left* Japan, and that makes everything just…messy."

Why did you leave?

I paused. "Have I not told you about that?" That was surprising to me, really. I didn't talk about it often, but I'd somehow assumed that the topic would have come up by now.

No. You've mentioned something bad happening, but you haven't told me what it was. She nuzzled at my hand, and I realized that in my surprise I had stopped petting her. I rolled my eyes a little, but I did correct that error.

Huh. Well, that's another long story. Though it would, I supposed, not be as long as usual. This part I was not talking out loud for, and mental communication was faster than speech by far. I probably could have spoken. The chances of this being overheard were slim, and with the nature of the Blackbird Cabaret it was unlikely that anyone would care much anyway. But it just...felt wrong.

So, I know I've told you about how I used to spend a lot of time with an organized crime group. Saito was involved in that, deeply. But the thing is, a lot of the time people who are partly human and partly something else don't show it at first. They seem like they're just vanilla humans.

I could feel a spike of curiosity at that. *Why doesn't it show earlier?* she asked. Always the question that most clearly caught her attention. Why?

I shrugged. *I don't know. And it doesn't always work that way, but it's common. Typically late adolescence is when it first shows through. For me, there were indications before that. My perceptions were always strange, very strange at times, for as long as I remember. But that was ascribed to mental illness and neurological conditions. My mother died before this, without telling me or my father anything about her nature.*

I could feel that Raincloud was displeased by this, perhaps even irate, and I grinned. There was just something too absurd about it not to. My dog was telepathically communicating protective anger because of a failure in communication by my wholly-inhuman mother decades before Raincloud had been born. Sometimes it wasn't hard to see why I, and everyone else, had thought I was just utterly insane for a while.

The grin faded quickly, though. *Anyway. Long story short, I went insane as a kid. And not the fun kind. I'd always had weird perceptions and seizures, but they both got much worse after she died. Nightmares got worse, and I started having manic episodes where I couldn't sleep at all. I'd always been prone to dissociation, but that got worse, more confusing. Between that and the mania I started hallucinating. Not often, but enough.*

Raincloud wasn't grinning, either, physically or mentally. *That sounds...frightening.*

It was, I confirmed. I didn't remember that time interval very well, and didn't really trust much of what I remembered to be real. That was...kind of the point, really. But I remembered the anxiety quite well, a sort of creeping dread as I slipped progressively further away from reality.

Raincloud whined softly, pressing into me again. I thought it was to offer comfort this time more than anything, and I appreciated it. Hell, she probably knew very well what my experience had been like. Given the mode of communication, she could probably feel the echos of my memory directly.

The hallucinations eventually got bad enough that my father couldn't ignore it anymore. Spent my tenth birthday in a psych ward. I, uh. Spent kind of a lot of time in a psych ward, actually. Maybe eight months, spread over the next five years. At first because of hallucinations, then behavior problems. Anger management issues, mostly.

I got a distinct feeling of doubt from Raincloud. *Anger management issues. That...doesn't make much sense.*

I laughed, and scritched her neck. *Thanks, but you didn't know me back then. I've had twenty years to work on those issues. I promise that at the time, they were…anger was much more a part of who I was and what I did. I lashed out at people a lot. And I was stronger than a normal human. Put another kid in the hospital once without meaning to. Anyway, all of this is just context, it happened before I met Saito. I figured out how to filter my perceptions when I was about twelve, I don't know which psych ward I was in at the time. By fifteen, I thought everything was under control but the anger, and I didn't care about that part. So I stopped going to psych wards and started going to gang bars.*

Don't blame you. That's how you met Saito, then?

I shrugged. *Eventually. I was stronger than a normal human, and I had some martial arts training already. My father thought it would help me learn discipline or something. Started out talking to pawns, but I met the players soon enough.* I hesitated for a moment, mostly because this was…well. There were reasons I didn't tell this story. It wasn't an easy one to tell.

Eventually, I resumed. *I'd been getting increasingly…strange, starting late that year. Impulses and emotions that I didn't understand, suddenly feeling like a stranger in my own body. Electronics started having really weird problems around me. It became increasingly difficult to tell where reality stopped and my perceptual oddities began. I was having more intense awareness of things like emotional resonances and energy patterns. I had a hard time identifying what was real at any given time, and what only existed in my head.*

Raincloud was nuzzling me again. She didn't actually tell me that this part sounded frightening. She really didn't need to, though. We both knew it. Of course I had been scared. I thought I was slipping back into complete madness.

This started when I was around sixteen. Kept building for a while. There was another episode of talking during a seizure. I'd by this point managed to convince myself that my memories of the first time had to be childish confusion, so that freaked me out hard. My behavior was getting pretty erratic, and there were times I started interacting with things that nobody else could see. When I was eighteen, things finally came to a head. I sighed, stroking her fur gently. She felt soft, and I needed some softness in my world right at the moment.

What happened?

It was supposed to be a normal day. We were going out to collect payment from a mechanic who paid us protection money. I was smiling, though it was a melancholic sort of smile. There were just…so many things wrong with that sentiment. For one, nothing good ever starts with "it was supposed to be a normal day". For another, when a shakedown on behalf of an organized crime family is a normal day for you, that kinda says things in itself. *There was a whole group of us. Me, Saito, six other people. Simple enough.*

So what went wrong? Do I need to eat someone for you? Raincloud felt almost enthused at the prospect.

I laughed. *No, this is one of the times violence actually* isn't *the answer.* I shrugged and kept petting her. *We walked in on a rival family trying to move in on the business. Sheer bad luck that*

we were both there at the same time, and it got messy, fast. Eight on my side counting myself, they had nine, and there were five civilians there. The mechanic, his family, and one woman who was there to pick up her car when everything blew up. Really terrible timing on her part, honestly.

I could feel a sort of nod of agreement at that. *Eight on nine by surprise in an awkward location. Not a great way to start a fight.*

No. And it escalated fast. I don't know who went for a gun first, but suddenly everyone was. I got shot, which was a first. I paused for a moment, because the first time is always hard. The first cut, as Cassie put it, is always the deepest. It changes a person, and they can't always go back, can't forget. *I'd been in fights before this, some fairly serious. But I'd never actually gotten shot, and I'd never been in nearly so much danger. I was in an awkward spot, very little cover. Someone tagged me in the arm, I was terrified, and things…happened.*

That is very clear and specific and I have no further questions. Well, damn. First Capinera got snarky with me, now Raincloud. Clearly, I was a bad influence on these people.

Go bite your tail. But also I can't *be very specific. I don't remember things after I got shot clearly. There was blood, it hurt, and I was afraid. After that, everything is a blur. I only have a few clear memories, and I can't put them in order.*

Raincloud absorbed that quietly for a moment. *But you do know what happened,* she said eventually. It was hard not to think of it that way. Raincloud could construct sentences with abstract ideas. She'd already gotten language use down so well that she was able to use it conversationally, and her thoughts felt like speech.

I sighed, soft and slow. *My understanding is that I killed almost everyone who was there. Saito got out, as did one person from the other family; I'm not sure how. Everyone else, both whole gangs and all of the civilians, died. I barely remember doing it, just a couple snapshots. Next time I was clearly aware of the world, I was waking up soaked in blood in a pile of bodies an hour later. I tore them apart, in many cases literally. Nineteen total. I remember this part. There was…a lot of blood.*

Raincloud was quiet for a moment again. When her mental voice did return, she felt…I wasn't sure what. Impressed, maybe, though in what sense of the word I wasn't sure. *Damn.*

I laughed. *Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction when I woke up.* In a few ways, really. If the casual aggression, association with career criminals, and generalized lashing out at society hadn't been enough to secure me a place in Hell, I was pretty sure slaughtering nineteen people, many of them innocents or allies, had done the trick.

Why did you kill them?

I sighed and shrugged. *Because they were there. I don't know beyond that. From what Saito told me after and what I do remember, my more bestial, inhuman side manifested for the first time. You've seen what I look like when that happens. Most humans aren't prepared for it. I killed most of the other gang while they were still in shock, because I was angry and scared. Someone ran, because* they *were scared, and I got hit with a massive spike of prey drive I wasn't ready for, and I chased them. It just…snowballed from there. No reason beyond that. They were there.*

Raincloud was quiet for a moment, then there was an impression of laughter. *Wow, you really weren't kidding when you said you had a gift for finding trouble, huh?*

I had to laugh at that myself. As though my current situation hadn't illustrated that? But I supposed this did confirm for her that no really, I'd always been like this. *Yeah. I was in a lot of it after that. I mean, other factors aside, I'd just killed almost twenty people, including members of two different Yakuza families. In front of witnesses from both who survived, and in a very overtly supernatural way. I was in, uh, kind of an awkward position.*

No shit. Did Saito get you out of it?

Verbal reasoning, sentence structures, using sarcasm and metaphor, and now she was even including both expletives and profanity. I'd been ready for Raincloud to develop quickly but this was still kinda spooky.

She'd asked a question, though, and I answered it. *Yeah. I'm not sure what all it involved. My understanding is that I never officially stopped working for the Yakuza, just got sent on an indefinitely long unsupervised assignment overseas. It was a way for everyone involved to save face, and honestly I needed to leave anyway after that. It was never openly acknowledged that I had been the one responsible. Saito recommended a small town not too far from here as a place to pause and reflect. I've barely talked to him since.*

I think I see what you mean now. Not exactly a threat but…messy. Raincloud yawned and cuddled against me. I got an impression of gratitude and also of sleepiness, and smiled. I was proud of her language skills, but there was something very sweet about those raw, unfiltered emotional impressions.

"Get some rest," I told her. "Tomorrow's looking like an exciting day."

Chapter Fourteen

Saori's car was a disaster.

This was not news. It was, in fact, one of the first things I had noted about her, and it had continued to hold true since. "Saori's car is a glorious disasterpiece composed of the most bizarre, disturbing, and confusing shit you will have seen today" was just a maxim I had learned about interacting with her. As with most such maxims, it hadn't taken long for this lesson to sink in.

What I now learned was that this rule applied more extensively than I'd quite realized. She'd had this car less than forty-eight hours, and it was already every bit as strange as the last. She had her usual array, the things that never varied: Emergency gear, medical kit, dice and cards, acetylene cutting torch and sledgehammer, spray paint and rope. Those things were in the car because they were *useful,* and as a result they stayed there.

But she had also accumulated quite a bit of truly strange shit already. To sit down, I had to move a bag containing about twenty mood rings, a toaster which appeared to be operated by hand-crank, and a plastic box with dozens of restaurant coupons. Being a fool who never seemed to learn, I gave in to curiosity and examined the latter somewhat before putting it in back. All of the coupons were from other cities, I was pretty sure, and it looked at a glance like they were all expired.

"This is impressive," I told her while I set those in back, on top of a large plastic tub of conch shells. Raincloud took a moment to climb onto my lap, possibly trying to make sure there was space to fit in around all the insanity. "I mean, I'm always impressed by the shit you dig up, you know that. But this is a particularly insane batch."

"Thank you, I try," Saori said, in one of the worst fake-humble tones I'd ever heard. "So your thing's at the coffeehouse, seemed easiest. It's at twelve-thirty, so you might want to wake up some." Then she stomped the accelerator, and I learned that it also took less than forty-eight hours for her to arrange whatever unholy mess of aftermarket tweaks she used. I at least managed to get the seat belt on and my eyes firmly closed before the first corner, thankfully. I wanted both with the acceleration she put into it.

Because of course she picked me up fifteen minutes before I was supposed to be on the other side of the city having an important meeting with someone I'd never met about a topic I had zero knowledge of. Saori was fun, but sometimes I just had to sigh.

Then something occurred to me. "Wait a second. You gave me an interval of, like, six hours. How is he on that specific of a timeline?"

"Because he's a wimp." I was guessing she meant the guy I was supposed to be meeting, though the sudden horns made it plausible she was referring to another driver.

"How does wimpiness affect timing?" I wondered.

"It's about those layover domains. You can route through those on whatever path you want. In theory, at least." Saori paused. "Oh, hey. You want some caffeine?"

"Fuck yes," I said, and the enthusiasm in my voice got a laugh from Saori and Raincloud alike. I'd had virtually no access to it except in the form of coffee in days, and while I wasn't yet desperate enough to drink that, that wasn't saying much with me. "So that's in theory. In practice?"

"It gets messy." She pressed a cold metal can into my hand, startling me a little. Blindness…was better than the alternative right now, but it always had its own drawbacks. "I mean, first off you're only going to have so many transfer points. And if you try using one you don't know, very bad things happen. There are other limitations, too."

"Sure, makes sense." I cautiously sniffed at the liquid. The can was labeled as an energy drink—I'd risked enough of a glance to check, and gotten to enjoy the sight of Raincloud with her head out the window and Saori with her hand out the other window flipping off a semi on the way past. The drink was *probably* what it said it was, but it was best to check with Saori. Her pranks were usually funny, but some were much funnier to watch from the outside. It smelled right, so I ventured a sip.

"Right, so anyway. The only way you're getting an ETA that tight is if you're doing things in a really boring way. Only use domains that sanction being used as a layover, so that you don't have to be careful about it, like a wimp. You don't have to be subtle that way. If you're bootlegging your way through the system to avoid paying fees, things get slippery."

I very nearly blinked, though in this case that would have meant opening my eyes to stare at her. "Wait, really?"

She laughed. "No, not really, dumbass. His transfer point was in Cleveland, remember? He's on the road already, texted me from the edge of town. Nah, nobody gives a fuck about portals unless you do something stupid. This kind of travel is pretty normal in most domains."

I sighed, but I couldn't fully hold back laughter myself at that. I had to admit, I'd walked right into it this time. I sipped at what did appear to be an energy drink, pet Raincloud, and listened to the familiar cacophony of drivers being pissed at Saori. This, too, passed in a blur; but it was a soft blur, this time.

Softened Dreams was busy. This was inevitable, really. It was Friday afternoon, two days before Christmas. If there was a busier time, I wasn't sure when it would be. I recognized a lot of the people there, too, not surprising given I'd been actively trying to socialize lately. Hell, I'd been trying to network, as much as I hated that verb both linguistically and as an activity. Of course I recognized people.

On another day, I might have talked to some of them. I didn't see anyone I'd really consider a friend, but there were some friendly acquaintances. On another day I might have sat and lost a game of chess against Karl, or gone to the back corner where Alexandria was presently working on some schematics. She was some cocktail of mechanic, mechanical engineer, and mad scientist, and

if I was being honest she was mostly friends with Saori. But she liked to talk shop, and given that cars had been something for other people to worry about for most of my life, I had a lot of shop to listen to. I was still almost certainly never going to be capable of driving, but I couldn't afford ignorance anymore. Sparrow was also apparently the kind of lunatic who would work overtime at a coffeehouse and then come in on his day off as a customer, and I might have gone over there so he could pet Raincloud. Things like that.

On another day. But I was here on business today, and I could see it waiting. Or, rather, him. Saori's friend-of-a-friend was here already, and it wasn't hard to spot him. For one thing, he was one of the few people I didn't recognize at all. For another, he stuck out. You just didn't get many people with skin that dark in Pittsburgh. There were plenty of black people, but the only time I remembered seeing someone comparable to him was a girl who had recently moved here from Kenya. It was noticeable.

Oh yeah, and also he was waving us over as soon as we hit the door. That part helped. Saori had said she'd never met this guy before, but he presumably knew who he was here to talk to, and it's not like there were many Japanese people in town, either. So I supposed that it was pretty reasonable for him to have spotted us. The chances of it being a *different* pair of Japanese girls (or, well, given that Saori wasn't even from Earth it got messy, but in terms of appearance at least) walking in at the meeting time by coincidence were essentially nil.

"Hi there. I'm Kadir." His voice was...remarkable, enough so that I had to work to avoid a potentially awkward reaction of one kind or another. Kadir was only average in height and build, but his voice was quite possibly the deepest bass I'd ever heard, and resonant, making me think he probably did actually sing. It was the sort of voice that made me want to taste it, and that wasn't *bad,* but it probably wasn't a good idea during a business meeting.

"Saori, a pleasure. Glad you could make it out here. Feather spoke very highly of you."

Kadir grinned. His teeth were almost startlingly white against the background of his skin. "Feather's a sweetheart. How's she doing these days?"

"Seems well enough. Still very...bubbly." Saori's smile seemed sincere, but it also definitely seemed rueful.

Apparently, whoever Feather was, bubbliness was a known trait. Kadir laughed, and it had the same rueful tone as Saori's smile. "Sounds about right. Well, pleasure to meet you. And..." His eyes slid over towards me, and he trailed off.

"Key." I wasn't trying to get him to pronounce Kyoko, for any number of reasons. The nickname was...tidier. "I'm interested in getting some defenses set up on my home. I hear you're a good person to ask about that topic."

He grinned, and didn't put any false humility in it, which made me like him more. "I do my best. Initial consultation and bid is free. Details on the job?"

I stared. I was...not expecting that. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, but usually it was me that was cutting through that much small talk. And I sure as hell had *not* been expecting anything about this to be free.

My surprise must have shown on my face, because Kadir chuckled. It sounded like a bass drum. “It’s good business,” he said. “Start off on the right foot, you know?”

“I suppose,” I said dubiously. “Confidential, also?”

“Yes, entirely. I might have to talk to some other people for the job itself, depending on what you want done. I’m good, but I can’t do everything. But I swear I won’t share the details of this conversation with anyone, not without confirming it with you first. With obvious exceptions for things outside of my control, of course.”

It was a bit casually phrased, but I wasn’t too worried. Even a casual oath had too much weight in our circles to be lightly broken. I’d want more exact definitions for some purposes, but for this? It was fine. I relaxed a bit more, suppressing a yawn. “Cool. I don’t know what information you need, though. You might have to walk me through it.”

“Let’s start with what you want. What do you know about ward systems?”

“Jack shit,” I said cheerfully. “I know they exist, how they work on an extremely abstract level, and that some react very poorly to being doused in honey mustard.”

“Hey,” Saori said, sounding like she was trying for indignant. It wasn’t working very well. “I already told you and her both that I wouldn’t do that again. Geez. A girl fumigates one dance party and suddenly it’s all people want to talk about.”

Kadir paused, and I could see him visibly make the decision not to ask. He was a quick study, really. Most people took the bait at least once before learning not to ask questions about Saori’s insanity. “Right, well,” he said after that momentary pause. “Start off with the base. Any given warding system uses a single working laid over the whole area as a backbone. Other components build off of that.”

I nodded. “The force reversal thing, right? Someone tries to push through and it redirects their momentum?”

“That’s the most common, yeah,” he agreed. “Sometimes you use something else, an alarm or such, but a kinetic inversion is very broadly effective, so it’s the most popular choice. For a really basic system that force inversion might be all you need.”

I thought about the things that had been going on, and my lips twitched, though I doubted anyone would mistake the expression for a real smile. “I think it’s safe to say I’ll need more than the basics.”

He nodded, not looking remotely surprised. “Right, well. Once you get past that, the options open up pretty wide. It will depend on how much you want to spend, what you want to prioritize, and what environment you’re working in. Generally, I recommend that people have at least four or five different kinds of triggered effects built into the structure. Usually better to go for a wide range on those, but it will depend on whether there’s anyone in particular you’re worried about. I once did a job for some guy who managed to piss off Surtr’s granddaughter, for example, and I didn’t bother putting any fire in that mix, you know?”

I snorted. “Yeah, I bet. What happens if one of these things goes off, anyway? I mean, not the actual magic, I get that part varies. But does it need to be replaced or something?”

Kadir shrugged. “Not usually. If someone actually damages the spell structure then it needs to be repaired. But generally I use versions that are self-rearming. It’s more up-front work, but much less over the long run. It still needs upkeep, the working is always going to decay over time. But I can show you how to do that, and it doesn’t require much skill. Not much more than it takes to raise and lower them, and I *highly* recommend you learn to do that. It’s not strictly necessary, you can automate them, but I really don’t recommend it for any but the most low-security purposes.”

I thought about Audgrim. About the key he’d made, so that someone could get through dvergr-designed wards without knowing how to use them. A small security lapse, one that I was sure he hadn’t even really thought about as an issue. Still enough to get him killed, though, and he’d dragged quite a few people down with him. “Yeah,” I said quietly. “Tend to agree on that.”

“Right then,” Saori said brightly, before the silence could really settle in. I was sure Kadir had noticed my sudden shift in mood, but the kitsune stepped in before any comment that might have been coming. “So now that we’ve finished remedial studies, what are we actually, you know, doing?”

“Well, I assume you have a specific place in mind here,” he said. “What can you tell me about it?”

“It’s a house here in Pittsburgh,” I said. “Relatively old one. Three stories, wood frame, built on a steep hill. Basement’s reasonably well secured, but otherwise no defenses or security of note. Neighbors are nearby, but street access is limited because of the hill. It’s on the northern slope, if that’s relevant. Sight lines are limited, but it has a clear view along the street leading downhill, which is also the best access route. Terrain is rough by city standards, overall, enough that it’s inaccessible to a lot of vehicles in winter.”

Kadir paused and looked at me. “That is an unusually good tactical summary,” he said. There was a sort of respect in both his eyes and tone that hadn’t been there before.

I smiled. It felt tight, but sincere. “I’ve had a lot of motivation to practice,” I said. I could feel Raincloud chortling in my head at his expression, a verb I had rarely if ever had cause to use and yet which was definitely the right one for the moment.

Kadir smiled as well, and inclined his head slightly. Not quite a nod; it felt more like someone acknowledging a touch while sparring. “Fair enough. Well, I’ll be honest with you. That’s…going to be hard for me to do much with. You’ve got a flammable structure with no existing defenses, and the neighbors will make things hard. They limit what kinds of triggered spells you can use without causing problems. Though they do somewhat limit the attacker as well.”

I thought about the car bomb. And granted, this wasn’t something I was looking into just because of my current situation. I wasn’t planning just around the one known attacker; I was hopefully going to survive long enough for other people to also get to threaten my life, after all.

But at the same time, I kinda doubted this would be the only person or group willing to use measures like that.

Yeah. I wasn't planning on the neighbors discouraging much of anything right about now.

If anything, kind of the opposite, and being reminded of that turned my mood from dark amusement to just dark in a heartbeat.

"What would you recommend I look for instead?" I asked him.

Kadir gave me a funny look. "That's it? Not going to argue with me about it?"

I shrugged. "You're the one who knows what he's talking about in this conversation. What's the point of hiring an expert if you aren't going to listen to what they have to say?"

He snorted, a very strange sound with how deep his voice was. "That's a sensible attitude, but you'd be *amazed* how many people don't grasp that. Especially when I'm telling them something they don't want to hear."

"I like my house. But I like being alive more, and I don't have much room to be sentimental right now. So, suggestions?"

"Ditch the wood," Kadir said without any hesitation. "You can reinforce it with magic, but you're starting at a deficit. The same magic applied to something that's already sturdy will be better."

"Considering present company," I said dryly, "less flammable is a good idea regardless."

Saori managed indignant for all of three seconds before she was grinning. "Okay, that's fair," the kitsune admitted. Raincloud didn't even try to mask her reaction, and the chuffing sound she made was so distinctly amused you really didn't need a telepathic connection to parse it as laughter. Hell, even Kadir was grinning, and he didn't even *know* Saori.

A moment later, though, he continued. "The hill is good. Makes it harder to use a numerical advantage. You're going to want at least one quick exit, though. The neighbors are also a problem, because a lot of the stronger wards are very…visible. I'd suggest somewhere where an explosion wouldn't draw immediate attention."

He was, I noted, pretty much describing the Blackbird Cabaret. The building was an old warehouse made out of metal and concrete. Easy road access. Secluded, a post-industrial district with few neighbors to speak of, and even when it had been active, loud noises weren't nearly as remarkable in a warehouse complex relative to a residential area.

Hell, it also described Maddie's home, or possibly lair. I wasn't entirely sure what all counted as a lair but her place seemed like a good candidate. And regardless of the word used, it was another warehouse complex, one so abandoned that I was pretty sure she was the only occupant in the entire complex. Metal, concrete, and asphalt, secluded, and she might actually be even closer than the Blackbird to Kadir's description, because while street access was through a maze of tangled, narrow side streets, she had easy access to both the river and the railroad tracks. I knew for a fact she had methods on hand for a quick exit using either.

"Great, I can work with that," I said. "Though it might take a little time for me to find somewhere. What's your availability like?"

Kadir shrugged. "I'm free currently, but things come up. If you have a specific date I can schedule around it, otherwise it might take a while if I've already got something I'm working on."

I nodded. "That's fine. I can contact you when I have a firm date. But for the moment, any chance you could also do a basic set of wards on the place I have? And I mean very basic."

"I guess," Kadir said, sounding rather dubious. "But I don't know how much good it will do you."

"Oh, it doesn't have to work," I assured him. "It doesn't even have to last more than a few days, a week at most. It just has to be there."

Kadir looked at me oddly. So did Saori, for that matter; she hadn't heard about this yet. "I suppose that's doable," he said after a moment. "Should be pretty easy, if you don't care about it lasting."

"Great! Can you have it done by Monday?" I was grinning, now. It was a little too wide, a little too eager. Kadir actually pulled back when he saw it, just the tiniest bit. I didn't think it was conscious, and I couldn't entirely blame him. I knew what I looked like when I was grinning like this. It looked more than a little bit like some of Saori's creepier smiles.

It was perhaps unsurprising, then, that she moved closer while he pulled away, and the confusion in her posture faded in favor of arousal. Saori…was very much what she was.

But Kadir, after that momentary flinch, was nodding. "Should be doable. You want a price quote?"

"Please, and can you do one for a better set? Just so I have an estimate to plan around."

"Sure," he said, taking out a notebook and a pen. "But it's a pretty broad price range until I see the place. I have to know what I'm working with."

"That's fine. I can give you the address for the current place." I fished around in various pockets until I came up with a notecard and what appeared to be a heavily-chewed brush pen. I had no idea where that had come from or why I was carrying it, but it would work. I wrote out a street address, he wrote out an invoice, and we swapped them with a mutual wince.

For me, it was at the price tag. I was reasonably sure I could afford it, but only barely. Depending on the margin of the error on the higher quality wards, it might or might not be enough that my inheritance was no longer self-sustaining. Regardless, it was clear that I could no longer afford to casually ignore my finances. Though I supposed that at least Kadir was willing to take cash. There were *much* worse things to owe someone than money.

For his part, I was pretty sure he was just wincing at the quality of my handwriting.

"Okay," he said after a moment, tucking the notecard away. "Do you want to do it?"

I nodded once, sharp and quick. I was, I realized, still grinning. "The cheaper of these at the address I gave you, minimum. I'm not sure when I'll need the better one, but I'll call you when I know more. I have a set of keys for the current location, if you need that, and if you can get me the

account information I can have payment sent over as soon as possible." I paused. "Though that might take until Tuesday, thinking about it. Just because of the holiday. Is that an issue?"

"No. I'm willing to trust that you're good for it. I'll get started right away, and barring unforeseen complications I'll be done no later than Monday afternoon." He smiled again, teeth so very white against skin so dark, and it didn't touch his eyes. "Pleasure doing business, Key."

"Likewise," I said, and watched him go.

Then, almost immediately, I turned towards Saori. "So," I said brightly. "That was fun. What can you tell me about veils?"

To her credit, or perhaps detriment, Saori had no difficulty with the topic change. "Quite a bit. It's one of my strong suits. Whassup?"

"Well," I said. "Start with, how the hell did you know Ekaterina and her gang was there the other day? I didn't feel them at all."

She laughed. "You wouldn't. Smoothing over those energy traces is, like, one of the most common things for people to practice. Any halfway decent veil is going to be very low-profile in that way."

I nodded. Not all that surprising, really. I was sensitive, but not remotely the only person who could feel magic moving around. And most of the people who were good at veils would be interested in hiding from other supernatural critters, not vanilla humans. It made sense that this was one of the senses people learned to hide from.

"But they're not perfect," I said. "I mean, as noted, you caught them at it. How's that…work?"

Saori shrugged. "It depends. There are a lot of kinds of veils. You can pretty much lump them into two groups, though. First one is if you block the actual sensory stuff, which is hard and usually has holes in it. You can see flickers or distortions, hear something for a second, stuff like that. The other is if you just make it hard to pay attention to you, which someone can shrug off like any other mental magic. They were doing the second, and I'm pretty good at catching those."

I nodded. That made sense, really. The few times I'd run into magic targeted at my thoughts or emotions, I'd generally gotten flattened by them. Capinera sometimes left me semiconscious *by accident*, and I knew because she had, repeatedly.

I added that kind of resistance to the list of things I would look into later. It had to be a trainable skill, I was sure of it. Everything became easier with practice.

For now, it was useful to know. "So," I said. "Hypothetically speaking here. It would be easier to get the drop on you with the other kind?"

"Ehhh, complicated?" Saori shrugged again. "It's not that binary. But I guess sorta?"

"Good enough," I said. I was grinning again. "And so, if I'm understanding right, for the kind you're not as good at, you're blocking the actual signal? Doing weird stuff with optics, that kinda thing. And then I assume that's not all the same, like, it's going to be different mechanisms to hide different things?"

"Yup. A lot of veils start mixing things together. Mostly use misdirection, but also hide so that it's easier to slide past. That kind of stuff. Like I said, not binary. Why are you asking?" Saori seemed genuinely surprised that I was even interested.

"I have a plan." The grin was wider, and my voice was cheerful. I didn't think it was a lie, not really. "It's stupid, insane, and extremely dangerous, you'll love it."

I explained what I had in mind, and it was actually a plan now. She had just confirmed some of the specifics. There were enough things in hand now to call this a plan now, not a vague idea.

I was right. She loved it. Saori was laughing her head off by the end, more than loudly enough to prevent eavesdropping. Hell, Raincloud was asleep, and somehow still managing to mentally laugh while dreaming. I did not understand that.

I grinned. I sipped tea, and started to say something about how I appreciated the help.

Then I realized that Saori had gone still. And she was looking over my shoulder. And from her expression, I was guessing I wasn't going to like what was back there.

I turned around, and looked up. And up. And up some more. The guy standing behind me had a lot of "up" in which to look, being around seven feet tall. His smile showed several missing teeth and entirely missing humor, the expression having more in common with a pit viper than a friend.

"Hi," he said, in a voice that might have sounded deep, had I not been listening to Kadir a few minutes ago. "Mind if I sit down?"

Sometimes, I really hate being right.

"Yes," I said, eyeing the large man standing behind me warily. "I do mind, but I have a feeling you're going to do it anyway, so let's cut to the chase."

"Great." His voice sounded distinctly wrong as he said that, an inflection pattern that just didn't quite work.

He did indeed proceed to sit down, taking the chair Kadir had recently vacated. His movements as he sat were a little off, too, not quite how human bodies moved. Between those and the really unusual size, I would have known he wasn't human at a glance. I could also feel it, his aura completely lacking the shimmering feeling of humanity and instead consisting of an unpleasantly musky smell and the sound of drunken laughter. But this wasn't even a convincing enough guise to fool most humans on more than a cursory level.

"So given you're now sitting down," I said, as Saori slid her chair over slightly towards me, putting the table between her and the new arrival. "What the fuck do you people want, anyway?"

"Have we been unclear?" He was still smiling, and he didn't pretend not to understand the question. That made me dislike him a tiny bit less, which wasn't saying much.

"Don't give me that bullshit," I snapped. "Obviously you're trying to kill me, but that's a proximate cause at most. There's some *value* in me dying or you wouldn't bother. So again, what do you want?"

"Personally," he said, "I mostly just want to get on the boss's good side. And she wants you dead pretty bad, so I figure this is a great way to do that."

I stared at him. "You know," I commented idly to nobody in particular, "this might be a first. Usually, when I talk to dumb muscle, they're at least smart enough to get their boss's orders a little more specifically than *that*."

Saori started laughing. A flicker of rage passed over the man's face, and the smell of musk got a little thicker. Between that and the likely association with Ekaterina, I was guessing he was a satyr. They seemed to have pretty close ties with maenads in the folklore, and goat would explain the smell. I wasn't sure, because trying to estimate anything based on my perception of an unfamiliar signature was dicey. But it seemed like a decent guess.

"Funny. Most of the people I've killed were at least smart enough not to make things worse for themselves in the process." He wasn't even pretending to smile now.

"Dude," I sighed. "If you think this is the first time I've made things worse for myself by saying something foolish, hate to break it to you but it's not even on the first page of the list." I yawned, apparently not yet fully recovered from the abrupt awakening and trip over here. I was pretty sure yawning was going to piss him off even more, but hey, I did just tell him this was a known issue for me.

"This isn't even on the first page out of times I've watched," Saori chimed in helpfully while I did. "Depending on the font, I guess."

"So you might as well piss off," I concluded after that interruption.

This whole time, the probably-satyr just kept looking more and more enraged. Honestly, I was pretty sure the only reason we got through that whole exchange without him interrupting was that he was too furious to find words. When he did, his voice still sounded more like a growl than speech. "You dare? You *dare* to speak to me that way?"

"Yup, looks like it," I confirmed. "Look, you've already said you have no useful information and neither the authority nor inclination to negotiate. I am not interested in making conversation with you, and I'm trying to eat this pastry in peace, which you're definitely interfering with. So, yeah, unless you have something useful to say, leave."

He was snarling as he stood up, and he didn't walk away. He just loomed closer, menacingly, and took a step closer, to our side of the table. He didn't say anything, but he didn't really need to. The aggression was clear enough that Raincloud was already on her feet with hackles visibly raised, and Saori was pushing her chair away from the table.

I didn't move. I didn't feel a need. But then, I was the only person at the table who knew what was about to happen.

I genuinely hadn't been trying to provoke him to this. I was a smartass with everyone, and had fully expected him to just leave. I had, apparently too charitably, been assuming that he had at least *that* much brain. No one in their right mind, and few who are out of it, will start any kind of physical violence at Softened Dreams.

Still snarling, he kicked at Raincloud, which was maybe the single worst choice he could have made in that moment. He barely even touched her; she was smart enough to see it coming, and quick enough to already be slipping out of the way of the attack. It didn't hurt her at all, I could tell.

But it was enough. And if it had been anyone else he went for, I might at least have *tried* to step in here. But he tried to kick my dog, and there weren't many things that would have catapulted him to the top of my bad list faster than that.

He hadn't quite gotten his balance back when Lacuna was at the table. I hadn't really seen them approaching. I didn't think it was anything spooky; they were just very fast, and very quiet. But regardless, they were *very* fast, because Saori was quicker both in reflexes and movement speed than any natural human, and she still hadn't quite made it around the corner of the table when they got there.

Lacuna didn't say anything, of course. They never said anything. But they rapped their knuckles against the table, once, sharp enough that most of the room could hear. The entire room turned to watch, and nobody was standing up or reaching for weapons.

That really should have been enough warning in itself. In a room full of magic and monsters, where most of those present had seen enough violence not to freeze up when a fight

broke out and a fair portion were pretty damn vigilant, nobody felt the need to stand up or make preparations when he picked a fight. That is never a good sign.

The satyr, like everyone else, turned to look at the sound. Lacuna pointed towards the sign over the bar, heavy block lettering reading "NO VIOLENCE. NO HARASSMENT. NO EXCEPTIONS." It was one of several, arranged so that at least one was visible from anywhere in the room. Lacuna then pointed at the door. The meaning was completely apparent, straightforward enough that words weren't needed at all. The rules here were simple. People got exactly one warning that they were breaking one.

Ekaterina herself would have known better, I was sure of that. Even if she didn't know about Lacuna, about this place specifically, she would have known better than this. Places like this, neutral social spaces catering to the supernatural crowd, *always* had measures in place to enforce that neutrality. She would have realized that this warning was one she should listen to. But this guy was the dumbest kind of muscle, and he just finished drawing his knife.

Lacuna reached out, and rested one hand on his other wrist. It looked almost comical, if you didn't know better. Lacuna couldn't weigh more than half of what he did, and had no apparent weapons. Just a pale, silent figure in white clothes who had no color at all, and all they did was touch him. It wasn't even a particularly firm grip. It didn't need to be.

Personally, I'd suspected for years they didn't need to touch someone at all, and the reason they always did was to keep the other patrons from freaking out any more than necessary. If they always touched someone before doing this, then people only had to be irrationally nervous about skin contact, rather than even being in the same room with Lacuna. That thought process would be characteristic for them.

I was probably the only person who could perceive what happened next. It was very fast, and very subtle. Even with how overtuned my senses were for this kind of thing, even knowing what to expect, it was *still* almost too fast to notice.

Lacuna's power felt like absence. They had a signature of nothingness, of void; energy flows faded around them, and they left no trace of their presence behind. Except now, suddenly, that changed. They radiated energy now, magic that felt almost exactly like that of the satyr they were touching. As I watched, that dialed in even closer, until their power felt like a perfect match for his. Just, you know, stronger. A *lot* stronger.

The instant that it did, the exact moment that Lacuna matched him perfectly, there was a strange, disorienting sort of *twisting* feeling. It wasn't just me that could perceive this part, either. I'd asked a few other people who had seen this, and they all said they felt something when it happened, though nobody quite knew how to describe it. Twisting, pressure, a force tugging at something they couldn't name. A particularly unusual woman called Opari had described it as feeling like nails dragging down a chalkboard ontologically orthogonal to Real.

That might count as knowing how to describe it. It wasn't like it made enough sense to me to say; it might have been a perfectly clear description, if I could figure out what the hell she meant by it. Opari…was at least as hard to understand as Lacuna, in very different ways.

Regardless, it only lasted a moment. Never mind blinks, it felt like the actual *change* happened so fast it cut between two thoughts. One instant, that twisting feeling was there, and then it was gone. The aura around Lacuna was gone, and they were back to feeling like an absence.

The satyr was also gone, and that wasn't a euphemism. He wasn't dead, or at least not in a way that I understood. He just wasn't there anymore. His clothes were, and my focus was quick enough to actually watch them falling to the ground in a heap, along with the knife and a few pieces of jewelry. But the satyr himself was *gone*, like he'd never been there at all. No body, not even dust. Just...gone.

The whole thing, from start to finish, took about two seconds. Maybe less. Lacuna was *that* fast. I didn't know what they were and had no idea what that trick actually was, but they were really fucking good at it.

Lacuna bent over, and started pulling the various belongings together into a tidy pile. The rest of the room went back to what they were doing. Saori and Raincloud, after a moment, settled back down, realizing that it was already over.

"Thanks," I said to Lacuna. "And sorry about that. I really wasn't expecting this. These people are just...ugh. Didn't mean to cause trouble here."

They just shrugged, and smiled at me as they finished gathering things together. No teeth, but it was a friendly expression, and they gestured vaguely with the satyr's knife as they stood back up. The implication was pretty clear. It hadn't been me that tried to hit someone, hadn't been me that drew a weapon.

I was guessing it would have been different, if I actually had been baiting him to provoke this response. There was a good chance that Lacuna would have known, by one means or another, and a very good chance that they wouldn't appreciate it. They liked me, but they also took their role as peacekeeper here *very* seriously. But given that I really was just a smartass and great at talking myself into trouble, and hadn't been intending this to happen, they weren't going to give me any difficulty about it.

They nodded politely to Saori, smiled at Raincloud, and took the satyr's belongings with them back to where they'd been sitting at the edge of the room. My understanding was that usually most of it got donated to some kind of shelter in town.

"Well," I said. "That was bracing." I ate a bit more of the pastry. It was excellent.

"Yeah, just a bit," Saori said. "You, uh. You weren't kidding, huh?"

"Nope." Raincloud stretched, and then walked over and sat next to me, leaning against my legs. She did not, I noted, feel particularly scared. There was some edge of stress, but it could have been excitement as easily as fear. I wasn't quite sure what that suggested.

"Is that what they do every time?" Saori, meanwhile, sounded fascinated. But that one wasn't hard to explain at all.

"Pretty much, yeah." I shrugged. "I've never seen someone shrug it off. Sometimes someone tries to hit them first, but I've never seen that do much either. You get one warning, and if you don't take that chance Lacuna deletes you, end of story."

"I can see what you mean about not starting fights here, yeah," she agreed, watching Lacuna sit down from across the room with an interest that hadn't been there before. "And not knowing how to describe it. I've seen a lot of things, but I don't think I've seen that stunt before."

"Same. Never seen anything like it." I shrugged. "People sometimes think it's creepy."

"But not you."

"Nope." I finished the pastry, sipped some tea. "Lacuna's a sweet person, as long as you can...I dunno, meet them where they are? Like, yeah, they can be spooky, and I think that particularly with them not talking and never leaving this place people get weird about it. But the rules here are simple, and the enforcement is very fair. They always give people a warning. The fact that I don't understand the mechanisms they use afterwards doesn't really matter much."

Saori nodded. "Yeah. I suppose I can understand that. No worse than what I was about to do to him, really."

"Probably!" I agreed cheerfully. "Hard to say, since I don't know what they actually *do* to people, but it seems likely. And, I mean, same. Though in my case it would probably have involved fewer cantaloupes."

She sighed. "You're just never going to let that one go, huh?"

"I'm just saying. I liked that painting."

Saori flipped me off. Raincloud snickered. I drank the last of my tea.

"So what now?" Saori asked me after a few moments. "Any more bad ideas for me to aid and abet?"

"Not really." I shrugged. "Kadir needs time, Silas's person won't be here for a few days, and everything else is pretty much ready to go. Not a lot to do this weekend."

"Sweet, that means it's my turn. You wanna go back to my place? I have a lot of getting laid to catch up on, especially with all the explosions recently."

I sighed. She grinned. I was pretty damn shameless, but sometimes even for me Saori was just...so very much who she was.

But also, and more to the point, there were practical considerations. "That seems like a terrible idea," I said, "especially with all the explosions recently."

She scoffed. "If it weren't a terrible idea, how would you know it was mine? But, also, they only pulled that off because I left the car unattended for so long. Not making that mistake again."

"Sure," I said. "But that doesn't rule out all kinds of other things. If these assholes know that's a good place to target me...they don't exactly seem to have many limits. At all."

"Most of those attacks would take prep time," she said, shrugging. "Not a ton, but some. And the ones that don't generally damage the property pretty extensively. Ekaterina's gang is too clownshoes to find the place, and the other is too competent to risk that."

I raised an eyebrow. "They were willing to risk blowing up a few buildings before."

"Not what I mean." Saori paused. "I...expect that if they know where I live, they also know more or less how I got there. And they aren't stupid enough to get involved in it."

"You think your benefactor cares that much?" I said, and even I could hear the disbelief in my tone. Every impression she'd given me about the whole situation was...much less benign than that.

"About me? Not in the slightest. They wouldn't cross the street to piss on me if I were on fire. But the building itself was part of a deal they made with me. And you do *not* want to put these people into anything resembling a breach of contract." Saori grinned. "And, as noted, terrible ideas, kinda my specialty anyway."

Interesting. It made a degree of sense. If you didn't know the terms of that deal exactly, I could see where it would make sense to err on the side of caution. It was much like what Capinera had described, and it was a similarly flimsy aegis. Eventually, the attacker would get tired of waiting. Though my concerns about Saori's mysterious benefactor, and my morbid curiosity as to who they were and why she didn't talk about it, were only growing with time. I noticed, as well, that she'd just referred to them in the plural, which was...interesting.

"Fuck it, why not," I said after a few moments. "I'm pretty good at terrible ideas too."

She laughed, in her usual golden-fire sort of way, and stood up. "I know," she said. "Your ideas might actually be worse than mine, sometimes."

But she was grinning, and she said it like a compliment.

Later. Not as much later as either of us would prefer, but later. I was dozing in bed, wrapped in scents of fox and spice and flowers. It was, I noted absently, probably just as well that my sensory everything was unusual. Most people didn't like the way foxes smell, to put it mildly. It was a heavy, musky smell, not far off from skunk. It was just as well that I was unusually fond of it, all things considered.

I'd have to go soon. Given that what little safety I had here was reliant on the enemy not having their feet under them, lingering would be kinda stupid. I certainly wasn't staying the night.

But for the moment, I was dozing. Saori was wrapped around me with her head pillowed on my shoulder. She still hadn't moved into this house much, and it still felt anonymous, virtually sterile. But it smelled like her, and I was drifting in quiet, wordless thoughts, and I felt peaceful.

Peaceful was never the easiest feeling for me to find, and lately I'd had none at all. It felt...nice.

Saori stirred, after what might have been five minutes or five hours. The kitsune yawned, nestling in against me closer, and traced her fingertips over the cut on my shoulder. As expected, it

was almost totally healed already. There was no pain, just an angry red line. By tomorrow, even that would be gone.

"This is kinda sad," she said. She sounded relaxed, verging on sleepy.

"How's that?"

"I like your tattoos," the kitsune said, nuzzling at one that looked like a viper. "It's a shame to mess them up with scars."

I stroked her hair with one hand. "Oh. You, uh, don't have to worry about that."

"How's that?" I wasn't sure whether she was echoing me deliberately, but my lips twitched into a smile either way.

"Well, a lot of them are old, from back when I was running with the Yakuza," I said. "It's this whole cultural thing in Japan, that association between tattoos and crime I mean. Not as much as it used to be. For a long time, tattoos were so tightly linked with organized crime they were illegal."

"Wait, seriously?" Saori sounded distinctly incredulous.

"Yup. It was a weird ritual thing, and then also stuff related to the Ainu got mixed in and it just had a very odd role in society. Then the government started using it as a punishment thing to mark criminals."

She snorted. "Lemme guess, that backfired and the marks started to be a badge of honor."

I laughed. "Got it in one." I really couldn't fathom how those officials had done something that stupid. Saori could tell it was a bad idea in under five seconds. *Saori.*

"And then they tried to fix that part by criminalizing it entirely," she continued. "Because banning something which has appeal because it's linked with illicit activity is *great* at discouraging people."

I grinned. "Yeah, pretty much exactly how it went. Whole thing was one bad decision after another. Anyway, tattoos were illegal for almost a hundred years. It's legal now, but still in a weird place socially. There aren't a ton of tattoo artists in Japan, and most of them are tourist bait."

"But not this one." It wasn't a question. She could tell where this was going.

"No. Someone Saito knew, who had history working with the Yakuza. He was a traditional horishi, living in the mountains outside the city. He didn't advertise, virtually never had foreign clients. Exclusively worked in the traditional irezumi style, which incidentally is really obnoxious. He did it by hand rather than use a machine."

Saori winced. "Ow."

I laughed. "Yeah. Very ow. And very slow. I was going out there weekly for almost three fucking years. He didn't do all of my ink, but he did most of it. And it's...strange."

"Strange how?"

"They're very colorful, don't you think?"

Saori made a sound that verged on purring. "Yes. They are."

"Colorful tattoos fade," I said quietly. "They age, they get sun-faded. You need to get them touched up now and again. These...don't. They were done almost twenty years ago, and they're so bright I could have just gotten them yesterday."

She was still purring, but it had a different tone to it, less relaxed, more intrigued. "That's really interesting. And it doesn't seem likely to just be different pigments."

"No. But it gets even weirder. I've gotten injured a fair number of times since then, right? And I heal so well that usually there's barely a scar after, but. I've had cuts deep enough I'd expect them to disrupt the tattoo. People need to get them touched up after that, too."

"But not you." She traced the line of a scar on my forearm with her nail, and I shivered.

"Nope. It heals back. Like, the skin that forms after the injury matches the tattoo perfectly. Every time."

"Like it was yesterday," she echoed. "That's fascinating."

"Right? And it's not some property about me, either. I've had tattoos done by other people, and those fade. His work is...a different kind of permanent."

Saori was quiet for a moment. "I notice," she said eventually, "that Saito was the one who recommended this guy."

"Yes. He was." It was something I'd thought about more than once.

"Wasn't he the same guy who 'recommended' that you move to a town which just *happened* to be run by a werewolf?"

"Yeah. Same guy sent me to this, I don't know, mystical tattooist."

"That's impressive. Also makes them hotter, if you were curious." She yawned and went back to cuddling rather than talking, though I noted she was tracing the lines of various tattoos in the process.

It was...something, alright. I didn't think Saori had thought through some of the implications yet. There really wasn't much reason why they'd occur to her right away. But I'd thought about this a lot of times over the years.

She gently stroked one of the wolves I carried on me. There were several in those tattoos. Wolves, clouds, and flowers all featured prominently. They weren't the only elements; there were a few snakes, a length of chain, and various other things. I even had a fox on me, something Saori teased me about mercilessly sometimes. But those three were the most prevalent, visible elements. There was a hibiscus blossom on the back of my right hand, a wolf's head on my left.

I'd specifically asked him to do my hands, which wasn't common. Most people in Japan make sure that if they're wearing a business suit, no ink can be seen. I'd wanted to intentionally make that impossible for myself, as a symbolic gesture. I wasn't interested in rejoining polite society. I wasn't wanted there, and the feeling was mutual.

I'd asked for the location on those, but none of the imagery had been my idea. The horishi had picked these motifs. It was how traditional irezumi generally worked. I had a say in the matter; I could have refused something. But almost all the creative decisions were made by the artist.

I hadn't objected at the time. I'd always been fond of wolves, and clouds were a common background element, forgettable. The flowers had been a little more marginal, but I had ultimately decided that they were acceptable, for a few reasons. There was an interesting dissonance in that softer imagery, as contrasted against both the rest of the ink and the rest of, well, me. The designs were beautiful when he sketched them out. And, I recalled, I'd liked the symbolism of some of them.

That, and I had seen that he used such vivid inks that the flowers looked slightly off-putting, and I enjoyed that. That and the dissonance both were funny to me. I hadn't objected.

After he'd already done all this, I'd learned that my mother was a raiju. That I looked lupine when I was drawing on that power, and I had lightning in my veins. I realized that plants grew unnaturally well under my care, and then most recently I'd realized that I had some sort of very limited telepathy with them.

And suddenly, things were a lot less funny.

Wolves, clouds, and flowers were the three most prominent, visible tattoos on me. You couldn't miss them when I had one on either hand and plenty of others up my arms, on my back, and covering portions of my chest and legs. They weren't unusual imagery, but the notion that he'd picked all three primary motifs *that* on the nose by chance was comical.

Wolves and storm and flowers inked into my skin, all of them permanent in a way that natural tattoos couldn't be. A mystical tattoo artist who had apparently known my nature before I did, and had found real, serious power in the old traditions he followed. A mentor who had sent me there, who had suggested Ashland as a good place to go for reflection. Saito was also one of the two people who survived my rampage the first time I shifted into fur, and I didn't know how.

Taken as a whole, the implications were uncomfortable at best.

I sighed, and stroked Saori's hair some more. Soon, I'd have to leave. But I could spend a few more minutes here, dozing and drifting. I could smell her, and it felt soothing, peaceful. That feeling of peace was a lie, of course, but it was one I needed.

I'd have to leave that false refuge soon. But not quite yet.

peppersghostinthemachine: *morning. how's the vixengoth?*

I laughed at that nickname. I laughed hard enough that Capinera, who was sitting on the other side of the room reading Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, was looking over at me curiously. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Okay, vixengoth is pretty good, I'll have to pass that one along. She's doing well, and remains insatiable. Also, referencing Pepper's ghost? Seriously? Also, you're up early.*

I wasn't. I was up late. Though in my defense, I had caffeine on hand now and was largely nocturnal by preference. Sitting around on a laptop until dawn was pretty standard behavior from me.

peppersghostinthemachine: *thank you, thank you, i owe it all to the pernatal toxin exposure. also i haven't slept.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Again?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *yup. i never sleep on christmas eve.*

I winced. From most people, that statement might indicate excitement. It might hint at fond memories. It might suggest an investment in the shared cultural exuberance around the holiday. Hell, it might even reflect Christian beliefs and an engagement with the religious significance around this date.

From Pepper? Not so much. I didn't know what her relatives did for Christmas, but I knew enough about them to be dead certain I was happier that way.

EmeraldKeychain: *Oof. Hate that for you. I...kinda know the feeling. Not about Christmas specifically, and probably not as bad, but yeah.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *which one haunts you?*

EmeraldKeychain: *Plenty. My birthday is...not a topic you want to bring up. New Year's Eve and lunar new year are the worst for actual holidays, though.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *wai t, really? lunar new year?*

I laughed again, though softer this time. I saw that kind of response often, and it always got a chuckle. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Yeah. Keep in mind that I wasn't born in the states. Cultural fixations are different in Asia.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *key. this is the first time you've mentioned where you were born, at all.*

I blinked. I knew that I was intentionally cagey about my real life and identity with Pepper, but I'd assumed that I'd at least shared this much at some point. **EmeraldKeychain:** *wait, seriously?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *yes. you haven't previously mentioned a birthday, where or how you grew up, or the real names of anyone except Raincloud. i'm pretty good about tracking that kind of thing.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Oh, I believe you. I just hadn't realized. I grew up mostly in Tokyo, aside from stays in Osaka visiting family. Occasional trips to the U.S., China, and parts of Europe. Lunar new year was…yeah. I don't sleep well that night.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *huh. that acutally explainos some things about tyou*

EmeraldKeychain: *How so?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *the way you use languae. esl peopo;le tend to use bettere grammar than native speakers. i think because natives mostly never actuolyy learned the grammar rules and just go on o instinct.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Present company included, apparently. And calling me English second language is a slight stretch, I was raised bilingual. But otherwise, I tend to agree. Languages can be hard to see from the inside.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *i know the grammar. i have too manoy issues with motor coordination to type right but i don't like susing speech-to-text. and editingoj everyinghing i type takes wayy too lon;g. so in casual conversation p;i mostly don't.*

I winced again. I could imagine how nasty that might get. When I considered how rough my own intermittent language difficulties could be…yeah. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Shit, didn't mean to rub that in your face. Sorry. Mind if I ask what's wrong?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *it's fine. so, i'm not actually joking about the prenatal toxin exposure. nicotine cocaine, a;dn i think probably lead or some;other heavy metal. i have some npeurologiacal issues from that, tics and stuff. then when i aw;as fifteen someone called child protective serveices about my parents. the outcome was me spaendin;gt a month and change in the psych; ward. got a l;ot of antipsychotics, and what wasn't already broken got wrecked by that. chronic tardive dyskinesia, guessing you're familiar.*

Oh. Well then. Suddenly, my jokes about Pepper's typos felt a whole fucking lot less funny. I was, in fact, familiar, and tardive dyskinesia could be *devastating*. I was guessing she'd been given the older, harsher antipsychotics. The side effects on those could get brutal, and the one she'd mentioned was among the worst, a permanent neurological disorder that had a lot in common with Parkinson's. A mild case might just involve a little twitching or a mild tremor. Severe cases were…much worse in how they impacted movement.

I doubted Pepper's case was mild. She just wasn't that lucky. And that was coming on top of existing damage from someone else's poor life choices.

EmeraldKeychain: *well then. That is extremely fucked up. Do you at least have treatment for it, an atropine derivative or something?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *your ability to guess that is kind of creepy. benzotropine, and it' snot enough. also, that was only moderately fucked up. the *extremely* fucked up part was the party when i go tout of the hospitalj.*

Apparently my reaction to this story was pretty noticeable, because Capinera had set the book aside and was now just watching me quietly from across the room. Her expression was…hard for me to read.

EmeraldKeychain: *To paraphrase: Pepper, sometimes you say these things, and I'm not sure whether you're being a drama queen, or I should actually be incredibly disturbed and freshly upset at the world.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *i prefer to think of myself as a hybrid. a trauma queen, if you will. also, since apparently we're trading unusually personal questions tonight, why that screen name? i've never understood where that came from.*

I sighed. Unusually personal conversation or otherwise, Pepper's sense of humor remained…unique. **EmeraldKeychain:** *I will not. And that's actually pretty simple. I have green eyes, and I've used the nickname Key ever since I was a teenager and doing things I didn't want associated with my real name. I don't like using multiple screen names, so I tried different combinations of Key until I found one I liked which was obscure enough not to be taken most places. That's…pretty much all there is to it.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *huh. that's a lot less exciting than i was expecting actually. though i ohbserve that you mention doing unspecified things that; you wou;d rather keep anonymous, so still keeping up the dramatized vs. creepy balance well done.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Thank you, it requires constant diligence to maintain a proper spooky mystique. Okay, I think it's my turn then? This game is actually weirdly fun. Why do you use all these bizarre puns as handles?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *copycat. and they aren't puns per se. it' smo re about concatenating different cultural idioms and des;critpison. i think that juxtapoisng differen t elements li;e this maikes it feel strange and absurdist, and that in turn makes peopl esee how absurd and incoherent their own cul'tural zeitgeist is. i like to confront people with that absurdism because it show;s how fundamentally arbitrariy language is.*

I blinked. Of all the answers I'd been expecting, that…wasn't. **EmeraldKeychain:** *And you say I'm the one who uses language oddly? Who uses the word concatenate in casual conversation?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *i do. obviously. do you miss living in japan?*

I had to laugh at that. Pepper and Raincloud both, it seemed, had a fondness for asking me hard questions, and it took me a long moment to phrase my answer to that one. **EmeraldKeychain:** *Yes and no. I miss things about it. People I miss talking to, experiences I haven't had since I left. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to find decent Japanese food here. But I wouldn't go back. I don't miss the person I was back then.*

There was a noticeable delay before the response this time. **peppersghostinthemachine:** *i supoise i can understand that. not re;ally prone to nostalgia myself os i can somewhat rel;ate i think.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Frankly, it doesn't sound like you have much to be nostalgic about. I don't think you've shared a single story about your life that I can imagine wanting to go back to. Alright, mine: Why haven't you mentioned the dyskinesia before?*

Another delay, this one longer. It was long enough I was a little worried that I'd gone too far with that question. She did eventually respond, though.

peppersghostinthemachine: *i don't talik about it much onoline. peopl;e treat me diffe;rent when they know. some get weirdly hostiole towareds the crack baby, some jump to pitying thye criplle, don't kjnow which is worse. need somewhere tthat peopl edon't look at me like that and i can' treally hide it irl. obviously not a concern with you, we can be crippled by neurologicail disord;ers together it's great. ji ust have a habit of not mentioning the topic, so i hadn't.*

I sighed, soft and slow, and scritched at Raincloud's ears. Yeah, I could understand that. My broken parts were in other places, but I knew the looks Pepper was talking about. You go into convulsions and then start talking about seeing things that aren't there, people assume overdose. You tell them that you struggle with basic tasks because of an incurable medical issue, and suddenly they treat you with pity and exaggerated care, less a person than a fragile object. I knew that pity all too well, and it wasn't too hard to extend it from the areas I was familiar with to the problems Pepper was describing.

EmeraldKeychain: *Yeah, I get that. Retroactively welcome to the club, I guess. I shall endeavor to respect your wishes by continuing to mock you relentlessly for the typos. You know, like I would any other person.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *go fuck yourself sideways. also i have to go soon, work wants me there early today.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Wait, seriously? The hell do they need you early for? It's a bakery, how much business can they even *have* on Christmas day?*

peppersghostinthemachine: *seriously key, life will be easier i;if you stpo looking for rastionoal descision making where it doesn't exist. humans gonna human. anyway got otime for one more so. why have oyou nmever mentioned your family before this?*

EmeraldKeychain: *Mostly because there's not that much to mention. My father isn't great, but nowhere near the spectacular dysfunction that is your relatives. He's just a corporate salaryman more or less. He thought my synesthesia was a psychiatric problem and had me hospitalized a couple times, things like that, but no particularly impressive stories. Haven't talked to him in years, and my mother's been dead for most of my life, which incidentally as a freebie that'd be why you don't want to bring up my birthday.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *how so? also that sounds dysfunctional enough to at least get an honorable' mention at the fucked up awards ceremony.*

I laughed. **EmeraldKeychain:** *That's uh. Well, to paraphrase again: No, that was only mildly fucked up. The part that was *really* fucked up was the details of her death. Violent death of a parent on your birthday when you're a kid is a great way to give someone a head start on neuroticism. If you were curious.*

peppersghostinthemachine: *i was not but thank you for lettin gme know. i will keep this in mind in case i ever need to produce a neurotic oprhan. also wow yeah that's taking gold in at least one category of fucked up so you may want to pwork on your accepatance speech. okay, i have to go before i overdose on sincerity. pets for cloud, bite foxface for me, etc.*

EmeraldKeychain: *Will do. Luck with work.* I stared at the screen for a few more moments, lost in thought, and then closed the laptop and set it aside in favor of petting Raincloud.

"You care deeply about your friends." Capinera's voice was soft.

"Conversation was that obvious, huh?"

"You are more expressive than you realize, I think. And I've observed the same concern in you before. Such as a few nights ago, directed towards myself."

"Heh, fair enough." I sighed. "I suppose I do. Maybe I worry more than I should, but I'm not sure. My friends are...not usually people who have had great lives."

"Few people have, in my experience. The world is rarely a kind place." Capinera shrugged. "I think that care speaks well of you. Many of the people I meet are...very shallow in how they invest themselves in others."

I smiled, and continued to pet Raincloud, who was mostly asleep at the moment but awake enough to make satisfied noises. "Thank you. That...means a lot to me, actually. I used to be pretty shallow myself. I like to think I've made some progress since then."

"You have," Capinera told me. Her voice was unusually firm as she asserted this, which made me laugh. For someone who wasn't sure it was possible for her to change her own nature, she sure seemed confident I could change mine—far more so than I was, really.

Though when I thought about it, maybe that made sense. I'd observed before that it was hard for me to believe Capinera had done the things she had, when I had only interacted with the person she was now. Similarly, she hadn't been there for that period of my life. She didn't have personal experience to confirm I could be that shallow, petty bitch with a tendency to lash out impulsively at whoever happened to be nearby.

Pepper had mentioned people looking at her differently once they knew she had, effectively, a debilitating congenital movement disorder. I found that extremely easy to believe. I was well aware that some things, when someone knew them about you, tended to warp how that person saw you. It hadn't previously occurred to me, though, that maybe the same applied when you looked in a mirror. Food for thought, perhaps.

"Thanks," I repeated. "I should probably try to get some rest."

Capinera smiled, needle-sharp and soft as snow. "Please do," she said. "I think I'll read a while longer, myself. Sleep well."

She stood and went out to the main room of the theatre, presumably so that she could read without the light keeping me awake. I watched the half-redcap woman go, and wondered whether it was possible for her to dye that cap black, to write over blood with ink and have it stay the shade she wanted. I wondered whether, if she did, I should celebrate her triumph or mourn her loss.

And then I turned out the light, and curled up in the dark with someone who looked a lot like a dog if you only saw the surface. Sleep found me quickly, and nightmares just a little bit quicker.

Chapter Seventeen

Nothing much happened on Christmas.

I was, on the whole, glad for it. In part, this was because it meant no catastrophes happened. But there was no celebration either, and I was glad for that part, too. I didn't love the holiday; it didn't haunt me the way it did Pepper, but holidays in general weren't my favorite thing, and this one in particular I didn't care for. There were several sets of moods associated with Christmas—rampant materialism and conspicuous consumption, family with the implication of traditional values and structures, and Christian theology with overtones of orthodoxy and martyrdom.

The first of those I just didn't like much, and I could acknowledge that part of that was my relatively privileged position. It's easy to disdain materialism when you don't lack for the material, and I'd been coasting my whole adult life on an inherited trust fund. The second, well, family was not something that had good associations for me. I was hardly going to be calling my relatives to wish them well. And for the last, when a large portion of Christian sects would place me in Hell from birth as a demon, a large portion of the rest would put me in Hell because I slept around and wasn't picky about gender, and most of the remainder would be convinced by the blood on my hands?

Yeah. Not a fan. I didn't hate the religion, didn't go out of my way to antagonize them or anything. But I wasn't fond of it, either. My usual policy was to leave them the hell alone, and I appreciated the faith most when they returned the favor. I didn't celebrate their holidays.

And so, I was glad for the quiet. My friend group really didn't have many people who disagreed with me on the topic. Saori and Capinera weren't even native to this world and definitely didn't care about its calendar. Melissa and Pepper both had more horror than joy associated with holidays. Raincloud had gotten bored of the fuss weeks ago. For us, then, it was just another day.

Capinera's scheduling for the Blackbird Cabaret was wholly arcane to me, and when I'd asked her about it, her answers had been so confusing that I'd just given up on even trying to understand it. It had logic to it but not of a kind I could make sense of. I could check her schedule for the next week or two, and go from that with fair confidence, but any further out than that and my ability to predict it was essentially nil. And so, similarly, I had come to regard it with much the same calm fatalism as the weather. It would rain, or it would not. Capinera would take a day off, or she would not.

Today she did take the day off, and it was quiet. This changed around sundown when Saori showed up unannounced, and informed me that as I was planning on being a reckless idiot soon she was there to celebrate my poor life choices. When I pointed out that I wasn't planning on *starting* until tomorrow, she looked at me like an idiot and told me that celebrations for this happened well in advance, since the whole point was that I might be getting myself killed in spectacular fashion.

I had to admit she had a point there. And so, food was eaten. I attempted, with little success, to convince the three of them to play Monopoly. I wasn't even halfway through explaining the rules when Raincloud declared the game a prime example of non-entertaining insanity and Saori accused me of only suggesting it in hopes of causing mental anguish as a prank. (Which, to be fair, I was, so I couldn't really get too upset.)

Towards midnight, Saori (who was at this point moderately intoxicated, and the rest of us were appropriately nervous) more successfully got a game of liar's dice started. Capinera said that she didn't know the game, and would we be so kind as to show her the rules? Naturally, Saori agreed, and suggested we play for small stakes so she could learn, with a distinctly malicious grin.

Capinera just as naturally proceeded to play like a novice, bait Saori into raising those stakes, and then run the table with expert skill. I laughed at how she had been taken in by the oldest trick in the book; Saori gave me a look that suggested I would pay for this later, but she was also visibly amused herself.

The night passed quietly. I fell asleep on the stage with Saori and Raincloud in a tangled pile of limbs, while Capinera read the musings of dead philosophers. As ways to celebrate poor life choices went, I had to admit this was pretty good.

"The hell do you want?"

I've never been great at answering phone calls with much courtesy. It was showing this morning more than most; it was barely noon, and I had actually been sleeping well for once, and neither one left me feeling charitable towards whoever had woken me up.

I had to admit, I was vaguely curious how these people did it. It wasn't like I even slept very much, or on consistent hours. That everyone and her sister could apparently time phone calls around waking me was vaguely impressive.

There was a moment of nonplussed silence, followed by a cautious male voice saying, "I'm calling for a Miss, uh, Sugiyama?"

"Congratulations, very proud of your achievement. The hell do you want?"

There was a distinct thread of amusement, now. "Saito said you might want to chat."

"Ohhh," I said. "Right, I remember now. Sorry about that. Call me Key." I wasn't trying to get him to pronounce Kyoko, though in this case that was less for the sake of anonymity and more that I just disliked it when people butchered my name. If he stumbled on Sugiyama there wasn't a chance in hell he'd get Kyoko right.

"Johnny. And no worries, some mornings are like that. Nice to meetcha." He sounded amiable, which was nice of him. I rarely had a reason to use that word, and I appreciated this one.

"Likewise. Uh. How do you want to...?"

"I'd rather not talk over the phone, and I'm in town today. Does Westinghouse Park in Point Breeze work for you?"

I thought for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah, I know the place. It might take me a little while to get there, though.”

“Not a problem. Forty minutes good?”

“Yeah, that should be fine.” I hung up and glowered at the phone.

Raincloud was also glowering, though hers was more amusing. A Siberian husky managing to glower was...not something you saw every day. *Do we have to?*

I shrugged. *I have to. You can stay behind if you want.* I didn’t say it out loud. Saori was still asleep, and I didn’t want to wake her. The phone call hadn’t, but I didn’t want to push that.

Raincloud was up and at the door within thirty seconds. I laughed softly, and followed her, albeit more slowly. I had clothes to put on, and gear to grab. I wasn’t carrying much to this meeting—it just made more sense to leave most of the weaponry and assorted other belongings here. But I had my shotgun under my coat, a couple of knives in case Thorn wasn’t an option for some reason, and a handful of more generalized tools.

Capinera was leaning against the wall watching while I got ready. If she had slept, I couldn’t tell; if she needed to, it didn’t show. She really didn’t seem to need much sleep at all, and I envied her for that. No amount of caffeine was enough to fully make up for my terrible sleep quality.

“You two heading out?” she asked me.

“Yup, looks like. Saori’s asleep still, and she seemed tired last night. Kinda want to let her rest some more, but I’ve got a meeting.”

“Okay. Let me drop the wards for you.” She turned and started working on that. I could feel it, this close. Even with my filters firmly in place, what still got through to my conscious awareness was enough to feel it, magic moving through the world with a scent like blackberries and bloodstained smiles.

I had to learn this trick. Practical value aside, if I had to keep asking someone else to get the door for me to leave like this, I’d lose my mind. It reminded me too sharply of the psych ward, and some of my experiences there had been bad enough I was liable to go into flashbacks from this eventually.

“Thanks,” I said, and stepped out into the sunlight, blinding after the comfortable darkness of the Blackbird. Behind me, the door closed, and the locks slid home with a series of sharp clicks.

Westinghouse Park was an odd place. It was a reasonably expansive park, built on the grounds of the old Westinghouse estate. It was here, in a manor named Solitude, that George Westinghouse had done much of the early research on electricity and electrical systems, and Tesla developed alternating current motors into a functioning system. It was on the same grounds that Westinghouse had drilled one of the first commercial natural gas wells, and in the process produced a burst of flame a hundred feet tall, so bright that people could read newsprint by its light a mile away.

It had been one of the centers of early American industrialization, the heart of a robber baron's empire. But that was a long time ago. Now, it was...well. It wasn't far from where Alice lived, and it was comparably desolate. The buildings were half-abandoned, and the park itself was tired. It was trying its best, and it wasn't exactly *bad*—the grass was healthy, the playground tidy and in decent shape. People did go there, but everything was old and worn. The basketball court was cracked and the hedgerow running along the northern edge of the park had gaps. It often wasn't hard to tell that the city's main mental health crisis center was within walking distance, either. The rideshare driver didn't quite ask me what the hell I was doing there, but he looked like he was thinking it.

Then again, I *was* wearing a trench coat, what that didn't cover was heavily tattooed, and I had already bribed him to get Raincloud in the car. So maybe I looked like I belonged here, and the question was why the hell he'd agreed to give me a ride when I was clearly unstable, criminal, or both. Which, to be fair, would be an accurate assessment.

Regardless, I was there, and it wasn't hard to find Johnny. There were not many people at the park in the snow the day after Christmas. When I saw someone sitting alone in the snow in the northwestern corner of the park, far from the playground and the basketball court, I was pretty confident.

He didn't look up as I walked up and sat down next to him, close enough to talk but far enough for personal safety. "Nice weather today," he commented. His voice was soft, with the characteristic drawl common among the hillfolk of the Appalachian region.

"Not bad," I agreed. It was clear today, and calm. The air was cold, and that always felt bracing to me. The sting of taking a deep breath did not substitute for sleep, but it at least did *something* to help me shake off the fatigue. "I assume you're Johnny."

"It's what they call me," he agreed. "How's Saito doing?"

I relaxed a bit. I'd been pretty sure this was the right person, but the implicit verbal handshake was still comforting. Johnny was a common enough name that it was—barely—possible I'd gotten the wrong person. But the chance of me guessing the wrong person at the park, that person's name coincidentally also being Johnny, and then for that person to also mention Saito? Nil.

Which did not, I reminded myself, mean that he was who he claimed. It just meant that if not, this was a deliberate ambush rather than coincidental mistake. But then, that was why Raincloud was out in the trees in front of me. It was the most likely place to put a sniper, and she was a very effective scout. A mostly-white dog can hide pretty damn well on snow, her senses were pretty sharp (as evidenced by her warning us about the bomb), and she could communicate an alarm to me without anyone else hearing. Excellent sentry, on the whole.

"I don't have a clue," I said, honestly. "Haven't talked to him in years, up until a few days ago."

"But he still took the time to set up a meeting," Johnny said. It didn't sound like a refutation, more just an observation.

I smiled a little. “We go back. And Saito’s the kind of guy for whom loyalty doesn’t have an expiration date.”

He nodded, slowly. “I know that type. I respect that in a person. And Saito’s someone I can respect. So, on to business. What are you looking for here? He wasn’t very specific.” Johnny had to have noticed the incongruity. I talked like I had known Saito years ago in another country, but I looked like I was barely out of high school? There was no way he’d missed that. He didn’t show a reaction, though.

I shrugged. “Not sure how specific he could be. I don’t even know how specific *I* can be. I’m mostly looking for munitions, maybe other supplies, maybe information.”

“Munitions,” he repeated. “Anything in particular?”

“Eh, not sure what all is available. I’ve got shit aim, so guns are pretty much only useful at short range. Knives I’ve got covered. Someone tried to kill me using plastic explosives recently, which has me wondering where to get those. Not that I expect you to snitch on anyone,” I added quickly, before he could respond. Nobody wants to work with a snitch, and I highly doubted he would appreciate it if I implied he was one.

Johnny nodded, slowly. “I see. Well, guns are easy. Explosives are possible, but they would take time for me to get. They aren’t exactly something I work with every day.”

Huh. He was…very casual about this. Very willing to tell me incriminating things. He had never met me, had no idea whether I was using a recording device. Either this was a trap, or Saito had put in a pretty fucking good word for me.

“That’s fine,” I said. “The explosives are more of a future thing anyway. Guns might be a today thing. I also need armor, but I don’t know how likely you are to have what I’m looking for there. Steel exterior and kevlar lining would be ideal.”

I’d made fun of Saori for her gear. It seemed ridiculous in the modern age. I’d since come to understand, though, that I’d been looking at things from a very limited viewpoint.

Once the supernatural was involved, guns were much less reliable. They were great at killing humans, but they weren’t designed with supernatural targets in mind. And they didn’t even *work* in a lot of Otherside domains. That wasn’t relevant to me but it probably would be in the future. People in the supernatural crowd still used swords because swords still *worked*, and they worked everywhere.

And similarly, the plate armor looked silly and anachronistic, but she wore it for a reason. Kevlar alone didn’t do great against knives or blunt force trauma, and a lot of things I was running into now were…well. My shoulder was healed, but the lingering cut on my hip was a great reminder of why I wanted this.

“Yeah, armor isn’t really going to happen,” Johnny said after a few moments to consider. “I could probably get it, but I’ll be honest with you, quality will be pretty bad. Guns are easy, though. I can get a heavier shotgun than you’re carrying, if you want. Specialty ammo too.”

It did not surprise me that the arms dealer could tell I had a gun under my coat. Knowing that it was a shotgun was a little more impressive, though, and I was curious. “How do you know what I’m carrying?”

Johnny smiled, showing a few missing teeth. “There aren’t many guns with that profile,” he said. “I can tell it’s larger than a pistol from how you’re moving, not long enough to be a rifle without showing more through the coat. You said your aim was shit, so you’re probably not carrying a carbine, and if you could get something like a P90, you wouldn’t need me. Shotgun’s the only thing that fits.”

I nodded. “Nice party trick. I should learn that one. You said you have a heavier model?”

His smile widened, and he leaned back in the snow, looking out through the hedge to the north. This side of the park faced directly onto the busway, so the only traffic was the occasional bus. It was quiet here, and it was hard to see how Johnny could have looked more casual.

“I can get one,” he said. “Promise. Again, if you could get something like that, you wouldn’t need to talk to me. I can get you any gauge from eight to twenty, pump or semi-auto.”

I turned and stared at him. That…shouldn’t be a thing he could do. I wasn’t a huge gun nerd, but even I knew this was absurd.

“How the hell are you doing that?” I asked after a moment. It was very blunt, but I was too startled for social niceties. “Nobody even *makes* a ten-gauge semi-automatic. And nobody makes eight-gauge shotguns *at all* anymore.”

Johnny’s grin was loose and relaxed. He looked smug to me, visible mostly as a vibrancy in the faint, shimmering feeling of human magic he carried. “No official manufacturer makes those,” he corrected me. “When you’re friends with a gunsmith, you’d be surprised what all is possible. Ammunition, too. I’ll throw in a couple boxes of buckshot as a free bonus. I can sell you buckshot, flechettes, electroshock, you name it and I’ve probably got it.”

Which was bullshit. A gunsmith didn’t have the machining tools to make an eight-gauge barrel just lying around waiting for a custom order. Flechette rounds weren’t used in shotguns, either. I knew that, because I’d tried to get some a few years ago, and the only manufacturer of note had stopped production years before that.

This…either this was just bait in a trap, or Saito had put me in contact with someone…out of place. Someone who had munitions for sale that humans didn’t need, didn’t make, and could barely use. This situation was suddenly feeling very different, and it called for a different response, a different persona.

“I’m not paying up front,” I said. I stretched my back as I did. It did a lot to sell the look I wanted. I was the mark too stupid, taking this too casually, to realize that the person she was talking to only *looked* casual. It also let me get my feet under myself. “No offense intended But I don’t feel like paying up front for something that I’m pretty sure doesn’t exist.”

Johnny laughed. “Well, that’s fair. I can get them here and you can pay on delivery. It will take a while, though. I only visit Pittsburgh once in a while, I’m mostly based further south.”

This wasn't right. He should at least have asked for collateral, escrow, half up front, *something*. This wasn't how this kind of transaction *worked.* but he hadn't even hesitated. On its own, a small thing. But the scenario as a whole, in the context of my recent life? There was only one rational response here.

We're running. Pedestrian underpass northeast of here. I projected this thought clearly enough that Raincloud could parse it even at a distance, and I could feel her confirm that she understood.

"Eight gauge semi-auto and two boxes of flechettes, payment on delivery." I didn't say anything else, was already standing as I spoke. I didn't even pretend that the sudden departure was planned or that it was casual.

I just immediately bolted for the other side of the park. I'd already sent Raincloud that direction. It was the quickest way to break line of sight with the park, and it was running towards Alice's place, which seemed like a good idea.

After a few steps I juked to the left, down onto the slope that separated the park from the busway below. I figured it would be a decently unexpected direction to dodge, since most people didn't like to walk on sloped terrain, and the undergrowth was enough to disrupt line of sight somewhat.

That dodge was a good idea. I could tell, because it was the only reason the bullet missed me.

I heard the bullet as it went by. That wasn't good, because even with my hearing, that still meant it had come *way* too close for comfort. The sharp *crack* of the gunshot was quiet, too, on a relative scale. It was pretty loud, but if I could hear the bullet it wasn't as deafening as usual. Either subsonic rounds or a suppressor of some kind. That would limit the effect some, they were rifle rounds, and I wasn't armored. If they put a few bullets into me I was going to die. It was, ultimately, that simple.

Adrenaline hit, and the world felt so *slow* as I kept sprinting through it. I stayed on the slope for now; after living in one of Pittsburgh's more infamously steep neighborhoods for fifteen years, I was pretty good at running on uneven ground. And it would keep the visual screen provided by the vegetation, which wasn't great but it was the best cover I had available.

The second shot came about two seconds after the first. Long enough to have aimed, but short enough that the person aiming was good at it. It wasn't quite as close to me as the last, but that wasn't much comfort. The world was slow and I was not, but I couldn't outrun a bullet, and I didn't like my odds of surviving a hit.

I didn't know where the shooter *was,* either. The angle wasn't right for it to have been Johnny pulling the trigger, though. He might be an accomplice, he might just be smart enough to run when the shit hit the fan, didn't really matter which right now. He wasn't shooting me.

I waited about two seconds, and then abruptly dodged sideways, further downhill. There was a plume of snow where I would have been if I hadn't changed trajectory.

I'd thought he would space them out consistently. It was nice being right. I had no idea why I was dissociated enough to think about that, but I was. And it wasn't like I'd thought of anything else. Standing still was death, I was just about out of space to run, and it would only take one lucky shot to kill me.

Then I realized the obvious answer, and if I'd had the breath I would have laughed at myself for not seeing it sooner. *Change of plans, get to the busway and go east.* I sent a mental image to Raincloud along with the sentence, and got back a feeling of agreement.

I took one more stride, trying to get the timing right. It was more instinct than cognitive tracking; even for me, I was juggling too many things to process consciously this fast. My momentum, the timing of the shots, guessing at how the marksman might vary that pattern or attempt to predict my dodge this time, getting my footing just right...it was too much.

I didn't dodge this time. It wouldn't work; not enough space, not enough cover, not enough sense of where the shooter was. If I kept doing that, I'd be dead in short order.

Instead, I jumped, putting my full momentum into a running leap downhill.

I was not a gifted acrobat. I had no illusions on that front. I could not, for example, hold a candle to Saori when it came to agility and grace. The kitsune had superhuman levels of both, and I...didn't.

But there was a reason the long jump was grouped with athletics, not gymnastics. *Jumping* wasn't the product of grace, just of speed and strength. I was stronger than any human short of a serious weightlifter. I was also a lot lighter than said weightlifter would be, which gave me a fantastic strength-to-weight ratio.

So when I turned that sprint into a running leap, I got some spectacular air. I cleared the fence at the bottom of the hill with ease, and landed on the busway around the same time I heard a fourth gunshot. I didn't see where it hit, but it didn't hit me, so I didn't care.

Jumping is not the product of grace. But *landing* is, and falling from that far up onto asphalt sucked hard. But while I was a shit gymnast, I used to be a pretty good judoka, and did enough falling that I was still decent at this particular facet of it. I turned the fall into a front roll, and it still sucked hard but it didn't actually hurt me. I pushed myself back upright with more grace than I was expecting, and kept running. Ahead of me, I could see Raincloud scrambling up and over the fence. I was winded after the fall, but now I was running on dry asphalt. I handled uneven ground well, but an actual highway was still much easier. I was running pretty damn fast still by human standards.

She started running beside me, and I didn't slow down. Siberian huskies *also* run pretty fast by human standards. She wasn't fully grown, but as a burst of speed she was already able to keep up at this speed.

We wouldn't be able to do this very long. The busway was absolutely not intended for pedestrian use, and getting pasted by a bus would not be any less fatal than a bullet to the head. It would arguably be a more *entertaining* way to die, but on the whole I'd still rather not.

But for the moment, it was an open road with no obstructions and good footing, and that made it a hell of a lot less dangerous than where we'd just been. I kept running. I didn't hear any more gunshots, and I was guessing that we'd broken the shooter's effective line of sight, but I wasn't slowing down yet, just in case.

We kept going as long as I felt I could risk, and then hopped the fence on the other side of the busway.

Okay, I see why you hate these things.

I snorted and pulled Raincloud more fully onto my lap. She wasn't exactly allowed to be there—pets were supposed to be in carriers unless they were service animals—but the bus driver had not been able to resist a puppy who knew very well how to exploit her intrinsic cuteness to get what she wanted. *Part of it, at least. There's a lot to hate.*

On some level, I supposed I was being unfair. Public transportation was a vital resource, and from what I'd heard Pittsburgh's bus system was actually pretty good by American standards. The fact that using it was miserable for me really wasn't their fault. I got sensory overload easily, didn't handle crowds well, and was prone to collapse in a convulsing heap if I wasn't careful with those things. I also had serious emotional issues around the topic. When I was a kid, I really hadn't been equipped to understand the details and context of my mother's death. I just knew that she'd gotten sick because of poison on the subway and it was probably part of why she died. Hadn't left me with great feelings on the topic.

It really wasn't the local transit authority's fault. I couldn't reasonably expect anyone to make a public transportation system I didn't hate, with all those factors to consider. I'd used it in Japan, if only because avoiding public transportation in the Tokyo metropolitan area is hard even for people who *can* drive. But since moving here and discovering that I was the heiress to a substantial estate? I might not have been on a bus in the past ten years.

Which was why I was now. Well, that and it was just the most convenient way to leave what was clearly a dangerous area. We'd been right by the busway, and while we weren't actually using it, busway stations tended to have stops nearby for smaller lines. I'd picked one more or less at random, and had no idea where we were going.

I figured that if the attacker knew anything about my habits at all—and they clearly did—they wouldn't have bothered planning for this. For me to use a bus as an escape route was just…so out of character for me that it wouldn't be worth planning around that contingency. And if I had no clue where we were going, it was pretty damn unlikely that someone else would guess our route after four or five random bus transfers.

Raincloud curled into my lap more tightly, and I got the impression of agreement. She was not loving this. The bus was, at least, not crowded. Middle of the day, Monday right after a holiday, on a minor line? Yeah, it was pretty much just us and the driver. She was quiet for a few moments, then asked, *Do you think Saito betrayed you?*

I sighed, and scritched her ears while I thought about it. *I doubt it,* I responded eventually. *It's possible, but it seems pretty unlikely. It's not his style.*

Do you think you're biased?

To a degree, I admitted. *But also, that's not quite what I mean. If Saito wanted me dead, he could have done a* lot *more damage than this. It would have been trivial for him to send me to an actual deathtrap. He's too competent to rely on something this uncertain.*

I got a feeling of contemplation, followed by agreement. *But you were suspicious about the man there.*

And still am, I confirmed, with a slight shiver. *But thinking on it, I'm not sure. For one thing, he was in a great position to shoot me while I ran, and he didn't. For another...* I frowned, trying to phrase something. It took me a while, but Raincloud was patient.

Saito is clearly tied to the supernatural world, I said eventually, still thinking through the logic as I went. *He's been involved in too many supernatural events for coincidence to explain. I don't know what the link is or what his role is in it, but there's some connection. I'm willing to bet Johnny is in a somewhat similar position. He's human, sure of that, but he didn't react to my apparent age, he deals in weapons that aren't useful to most humans. I'm almost sure he's had business dealings with nonhumans before, and that's why things felt weird to me.*

Raincloud was quiet for a moment, just curled up comfortably on my lap. *They got plastic explosives somewhere,* she said after a moment, feeling thoughtful. (I'd given up on technical accuracy at this point. She was using words; it was easier just to think of this as something she said. Much like how I used the verb to describe communicating over the internet with text, really.)

Yes. And whoever did that, they probably weren't human. I doubt anyone is manufacturing C-4 in meaningful volume in the Otherside, too. I shrugged and stroked the fur on her neck, for my comfort as much as hers. *These people have to buy gear* somewhere. *If Johnny works with this clientele he might actually have access to equipment like that, even though vanilla humans are unlikely to want it. That's why I actually asked for something; I figure if he was dealing on the level, I'll probably want it, and if not, it won't matter.*

That makes sense. But if it wasn't him, how did they know where to find us? Raincloud still felt thoughtful, and I got the impression that those thoughts ran deeper than just the immediate past.

I shrugged, physically because why not. *Hard to say, there are too many possibilities. Intercepted Saito's communication because he had to reach out to people he doesn't know well, bugged my phone and listened in on the call, tracked me from the Blackbird, there are tons of ways it could be done.*

There was an impression of quiet agreement. Raincloud asked no further questions, and I settled in to endure the bus ride, lost in thoughts of my own.

"Sorry I haven't been around in a while. Things have been kind of insane lately."

The plants felt like they understood. That made sense, I supposed. They weren't actually hearing me; I talked out loud mostly out of habit. Meaning was being conveyed directly in much

the same manner as with Raincloud, though they were far simpler than she was, lacking both words and nuance. I didn't have to describe in words what I meant about things being insane.

I'd really hoped, at first, that this wasn't real, that the impressions I got were just the invention of my own mind. That hope had faded completely, by this point. This experience was real. It seemed to mostly happen with my own houseplants; I wasn't sure whether that was because of my familiarity with them, or my ongoing presence was why they had even this much mind. Plants weren't supposed to have emotions, not even simple ones.

I kinda wished I knew why this happened, why plants thrived around me, why I had this emotional link with them. I also strongly suspected that ignorance was bliss, as it often was.

"We're moving on from this place, I think," I continued. I was going around watering them as I spoke, confirming that they were still inexplicably healthy. I was in the room set aside for the poisonous ones at the moment. Saori, unsurprisingly, was collecting the psychoactives from the loft, and most of the rest had already been carried out. "Not sure where to yet. Probably won't know for a while. You'll be staying with a friend until I get that sorted out." This set, specifically, would be at Derek's place. Given that werewolves were as resistant to toxins as I was, it just seemed…tidier that way.

The werewolf himself was downstairs carrying things out to his car. Kadir had used the spare key as a less literal key so we could get through the wards easily; it was terrible practice, as he had told me and I had already known, but that didn't matter. I wasn't expecting them to do anything anyway.

I wasn't taking everything. It would have been impractical, and it would have looked suspicious. It also just wasn't necessary. There were plenty of things here that I didn't actually need, from furniture I didn't use to art supplies that hadn't been touched in years to sentimental keepsakes from which the actual sentiment had long since faded. This was as good a time as any to offload that stuff.

But the things that mattered, I was moving out now. Saori was holding onto most of it, because she had way more house than she used, and Derek was taking the rest. Electronics, weapons, tools that I actually used, useful supplies, and the plants were all getting moved out of this building today.

"I don't really know what's going to happen here," I continued as I went around the room tending to the latter before I carried them downstairs. "There are too many unknowns for that. But I'm pretty sure it will get messy, and probably bloody, and I doubt I'll be coming back to this place afterwards."

The autumn crocus was excited, and had a feeling of frenzied laughter in it. That plant seemed to just kinda be that way, bloodthirsty and exuberant about it. It was much the same as how the sundew upstairs consistently felt like it was smirking after I got laid, and how the mint by the kitchen always felt somehow eager and enthusiastic when I was cooking.

That difference between them, and the way it seemed to be consistent, was part of why I couldn't dismiss this as the product of my own mind. It was hard to think of it as me projecting when the plants didn't even respond to things in the same ways.

It was also why I was making sure to move them out first. Strictly speaking, it would have been smarter to leave most of them in the house for now. I had no doubt this building was being surveiled by one means or another, and that made things delicate right now. If it were too obvious that I was expecting trouble, then it might look suspicious to the person or persons watching me. Leaving at least the plants I could easily replace where they were would probably be smart. But if they had even this rudimentary of mental functions, I couldn't bring myself to do that. It would feel...fundamentally wrong.

"I don't know when things are going to get rolling, either," I continued as I finished watering them. "I'm expecting Silas's person to show up tonight. Reasonably confident she's a vampire, so I'm probably not going to hear from her until after sundown, but beyond that I have no idea. So I figure I'll get everything arranged early just to be safe."

The wolfsbane felt hungry, like it was encouraging me in this plan. I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"I think I'm actually looking forward to it, weirdly enough." I finished with the watering, and started actually getting ready to carry them downstairs. "It's kinda stupid of me given that I'm intentionally putting myself into a dangerous position. But at least it will be *doing* something. I'm kinda tired of waiting for other people to act on my life. Being proactive like this feels like a nice change. I'll let you know how it goes, I guess, assuming I don't die."

The autumn crocus was still laughing. The wolfsbane felt hungry. The skimmia seemed sad to me, and the foxglove was laughing too, though it felt less violent, more just amused.

Yup. Still insane, which I supposed was at least useful confirmation. I sighed, and started carrying my poisons downstairs.

It ended up being closer to midnight than sundown when I got a text from an unfamiliar number. It was very straightforward, to a degree that I had to admire. *Arrived from S. Albany re: K.S. Rendezvous?*

I wasn't entirely sure whether she was being careful because she knew this number might be being surveiled, or she was paranoid as a general policy. Or, hell, maybe she really was this terse and it was just how she communicated. Regardless, the end result was anonymous in the extreme. Even if someone did intercept this text, it was virtually meaningless without context. The S, alone, registered more like "south" than "Silas", and my initials weren't all that rare.

Which, honestly, did a lot to convince me of its authenticity. It fit both with the reputation of paranoia that vampires had, and the impression I had of Silas himself. He was crisp, brisk, professional to the extent that he had a profession. It made sense that someone he sent would exhibit the same traits.

I was similarly terse in my response. I didn't even acknowledge the message, just sent the address of Softened Dreams without explanation. It was the best option I could think of. I'd just had an object lesson in why public parks weren't always the best plan, and I'd be an idiot to try that again so soon. My house wasn't an option, and I was hardly going to invite a vampire into a friend's home.

So, Softened Dreams. I was guessing someone would be spying on it somehow, but I was certain that they wouldn't actually be able to bug the coffeehouse itself. If nothing else, Lacuna literally never left the building, and they were very attentive to it. I had a hard time picturing someone managing to plant a listening device or camera inside the building. So, the hypothetical attacker might know I was here, and might even know I was meeting with someone, but they wouldn't know what was said.

Not ideal. But it would have to do.

Saori came with me, citing a need to keep me from somehow managing to exsanguinate myself while unsupervised. I felt that I had been doing a decent job of that so far, but she was insistent, and I *did* need a ride.

And besides, I had to admit that having her there was comforting, and not just because I liked her company. I wasn't too worried about the person I was here to meet being hostile, and I wasn't expecting another attack so soon after the last. But I'd be an idiot to rely fully on either of those expectations. It was good to have someone I trusted along to watch my back.

Granted, a lot of people would say I was *also* an idiot to trust Saori. I wasn't too concerned, though. The kitsune was a violent lunatic, but she was *my* violent lunatic. She might well get me killed, but it wouldn't be by betrayal.

It was, once again, easy to spot my contact. This time, though, that was because the coffeehouse was almost literally empty. Lacuna was there, of course, and tonight Hope was as well, and the two were sitting at the bar together. Hope was doing something on a laptop, while Lacuna was cuddled up next to her resting their head on her shoulder.

I honestly had no idea how people were scared of Lacuna as a person. When I looked at this, the notion of feeling nervous about them making skin contact with me was absurd. Lacuna was adorable, and around Hope, in particular, it was easy to see that sweetness. The fact that they were also one of the more personally dangerous people I'd ever met really didn't change that.

The only other person in the room was a young woman in the back corner, sitting with her back to the wall watching the door. Or, at least, a young-looking woman. She looked about the same age I did, around that of a freshman in college. Hell, Saori looked about the same age too, and it was utterly unreliable for all three of us. Kitsune lived for centuries, I was pretty sure I'd inherited enough raiju to do the same, and while this vampire might have been in college when she died, that meant very little. My understanding was that vampires sort of…froze in the moment of death, and didn't show much change afterwards.

And she *was* a vampire. Any doubt I'd had of that vanished when we hit the door. With the room so empty, I could feel her aura right away, and that signature was distinctive, a low red-

pulsing hunger and a smell not so far from Maddie's, blood that wasn't quite what blood should be. The scent was distorted in a different way, though, like it had notes of anise mixed into it, or maybe licorice.

"Well," I said. "Here goes nothing, I guess."

"Good luck, let me know if you need anyone set on fire and/or stabbed repeatedly in the liver." Saori was grinning.

I blinked. "Okay, so first off, why the hell would I want to set anyone on fire *here*? And second, only the liver?"

"It does seem unlikely," she admitted. "But I find it's best to keep options open, and livers are very nutritious. Anyway, don't have a lot to contribute to the actual planning, so. C'mon, 'Cloud, let's see if we can get Lacuna to play dice."

The two of them wandered off, presumably to cheat at dice against the exceptionally dangerous cinnamon roll. Honestly, the question really wasn't "will Saori's shenanigans get me killed" so much as "how have they not already gotten *her* killed years ago?"

Meanwhile, I walked over and sat down across the table from the vampire, who had watched this whole byplay without any reaction whatsoever. I was almost sure she'd heard it, given that the room was otherwise silent and what I knew about vampires suggested her hearing was as good as mine. Similarly, I was sure that Hope and Lacuna would hear most of this conversation. I wasn't too worried about that, though.

"Kyoko, I presume?" she said as I sat down. Her smile showed teeth. They looked perfectly normal, not like fangs at all. She had no discernible accent, but I noted that she got my name right, which most Americans didn't.

"Yup. Glad you could make it." I didn't actually thank her. To the best of my knowledge that didn't actually matter; with fae the implicit acknowledgment of debt could get you in trouble, but vampires didn't have the same fixation on debts and bargains. Still, it seemed polite to extend that wariness. Much like how Ekaterina had apologized for her minion deciding to jump me alone, in some ways. In my circles acknowledging someone as dangerous and acknowledging them as competent were...virtually synonymous.

"Lily, a pleasure. Sorry I couldn't be here earlier. Travel arrangements can be...difficult."

Somehow, I had no difficulty believing that. I could imagine the hassle involved in traveling between cities while being absolutely certain that the sun wouldn't reach you.

"How much did Silas tell you about the situation?"

Lily shrugged. "Virtually nothing."

I nodded. "Alright. Well, the short version is that there are several people trying to kill me. I need some external support in trying to find and deal with them. I'm not sure how long it will take; Silas and I agreed on a week at most, but it might be shorter than that. And...yeah, I think that's about the gist of it."

She nodded, once. "Understood. Do you have immediate plans?"

I grinned. “Yes, actually, and you’re rather central to them. Let me explain.”

By the time I finished the second sentence, Lily was staring at me. By the time I finished going through the plan in full detail, she was still staring at me, and she had also gone dead still.

That wasn’t a metaphor. When humans go still, they’re still moving quite a bit. They blink. They breathe. They fidget occasionally, or a muscle twitches. Lily…didn’t. When she went still, she was still like a statue, or like the corpse she in some ways was.

“Silas told me that you were an interesting person,” she said, once I was done. “I see that he remains as fond of understatement as usual.”

I snickered. “But can you do it?”

Lily shrugged. “I mean, I can do the things you’re asking. I can’t promise that it will work, not without knowing a lot more about the attacker. Are you planning to do this tomorrow night?”

“Yup!” I was still grinning, and it felt sincere. “I don’t think tonight is feasible, but I’d rather not wait around, either.”

Lily nodded again, quick and sharp. She’d started breathing again now, which didn’t surprise me. Vampires were fundamentally carnivorous, and passing as human well enough to get close to them was essential to that. I imagined that things like breathing, though unnecessary, were habitual as a hunting adaptation. She wouldn’t stop for long without a good reason.

“Understood. I should scout the area before dawn. Anything else?”

“Nope,” I said cheerfully. “You’ve got my contact information if you need anything.”

Lily left without saying goodbye, and the room was most of the way to empty again. Looking over at the few people who were still present, I saw that Saori had in fact managed to convince Lacuna to play dice. They were sitting on the floor, because it would be awkward for Raincloud to sit at the bar. It was awkward for her to play in the first place, but she found workarounds for things, and she was already learning to cheat despite not even being the one who rolled the dice. Saori truly had a gift for it, and she was an excellent teacher. Lacuna, meanwhile, was sitting on the floor with their head resting against Hope’s leg. Hope was still on her laptop, though she was clearly amused at the game.

Seriously, just…how people worried about Lacuna harming them was beyond me. Outside of a single, easily-avoidable circumstance, they were one of the sweetest people I knew.

I wandered over and sat down at the bar next to them. The bar itself was gorgeous, made entirely of glass with swirls of vivid color shot through it, and to my eyes it shimmered with the magic woven into it to reinforce the glass. Hope’s art collection as a whole was gorgeous, but this piece in particular was one I admired every time I saw it.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” she said as I sat down. Her voice was soft, quiet and with an almost lilting tone. Though she really didn’t need to speak loudly. There were only five people in the room, and given that count included Lacuna and Raincloud, it was *very* quiet in there.

"I know," I sighed. "But it's the only game in town. And even a bad hand in a rigged game is better than sitting here holding aces and eights."

"Wait," Saori interjected. "Why the hell do you know that line? I would have guessed that if anyone here was going to reference a dead man's hand, it would be me."

I paused, then shrugged. "Now that you mention it, I'm actually not sure. Might have been Derek, or someone back in Tokyo or something. I know the reference, but I don't remember where I picked it up."

"I probably should have known better than to use that idiom," Hope said wryly. "But the fact remains that you're putting yourself into a dangerous position, using yourself as bait like this."

I laughed. "I'm already in a dangerous position, Hope. Honestly, I got stupid lucky to get out of the last round alive. Dodging four bullets in a row is...not something I want to rely on pulling off again."

"Hm. I suppose that's fair." Hope was quiet for a moment, and the only sounds were the rattling of dice and the rhythmic tapping of her keyboard. "I've a question, if I may. I've been meaning to ask for a while, but this seems like the right occasion."

I could never quite get a clear sense of Hope. I wasn't sure whether she was human; her signature was hard to parse, in part because Lacuna was always right there when I saw her, draining energy flows away. Sometimes she seemed modern, like she actually was the thirty-five she looked. Other times, much less so. This was one of the other times.

But I did like her, so I just shrugged. "I don't know that I have an answer, but you can ask."

She smiled, though it didn't reach her lips; I could only really see it around her eyes. "We've spoken in the past about your ability to sense the magic around you. Have you put any thought into whether you might also be able to manipulate that energy?"

I laughed. "Can you imagine a world where I hadn't? I've tried quite a few times, and gotten nowhere with it. As far as I can tell, my ability is purely passive. I can do some things most people can't, stronger and faster and so on, but that's not really something I do consciously."

Hope nodded, clearly having expected this answer. She was quiet for a few moments. Saori cackled as she was, improbably, vindicated in her accusation that Lacuna was a liar to claim two fours. Then, casually, Hope asked, "When was the last time you tried?"

I opened my mouth to answer, then paused as I realized I didn't know. It had been a while, I knew that, but I actually wasn't sure when I'd last tried. There had been a bunch of attempts in the first few years after I found out about all this, but they'd failed so completely that I'd given up on the prospect.

How long ago *was* the last time I really tried to intentionally, consciously do anything outside of perception and a certain amount of the raiju stuff? Five years? More?

Hope had clearly expected this, too, and was looking at me with a faint half-smile, though I couldn't quite tell what emotion it expressed. Saori was also looking at me, and I couldn't read *her* expression at all.

"I'm not sure," I said slowly. "I...huh. It's been a while, I think."

"We, all of us I think, are often blind to changes in those close to us," Hope said softly. "And in ourselves. Growth, I find, happens incrementally, like other changes. We don't notice changing, we just find that we are different than we once were. Or in this case, we look around and realize that the things we are capable of are not the same as they once were. We can do things that would be impossible or even unimaginable for the person we once were."

"Huh. I...yeah, that's a good point." I frowned. It was probably an important insight, and as she had said, its applicability to my current situation was obvious. But at the same time, that comment felt...off, somehow. It felt unsettling. It wasn't just the ominous implication of how the same principle applied to other changes, ones less benign than simple growth. It felt like there was something else, like I was overlooking something.

"Food for thought, perhaps," Hope said, while Saori and Raincloud stood up. I wasn't sure whether they could feel my sudden unease, or it just felt like a reasonable time to leave.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "It might be."

I had an uncomfortable feeling of being watched as we left the coffeehouse. Optimistically, I wrote it off as my own neuroticism.

Food for thought. Of a few kinds, and I somehow doubted I was going to like the taste.

Chapter Nineteen

The next day, once everything was arranged and it was starting to approach sunset, I went home, for the first time in a while now. It felt…strange, being there again. It was familiar, but at the same time felt somehow alien. It wasn't just that so much of my stuff had already been moved out; that definitely played a role, but there was also an element that felt more intrinsic. I felt out of place, like I didn't belong here anymore. I'd lived in this house for fifteen years, but tonight I had the same sort of derealization that I sometimes felt in unfamiliar places, like I was moving through a dream.

You can't step in the same river twice. The world looks different depending on where you're standing, and I'd gone a hell of a long way in the past week, though what direction this path led was impossible for me to guess. Regardless, the view from here was different, and my own house now looked like a strange, alien environment.

Raincloud made a soft sound and pressed up against my legs. I started to take my shoes off at the door, then stopped. I might need to run soon, after all, and it wasn't like tracking dirt here mattered anymore.

"Sorry," I said quietly, though I wasn't sure who I might be addressing. The house itself, maybe. It had done a good job for me over the years. It deserved better than what I was expecting to happen soon.

But I supposed that made sense. What someone deserved never really seemed to have much to do with what they got. Why would houses be different?

Upstairs, I wandered around aimlessly, trailing my fingers over the walls, feeling the familiar energy residues left by years of occupation. I rarely noticed my own signature, for the same reason I rarely thought about my own scent or actively noticed my tattoos. It was always there, and so it became background noise. Now, paying attention to it specifically, I could feel how it permeated the space, a sound like wind rustling leaves and a faint silver sheen to everything. It had a musky scent like wolf and leather, with fainter tones of ozone and night-blooming jasmine.

I liked it well enough, which was good given that I was stuck with it; I'd never had any luck intentionally changing how my brain interpreted either magic or ordinary synesthesia. But even to me, that combination smelled a little strange.

It was funny. I hadn't really thought about that lately. I didn't actually *look* at this space much, even the parts that weren't largely disused. It was so familiar I rarely took the time to focus on it. It was amusing to me that only now, when I was making preparations to leave for the last time, was I actually aware of the building I lived in.

Though I supposed that was natural; sometimes it's transience, the awareness that a thing will end, which lends it beauty. That element of Japanese aesthetic philosophy had stuck with me.

I looked at the disused tools and furniture, the keepsakes that I no longer cared enough to keep, all the detritus of half a lifetime. It felt very final, somehow, as though I were walking away from much more than just the things around me.

In a way, I supposed that I was. I wasn't just saying goodbye to the house or to the things I had in it, right now. I was saying goodbye to the life they belonged to. The idleness, solitude, and calm which had characterized my years here weren't coming back to my life. I knew that, with a sort of certainty that left me feeling peaceful and melancholic.

I wasn't sure I'd want those things back. It wasn't far enough in the past for nostalgia to have softened the sharp edges. I was aware that I'd been pretty unhappy for most of those years. But it would have been nice to have the choice.

"I'm sorry," I said to no one again, and then went up to the third floor, the part of the house I'd actually used as a living space. Raincloud, perhaps sensing my mood, was quiet, and she stuck close by my side, for whose comfort I wasn't sure.

I was expecting trouble. Of course I was. I had lived in this house for over a decade, and I hadn't been terribly private about its location. I'd have to be an idiot to think I could come back here without someone knowing and acting on it. More of an idiot than I actually was, even.

The whole point of this exercise was to invite trouble. I was fully expecting trouble to oblige me. I was ready for a variety of possible disasters; I wasn't necessarily prepared to address them, but I was at least mentally braced for them.

I was less ready to open the door to my bedroom and see a stranger casually lying on my bed reading one of my books. She looked…odd, with dusky skin, vaguely Asian features, and what might have been the single most garish outfit I'd ever seen. Seriously, just…a black-and-white tiger print jacket trimmed with hot pink fur, pants almost as green as Saori's new car, and black cowboy boots which were currently crossed at the ankle on my bed. What appeared to be a Día de los Muertos garland of pink and purple plastic skulls, bright red lipstick, and red-rimmed sunglasses really just…this was *impressively* garish, verging on tacky.

I stopped dead at the door and glared at her. Raincloud was standing next to me and growling, and I could feel anger radiating from her, surprisingly intense. "What the fuck are you doing here?" I asked the woman, and felt rather proud of how steady my voice was.

She shouldn't be here. This wasn't because of the wards. There was a reason I'd told Kadir this set didn't need to be good at all; I was fully expecting them to fail tonight. But I had just gotten back less than five minutes ago, and *nobody* should have had a response time that fast. She looked like she'd been here for hours, too. I hadn't heard or smelled her until I opened the door, though now I did, a subtle but distinct floral scent strong enough I definitely should have noticed it earlier. Every part of this was wrong.

"I'm reading," she said, as though that explained everything. Her voice was amused, and while it had no discernible accent, there was something…odd about it. It was like in addition to the

words, I could hear a sort of wild, mad laughter lurking underneath. I was guessing that was the product of my less mundane senses, but it didn't feel like a normal signature, in a way I couldn't explain.

"Cute. And why are you doing it here?"

"Because I wanted to chat," she said, calmly turning the page. "And I was bored waiting for you. You have terrible taste in literature, you know, it took me ages to find something decent."

"And you dress like a blind pimp after a three day bender, but you didn't hear me bringing that up, did you?"

I really hadn't been joking with the satyr who had been stupid enough to break the truce at Softened Dreams. If I had a dollar for every time I'd gotten myself into trouble being a smartass, paying for the wards wouldn't be an issue at all.

She snickered, though, so apparently smartass had been the right tone to take for once. "If you think this is bad, you should see me when I dress up," she said. Her grin was loose and casual, her teeth oh so very white.

"Cute," I repeated. "Well, as we are now chatting. Who are you, and why are you here?"

"Well," she said, "there's a better view of the sunset than from your sitting room. It was lovely tonight, by the way. But as you're already too late for the sunset, why don't you call me Dusk. As to more general location and motives, well. You've been asking such interesting questions, I just *had* to see what it was all about."

Call her Dusk. Which was not, I noticed, the same as actually saying that was who she was. And while telling me that she was here because I was asking questions could be a threat, as could breaking in like this, I didn't really get that vibe from her. Her bearing and general demeanor didn't fit at all, and it didn't really make a lot of sense to me. If she was here to keep me from asking inconvenient questions about the people trying to kill me, the MO of all parties involved suggested I would be dead already. No, the impression I got from Dusk was far more playful than menacing.

Which did not, of course, mean that I was any safer. Raincloud had felt playful when she caught her first mouse last month. She'd been beaming with pride when she dropped it at my feet, while I sat at in my living room with Melissa, and I'd been proud of her as well, happy to see her learning and growing. It was a fond memory.

But I somehow doubted the mouse would agree with me on that.

So, I had to be more entertaining as a metaphorical rather than literal chew toy, because I had an uncomfortable suspicion those were my options. I wasn't sure what Dusk was, but if nothing else she was clearly disturbingly well-informed, and entirely casual about breaking into my house while I was already in a jumpy, trigger-happy mood. And while I couldn't get a clear sense of her signature, that overtone of frenzied laughter in her voice wasn't like anything I'd run into before. I'd be an idiot not to be wary of her.

But she was amused when I was a smartass. So hey, on the bright side, for once I was apparently well suited to a social challenge!

This whole line of thought ran through my head in about three seconds while I stood in the doorway. Then I yawned and stretched my back. "So, on the topic of interesting questions," I said, "did you use some of that waiting time to make snacks?"

"I'm afraid not," Dusk said with an easy grin. "But I can make it up to you with a buffet later."

"Is that so." I hadn't moved further into the room.

"It is so," she confirmed for me. She hadn't moved to sit up.

"And why would you do such a thing as that?" I rested one hand on the back of Raincloud's head, soothing the anxiety and anger I could feel coming from her. It seemed to help some, for both of us.

"Well, as I see it, your problem is that you're asking interesting questions, but the people you're asking don't have interesting answers," Dusk said, still with that loose, easy grin. Her teeth were so white and even that it was a little creepy. "So I thought I'd put you in a room with some people who do."

I stared at her. "That is both extremely vague and lacking any actual information about why you would do this," I said. I managed what I felt was a reasonably steady and deeply unimpressed tone.

"Always with the details," she sighed. "Fine then. I know that you've been asking around about two groups of interest currently active in this city. I will gladly provide you the chance to attend a social event where I know, with certainty, that you can talk to someone who knows quite a bit about both. Granted, convincing them to tell you is on you, which is why I'm only asking a token price."

And there it was. "What price would that be?" I asked.

Dusk smiled at me, and it should have looked comical. She was still lounging in my bed in her pimp-on-parade outfit, after all. It should have looked silly. Instead, I had to fight to keep from shivering, and I didn't know why. "Let's say you'll owe me a favor," she purred. "Of your choosing."

I was ready to decline and take my chances with pissing her off when she got to that last part, and I just paused with my mouth already open. "Of…my choosing," I said after a moment, with the cautious tone of someone who is sure she heard correctly and even more sure it cannot possibly have been what the other person meant to say.

"Indeed." She turned the page in her book—or, well, technically my book—casual as anything.

"So it could be pretty much anything," I said.

"Anything I ask for," she agreed.

"And if you ask for something I don't want to give?"

Dusk grinned at me. “You can say no. For any reason or none at all.”

“And you won’t take any reprisal against me for declining? What’s to keep me from just telling you to piss off every time?” I had, if anything, gotten more nervous now. This sounded *way* too good to be true, and that usually meant it wasn’t.

“I will take no reprisal of any kind, nor instruct or request another to do so,” she agreed. Her voice sounded sweet, with frenzied laughter underneath. “And nothing. If no favor arises that you care to perform within a reasonable period, let’s say five years, I’ll let the debt expire cleanly. But I don’t think you’re the type for that. I’m sure I can find *something* you’re willing to do.”

I continued to stare at her, and I had gone very still now. “That,” I said quietly, “is an extremely light payment.”

“Perhaps, but consider the burden,” Dusk said, still grinning. “Gaining entry to such a social event might be impossible for you to do yourself, but I assure you it presents no great difficulty to me. A token payment for a token effort seems fair, does it not?”

It did not. Or, rather, it seemed fair, but life had taught me that fairness was rare in this world. I also didn’t miss the implicit threat there. An impossible task for me was a trivial effort for her. That implied a lot about our relative power, and I had a sneaking suspicion it wasn’t deception. I was a featherweight in the supernatural world, and I was willing to bet that Dusk…wasn’t.

I wanted to ask what the social event was, but I was sure I wouldn’t get an answer. Still, I had to at least do some basic hedging. “When is this event? And will I have the option of declining to attend if I decide that it’s not necessary?”

“It is on New Year’s Eve, four nights hence. And certainly. Your participation is fully voluntary, and you will be protected by binding truce during the proceedings.” That grin hadn’t gotten any less unsettling.

I was getting screwed. There was basically no doubt of that. This bargain was so close to free that I was *certain* I hadn’t actually seen the price tag yet. But I couldn’t see a trap in the deal itself, not at all. The bargain she was proposing was so simple, and she was putting so little restriction on it, that I wasn’t even sure where you could fit a loophole into it.

“If this is so trivial for you,” I asked, trying to buy time while I thought, “why do you even know I’ve been asking these questions?”

Dusk’s smile was thinner now, and sharper, and it felt more honest. “Because you amused me with your antics this past autumn,” she murmured. “And I assure you, in the unlikely event you live to be as old as I am, you will find amusement becomes hard to find.”

Great. Just *wonderful*. Just like that, she simultaneously revealed her interest, reinforced the implicit threats being made, and sidestepped the actual question neatly. She was aware of my actions in September. And she was amused by them, which was several kinds of unsettling. Among other things, if she was the sort of person who found that amusing to watch, I *really* did not want her to start making her own fun out of my life rather than being content to simply watch.

I was so utterly and profoundly fucked. But there was no way out but through, and I didn't see a way to dodge this one. Besides which, I *did* need that information. Toby might be able to track Ekaterina's gang down, and hopefully after tonight I'd know more about the other attacker. But there was no guarantee of that, and even if it worked, I still didn't know anything about the context or motives in play.

"Deal," I said eventually, quietly and with obvious reluctance.

Dusk smiled at me with no such reluctance. Just perfect white teeth, blood-red lips, and the playfulness of a tiger who has the fawn between her paws. "Bargain struck," she said, drawing it out in a way that sent shivers down my spine.

And then, abruptly, she was gone. I didn't see her move, nor did I feel even a whisper of magic. Even when Lacuna deleted someone, it wasn't this instant or jarring. Dusk quite simply wasn't there now.

I walked over and picked up the book she'd left on the bed. It was, in fact, one of mine; I recognized it after a moment, one of a fair number that I hadn't bothered packing. I took the books that had practical value, but I just did not have much room for sentiment right now. I liked this battered old copy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but not enough to bring it with me when I left.

Dusk had left it open on the bed. I looked at the page she'd left it open to, and saw an underlined passage. It was very faint, the line barely visible, but it was definitely there, and I was sure it hadn't been the last time I saw this book.

I talk about the gods, I am an atheist. But I am an artist too, and therefore a liar. Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth. The only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. Psychologically defined, a symbol. Aesthetically defined, a metaphor.

I read that passage. Then I read it again. Then, with a distinct feeling of trepidation, I found a scrap of paper to use as a bookmark, and went to put the book in my bag.

I was too nervous to eat after that. I knew it would probably be a good idea. I just couldn't make myself do it. I'd already been on edge, but chatting with Dusk had bumped that feeling up several notches in intensity. I was pretty sure if I tried to eat, I'd just end up feeling sick.

I managed to get an energy drink down, though, and some soda that Saori had left in my fridge at some point. So I didn't have to worry about my blood sugar tanking, and the caffeine would help to offset the sleep I definitely wasn't getting tonight. Raincloud, as per usual, was having no such difficulties eating and consumed an impressive amount of steak.

I cleaned the blood out of her fur afterwards, because while Raincloud had many excellent qualities, being a tidy eater was not among them. That done, we went upstairs and sat in the bedroom in the dark. I wasn't going to be sleeping, but the whole point of this exercise was to create an opening so tempting it would bait someone into attacking it. I'd gone to some pretty significant lengths to create a convincing impression of vulnerability. I wasn't going to blow it now by not seeming like I'd gone to bed.

So I sat and looked out the window at the lights of the city. It had a very melancholic feeling to it. Another moment that I wasn't going to have again. I'd picked this house largely for its excellent view of the skyline, and I'd sat and looked out at it more times than I could count. Which I was sure I would do again if I lived long enough, there would always be places from which to look out at the urban night. But I wasn't going to be doing it from quite this vantage ever again.

Raincloud felt melancholic too. I supposed that made sense. She'd spent her whole life to date thinking of this as home. I rested one hand on her back, gently scritching at her neck. The other, I realized, was about six inches from Thorn's hilt. The sword had decided to keep us company, it seemed. Appropriately, I supposed. The mood of the night was distinctly martial in tone.

From Raincloud, I got a sudden question as we waited in the dark. *What did I cost?*

I blinked. "Eh?"

There was a mental impression of the recent past. I was sitting there talking to Dusk, and thinking about how nothing came without a price.

"Ohh," I said. "Right, I get it. Hm."

Part of me wanted to tell her that there was nothing, that her existence hadn't come with a price tag attached. But she was too smart to believe that. It also just wouldn't be true, and I'd never been a fan of the lies-to-children educational model, in any context.

It took me a moment to work out the phrasing, and then I hugged her closer against me. "A bit of an opportunity cost," I said. "In that I've spent time on you. I might have done more to prepare for situations like this one, if I hadn't been putting attention towards you. And there were a few small debts to various experts before I actually met you. But on the whole, very little, and you're definitely worth it."

It had been the right approach. I could tell, because she felt thoughtful for a moment, and then content, and there was a surge of affection that damn near had me in tears. Raincloud wouldn't have believed that she was free; she'd already picked that up from me, that baseline assumption that there was nothing truly, entirely free in this world. But she could believe that she was worth what I'd paid, and for tonight that was enough.

Chapter Twenty

The fire started a little before five in the morning.

I had to admire it, in a way. The timing was very precise. I was a night owl by habit, but by this point even I would normally be starting to wind down for the night and considering sleep. It was late enough that if someone were planning around the intuitive time of midnight, they would be starting to let their guard down. But sunrise came late in December, and it was still solidly dark out, so they had all the advantages associated with that.

Similarly, there was no warning. I just felt a sudden sharpening of Raincloud's attention, and then a moment later I could smell the smoke too, and it was getting stronger rapidly. It smelled like woodsmoke, but I could smell something else under that, just a hint of something less pleasant. An accelerant, I was guessing; gasoline would be the most obvious pick, but there were plenty of hydrocarbons to pick from, and it might be something less mundane than that.

I was on my feet in a couple of seconds, and while there was a spike of anxiety, it was mild. It was hard to fully suppress it; the fear of fire is deeply rooted in the brain, for humans as much as other animals. But this wasn't unexpected, and I was pretty good at keeping that kind of thing controlled.

There were a number of reasonable courses of action open to me, now. I might follow standard procedure for evacuating a burning building, staying low to the floor and moving to the stairs. I might opt to go out the window instead. I also might panic and run around like a chicken with its head cut off, or struggle to wake myself and be stumbling around half-stuporous. Neither of those would be reasonable per se, but they were very understandable all the same.

I didn't do any of those things. I'd actually planned out my response to this ahead of time. I had been expecting an attack, baiting it even. And while fire was hardly the only form that attack might have taken, it was an obvious one. It exploited clear vulnerabilities in the building, didn't require the attacker to get past the wards, and didn't expose the arsonist to much risk. It was, in short, an excellent fit for this assassin's style.

I had thought through my response to this, and I was calm enough to stick to that plan. And so I didn't attempt a calm, orderly evacuation. I didn't even go for one of the windows. Those responses were too obvious, too predictable.

Instead, I grabbed Thorn. The sword's hilt fit into my hand like they were made for each other, as usual, and it felt natural and fluid to undo the restraining strap and draw the blade, like I'd done it a thousand times.

Eager, giddy bloodlust washed over me, completely eclipsing what fear I did feel. I was grinning as I turned to the western wall of my bedroom. Raincloud was already over there; she was, as I had noticed, exceptionally good at keeping her head in a crisis. She knew what to do.

There was no exit over there. The northwestern corner of the building had no windows or doors at all, in fact. This made it the perfect escape route, I felt.

Three long strides and I was there. Thorn swept down in a smooth arc, and the wall didn't slow it down. I couldn't even feel resistance. Thorn could cut steel like pine; actual pine wasn't going to slow it down a bit. Three quick strokes and I had a triangle carved through the exterior wall. The smell of smoke was already thick enough for a human to notice by that point; this fire was growing rapidly.

I dropped Thorn. The sword felt disappointed, and the sudden loss of that giddy feeling was oddly disorienting. But it was indestructible and I needed hands more than weapons right now. I took a deep breath, then scooped Raincloud up into my arms. She felt excited, more than nervous.

Like all my other friends, Raincloud was clearly insane. Though at least in this case that might be Saori's influence rather than mine.

I turned and kicked that roughly triangular section of wall. On its own, that wouldn't have done much of anything. But there wasn't anything actually holding that section in place right now except inertia; all of its connections to the rest of the house had been cut. And I was much, much stronger than I looked. That chunk of wall went flying, far enough that when we followed it out a moment later I wasn't going to land on it.

Falling from the third story of a building is not a pleasant experience. It's around the point where falls start being lethal, in fact. The snow helped quite a bit, and I was good at falling, but even so, this was a nasty one.

I managed a passable front roll, cushioning the impact for Raincloud; I wasn't sure her body was up to this insanity, and I was trying to keep her as safe as possible. Which admittedly wasn't saying much, I was aware. I hadn't even wanted her to be here for this, but it would have looked suspicious, and more to the point, she had refused the suggestion rather vehemently. Besides which, I knew she wouldn't be truly safe as long as I was in her life, and neither of us was willing to walk away.

So, I couldn't really protect her, but I did what I could. I took most of the force of the fall myself, cushioning her landing with my body. I ended up flat on my back and a little dazed, and everything felt slow, but at the moment that included me. She squirmed out of my arms and bolted. I couldn't see which direction she ran.

Behind me, the building was burning down, and rapidly. There was definitely an accelerant involved, and while I was far from an expert, I thought it was probably a strong one. It had been, at most, a minute since I first smelled smoke, and the building was already engulfed in flames.

I didn't take the time to look more closely than that. As soon as I had my wits back enough to move, I was. It only took me a couple seconds to get myself back in motion, rolling to the side and then standing up again. I felt this was pretty good, all things considered.

The fact that I saw the bear trap in time not to step in it, then, was just extra credit. It was subtle, but the metal glinted in the firelight, and I was paying attention. Staked out under one of the windows, it looked like, and I doubted it was the only one.

I was feeling pretty good about my decision not to use conventional emergency exits right about now.

I started running, trying to keep myself low to the ground. I wanted to present the lowest profile I could, in case the assassin wasn't satisfied to count on the fire doing the job. I felt vindicated in this decision too, about two seconds later when the shooting started. It was louder than last time, and the shots were more tightly spaced. The shooter was not, it seemed, worried about drawing attention. Though to be fair, it wasn't like they could draw much more than the fire already would.

A distant, dissociated part of me wondered whether I was going to rack up more civilian casualties on my collateral damage score here. It seemed likely. The fire was already starting to spread, and while the neighboring houses probably weren't doused with accelerant, that didn't necessarily matter much. People would be asleep right now, and I doubted they would wake up, figure out what was going on, and evacuate quickly and calmly. The fire department had basically no chance of getting this out quickly, too. That street was barely accessible under ideal circumstances. In the middle of the night with snow and ice a factor? Not going to happen.

That dissociated part of me took the time to be upset about that. I still didn't exactly feel responsible for it; I hadn't been the one to strike the match tonight, after all. But I had *known* that I was putting people into the line of fire this time, and there was a little guilt about that. Even if Kadir hadn't recommended as much, I would have wanted to avoid neighbors where I lived next. People getting hurt or killed because they had the bad luck to live near me was not something I wanted to have happen again.

The rest of me was too busy making sure I would live that long to care. I ran north, down the hill at top speed. I could hear more gunshots; I wasn't sure where the bullets were hitting, but that meant they weren't hitting *me*, so I was okay with that.

That hill really was a nasty one. Steep, and the sun hit it just enough that it was prone to turn the snow into slush and ice. The good news was, steep and slick meant top speed downhill was pretty damn fast. They didn't make it a fun descent at all, though. It was dark, too, there weren't streetlights on this street and the sun was nowhere near risen. My eyes were better in the dark than a human pair, but there were limits to that.

Bottom line was, I got down fast as hell, but the process involved several falls. Most I was able to make into front rolls, just from the momentum, though my judo teacher would have been deeply disappointed in my form. It probably would have been better if I could have maintained better posture; I lost forward momentum like this, and it made them nastier than they should have been. That distant, dissociated part of me realized this and added practicing my falls to the to-do list. The remainder had just taken a double side fall at the bottom of the hill, and was currently winded as hell.

I didn't hear any more gunshots, though, so I was guessing I was safeish. I was almost sure I'd broken the shooter's line of sight, just based on geography, and I could already see people

starting to gather in response to the fire. For them to follow me and line up another shot would take time, and it would risk detection. It wasn't their style.

I didn't want to count on that, though. I waited long enough to get my breath back, then stood up with a wince. I hadn't seriously injured myself, but I'd have some bruises tomorrow. Today, I supposed; it was well past midnight.

Raincloud was there by that point. She was completely uninjured, and I could feel her giggling. Apparently, my descent had looked pretty damn funny from the outside.

"C'mon," I said wearily, and started walking. Some of the people who had started to gather gave me odd looks, which I supposed made sense. I'd just sprinted away from a serious fire, and it didn't take a genius to figure out I was associated with it in one way or another.

But they didn't stop me, and I didn't have enough skin visible for anyone to identify me. Just an Asian girl in a hoodie and gloves, average in height and build, with a dog. That could describe so many people in this city it was laughable.

At the main street just ahead, I took a second to orient myself, then turned and started walking. I wasn't moving fast now. I was pretty sure that I was in the clear.

Less than a block later, Saori stepped out of an alley next to me, perfectly casual. "That was fun," she said, grinning.

I sighed. These people were lunatics. "Did you get anything?"

"Not a bit." She was still grinning. "There was definitely someone there, but they had a hell of a veil going. I didn't even get a glimpse of them. Pretty sure they saw me, too."

I nodded. About what I'd expected. "Perfect," I said. "You want to get some dinner? There's a diner nearby that should be open. Yes, you can get something, we've talked with them about this before." This last was directed towards Raincloud, who was excited at the prospect.

I rolled my eyes and kept walking.

Eating rarely took long for us, and there was plenty of time left afterwards. We ended up spending it in Saori's car, driving around aimlessly. I had nowhere in particular to go right now, and I had to admit that it would shake any tail I could think of. Not so much because Saori was trying as because nobody could follow her as she wove through traffic; even in the middle of the night, trying to keep up would be a nightmare for any mortal driver. I wasn't sure how she didn't get in wrecks daily, and was confident at this point that I never would be.

"Okay," I said after a while. "I have to ask. Is this Ice Nine Kills?"

"Yep!" She was grinning. I couldn't see it, because no way in hell was I opening my eyes right now, but I could hear it in her voice.

"Singing about a serial killer."

"It's their thing," she agreed brightly. "This one is *American Psycho,* if you were curious."

"Right, but why is there a ska section?"

The kitsune responded by turning up the volume. I listened to the singer declaring himself to be walking on sunshine over a mix of aggressive metal and aggressively cheerful trumpets, and just shook my head.

It took longer than I expected. It was almost dawn, and I was starting to worry. But my phone did eventually ring, and Saori turned the cello metal down enough to listen in.

"Hi! Did you find anyone worth murdering?" I asked brightly.

To her credit, or possibly detriment, Lily didn't stumble at all at that greeting. "Yes," the vampire said, as brisk and professional as when I'd talked with her before. "I don't have time for a full report before dawn. I got location, mode of travel, some information about weaponry, an estimate of security, estimate of target identity, and a rough blueprint of the target's headquarters. Full report tonight, but I wanted to confirm the basic success of the operation now."

"I appreciate it," I said. "Good work, I'll talk to you tonight."

Lily hung up without further comment. Not one for long goodbyes, apparently. Although to be fair, she might just be in a hurry. I imagined that maintaining a sanctum where she could be confident in her safety through the day, in a city she didn't know well, had to be tricky. The vampire might very well just be in a rush to arrange that before the sun rose and she died for the day.

I hadn't offered to help. Even if I'd had somewhere suitable available I wouldn't have. It wasn't even because she was dangerous, though I had no doubt that she was. Kinda the opposite, really. Vampires were, as I understood it, deeply vulnerable during the daytime. It wasn't just that the sun was dangerous to them, though it was, extremely so. She wouldn't even be conscious. Some more powerful vampires were probably able to stay active in the daytime, but I didn't get the impression that Lily was nearly that strong. So, that offer would basically be "Hi do you want to be completely helpless around a total stranger?", and even offering that felt rude.

"That's a pretty good job on recon," Saori commented.

"Yeah. I figured she'd get something, but I wasn't expecting that much." I was grinning, too wide and feral. Saori was grinning too. Hell, even Raincloud was grinning when I risked a glance at her. Canine faces weren't suited to smiles as such, and it mostly made her look like she was ready to bite someone. But given present company, that just made her fit right in.

How did you know she would find something? Raincloud asked me.

I shrugged, mentally. In this case talking out loud felt ruder than not including Saori in the conversation. And she was fiddling with the music anyway. *I wasn't totally sure, but I was confident. As to why, do you remember the conversation with Capinera, where we talked about who had what advantages?* She did, so I continued. *One of the biggest ones she identified was specificity, because the attacker only has to prepare for the target. But like a lot of advantages, it comes with its own problems.*

I could feel a sense of dawning realization in her. *They wouldn't have prepared for Lily, then.*

No. Why would they? My association with Silas started with a minor event that wasn't publicly associated with me, and then I had no contact until now. They have no reason to expect a vampire to be involved.

But you asked Saori to watch, too. Raincloud felt interested, in almost the way I associated with hunting, the same sort of eager curiosity.

I scritched her ears, and she wriggled to give me a better angle. *Yes. But my association with her is known. The bomb proved that. And this attacker seems very competent, so I assume they would be ready for a kitsune. But hiding from a vampire is a very different prospect. They have a different set of senses, and my understanding is they're largely immune to mental magic, just too far removed from living beings for it to work.*

So Saori was bait, too. The interest had, I thought, sharpened further. *A watcher they expected, so that they wouldn't look for another.*

Sentence structure *and* tactical thinking patterns. Add in the generalized lunacy and she was starting to fit right in with the rest of my friends. Something about that felt sad to me, for reasons I couldn't put words to.

Pretty much. I've been being pretty cautious so far, and a sudden change of behavior might have tipped them off. The wards were mostly for the same reason, so it looked believable that I'd think I was safe there. On which note, you didn't seem anxious at all. Not at Softened Dreams, and not tonight. Why's that?

Raincloud felt vaguely smug. *At the coffeehouse, I saw enough of your reaction to know I was safe. Tonight I could tell you hadn't been injured, and nobody was shooting at me, so why would I be scared? And besides, you look* hilarious *falling down a hill.* She was still grinning, and I sighed. Yup, fitting *right* in.

Telepathy was so fast that this whole conversational byplay barely took long enough to be a noticeable break in conversation. I wasn't sure I'd ever really get used to that; simultaneously managing two modes of communication at such different speeds was strangely disorienting.

"Thanks again, by the way," I said to Saori. I had to almost shout to be heard over the music, which had shifted to an uptempo Japanese Vocaloid song cheerfully describing some of the most fucked up, unhinged violent imagery I could recall hearing in a song. Top ten, I thought, which didn't sound impressive, but considering present company was still pretty good.

"No problem," Saori replied, in much the same voice as the singer. "This asshole blew up my car. I am *definitely* on board with tracking them down and exsanguinating them."

"Not threatening immolation this time?"

"Nah, I don't want to pigeonhole myself. Pyromania is fun and all, but I don't want to get into a rut. Gotta find room for some dacnomania too."

"Dacnomania," I repeated.

"Yup!"

It was a bad idea. I *knew* it was a bad idea. But I couldn't resist. "What the fuck is dacnomania?"

"Italian word for a compulsive urge to bite people." Saori sounded smug. She usually did when she got me to contemplate questions like "why do Italians have a word for that?"

"Someday," I sighed. "Someday, maybe I will learn not to ask questions when I don't want the answers. So where are you driving, anyway?"

"Some random parking lot. I think there's one on that hill."

"Right," I said dryly. "On that hill, because that narrows things down so much in this damn city. Why are you driving to a parking lot?"

"Because I'm tired and want to sleep?"

That was enough to get me to actually open my eyes and look at her. Fortunately, she wasn't going around a corner at the time. Watching *that* had a tendency to make people feel ill without any weird medical conditions being required. "Okay, but why do you want to sleep in a parking lot? You have a *house*."

"Sure," Saori agreed. "But I haven't cuddled anyone to sleep in this car yet. How would you even know it's mine?" There were at *least* five layers of innuendo in that, I was pretty sure, even if I could only spot two or three. Her tone was too self-satisfied for fewer.

I considered that, and then shrugged. "Okay, yeah, that's fair."

"Besides," the kitsune continued brightly. "The stereo system in this baby's pretty good. So 'Cloud gets better lullabies this way."

Having heard what Saori considered a good lullaby, I shuddered. Saori and Raincloud *both* chortled at me, in sync, which I felt was slightly unfair.

Surprisingly, though, my sleep was only marginally worse than usual. Which, considering my usual sleep quality, was still pretty bad. But considering that I was sprawled in the back seat of a car in a pile involving at *least* three more legs than the manufacturer had ever planned on while listening to a playlist featuring a lot of grindcore and some really surreal minimalist noise music, I was willing to call it a win.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next day opened so peacefully that it was a little creepy. I woke up in the back seat of an appallingly green car with a fox curled up on my chest and a dog sprawled over my legs, both still fast asleep. The location was strange enough that I was momentarily disoriented and unsure where I was, but the company was familiar enough that there was no real anxiety in it.

We often ended up in roughly this circumstance. Of the three of us, only Raincloud could really be said to sleep well. But Saori's issues were mostly to do with difficulty falling asleep to begin with and nightmares once she had. Duration was usually decent for her, and for me it just…wasn't. I was almost always the first to wake up, and given that all three of us were fond of each other and tactile in how we expressed affection, I often did so like this. Saori slept in fur as often as not, and she tended to end up lying on top of me regardless of how we were arranged when she went to sleep, so when we slept together, this was how I woke up.

I stayed where I was. It felt…nice. I wasn't nearly as touch-starved as I used to be, but the change was recent enough that the novelty hadn't yet worn off. And I had nothing pressing to take care of right now, nothing that couldn't wait. So I stayed right where I was, stroking Saori's fur and drifting through thoughts without trying to fit them into words or assemble linear reason out of them. This sort of idle, quiet thought wasn't the same as sleep, but it was a passable substitute.

Time slipped past me, uncounted and unremarked, full of music just consonant enough to merit the term. It was, if anything, probably more restorative than actually sleeping more would have been. My dreams were generally nowhere near this nice. Caffeine could compensate for a deficit in sleep; it did much less to make up for loneliness.

People rarely understood how much that mattered.

It was a longer wait than most mornings; even for me, this wasn't much sleep. We'd been up well past dawn, and I woke up when it was barely past noon. I spent quite a while dozing like that before Saori woke up.

When she did, it was in the same way she always did. Physically, it was slow, languid and relaxed. She stretched, yawned, nuzzled at me. But this belied an underlying mental alertness. There was no uncertainty, no haziness or drowsiness. She was wide awake, all at once, alert and oriented before she opened her eyes.

We didn't talk about our dreams much. I didn't need anyone else's nightmares, and mine were…not unlike Saori's exploits, in a way. People generally only had to ask about them a few times to know that they didn't want to know. So I didn't know, in any detail, what featured in Saori's nightmares. But I knew that she used to run with a pretty bad crowd, doing some pretty fucked up things. I knew she felt weird and uncomfortable about showing any kind of vulnerability, and that her family was about as functional as mine.

And I knew that she always woke up like this. By the time she moved *at all*, even to open her eyes, she was already alert and oriented to her environment. I was pretty sure that was a learned trait, and I was pretty sure she'd learned it the hard way.

It would be nice, I reflected, if the nightmares stopped when we woke up.

Today was better, though. She yawned, uncurled herself, and stretched. Then she shifted into skin, and suddenly instead of a fox, I had Saori sprawled over me in her human form. As most humans were significantly larger than a fox, this made the back seat of the car even more cramped. She was grinning at me with her face about four inches from mine.

"Hi," she said. Her voice, in combination with the wriggling, had Raincloud waking up too, though she was significantly slower to do so. "Did we miss anything exciting?"

"Your sleep playlist dipped into dubstep mariachi music," I said after a moment. "But that's about it."

"Cool. Let's go get some caffeine."

That eerily peaceful feeling lingered through the early afternoon. There were no assassination attempts, no calls. There was no sign of Dusk, and no indications of what social event she had meant. Nothing.

I had told Saori about her. It was with some reluctance; I was feeling uncertain, overwhelmed and unsure of who to trust, and there had been a real temptation to keep this development to myself. And if I was being honest, I didn't trust Saori, not unconditionally. I didn't *think* the kitsune would betray me, but my assessment of trustworthiness was not exactly famous for its accuracy. And I certainly couldn't deny that there were elements of her behavior that disturbed me.

But at the end of the day, I had to trust *someone* or I would die in short order. I just didn't have the personal skills or resources to survive this situation on my own, to say nothing of the toll it would take on my own sanity to try. And while Saori was a violent lunatic, she was *my* violent lunatic. The kitsune had not, at any point, directed real malice or threat towards me, and had seemed genuinely fond of me pretty much since day one.

Besides, there was nothing particularly secret about it. All I really knew after talking with Dusk, honestly, was that there was someone who seemed disturbingly powerful fucking with me, and she had spectacularly bad taste in fashion. The former was hardly news, and Saori had no more idea what it meant than I did; the latter got a lovely golden-fire laugh, but that was about it.

Regardless, there was no sign of her. And we obviously wouldn't hear back from Lily until after dark, so the afternoon was largely ours to spend as we pleased. Saori didn't want to stay in one place, saying that it was smarter to keep moving with someone hunting me. I suspected her reasoning also included a fair bit of amusement at subjecting me to more time in a lime-green nightmare taking corners at implausible speeds and blasting bizarre music at anyone remotely close to us. But that didn't make her stated reason less valid, and I didn't argue.

We wrapped up with what might be considered an early dinner or very late breakfast, depending on how you looked at it, in a very Polish restaurant I hadn't been to before. Raincloud wasn't allowed in, but while the staff weren't willing to actually let a dog inside, Saori had no difficulty convincing them to seat us next to an unlocked window and quietly look the other way as to who might be sitting outside it.

Saori says she has charisma. Personally, I tended to think it was more that people were either too fascinated to stand in the way of her insanity or too disturbed to keep questioning her about it. But regardless, the effect was much the same, and looking past Saori out the window I could see Raincloud right outside. She, in turn, appeared to be watching the start of the sunset.

"So how much of a problem is this going to be for you?" Saori asked me eventually, through a sausage whose constituency I was not prepared to speculate upon.

"Uh. The idea of only one 'this' causing me problems right now seems quaint at best," I said.

"Having your house burnt down," the kitsune clarified.

"Ohh. Actually probably not much of one," I said. I shrugged. "It was insured. And strictly speaking it wasn't mine; it was VNC that had the title to the property. If there's anyone who can get an insurance claim through even though it was arson, it's them. I wouldn't be surprised if they manage to turn a profit for me in the process. Should be able to find another place."

"That's something, then." She was quiet for a few minutes, then asked, "Do you think you'll be alright if I go do something tonight?"

"You're really into asking questions I have no way of answering tonight, huh?" I asked dryly. "It will depend on who tries to kill me how. Why?"

"Well," Saori said, "if you're right about Ekaterina being a maenad, I've got a friend who probably knows her. I was able to get into contact with her, and she's in town tonight. Thought I might go ask her some questions."

"Ah," I said. "And bringing a stranger along would cause issues."

"Actually, not this time. It's just that we usually meet up over a game of cards. And if the first time Camellia meets you is in a game of poker, trust me, she will *never* respect you."

I sighed. Then, at a sudden mental prompt, sighed further. "Raincloud wants to know if she can come along," I said wearily.

Saori laughed like a hyena made of fire. "Why the hell not," she said.

Great. I wasn't sure what was worse: That my dog had been deemed more capable of making a strong first impression on seedy supernatural creatures than I was, or that they were probably right.

Food was eaten. Saori licked my teeth clean before she left, and told me that if I died while she was gone she was going to learn necromancy so she could drag my ghost back and beat the shit

out of it. I was pretty sure that wasn't how things worked, but in its own strange, spectacularly dysfunctional way it was quite sweet of her to say.

They left, Raincloud laughing her head off at me inside of mine, and I was left alone to watch the last of the sunset.

I went to wash my hands after eating. When I got back to the table, I found something waiting for me. The waiter had left the check, but there was a second, larger piece of paper next to it.

With a distinct feeling of trepidation, I reached for it. Not paper, I noticed, but rather vellum. I had to admit a certain curiosity about that. Who actually writes on *vellum* these days?

I got my answer about five seconds later, and trepidation immediately shot up to dread. It read:

You are cordially invited
To attend a Gathering and Festival of
The Courts of the Sidhe
Seelie and Unseelie alike
And to bring one Escort of your choosing
With the compliments of
Our most Gracious Host
The Lady Nephele
To mark the Beginning
of the New Year to come

I stared. I stared some more. The words remained stubbornly the same, gorgeous calligraphy with illumination and a subtle, abstract watermark. It would not have looked out of place in an exhibit showcasing the finest examples of medieval calligraphy as an art form.

I was fucked. So utterly, *unbelievably* fucked.

It wasn't even just that I'd been invited to a high-society party with the Sidhe Courts. I mean, I was, and that was more than enough to inspire a feeling of imminent doom. But even more than that, it was the context that scared me. It was the *implications.*

Dusk had said that securing entrance to this "social event" was an impossible task for me. I fully believed that; the notion of me even being able to find someone important enough to be invited and attend as their escort was ludicrous. She had also said that it represented a trivial effort for her, and now that I knew what event she actually meant, that was *terrifying* to think about.

And while she might have been lying, I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach saying otherwise. It really was barely an effort at all for her. Trivial. Arranging an invitation to a party being thrown by the most personally and politically powerful faeries there were was a *trivial* action for her.

And I owed her a favor. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter that I had so much flexibility when it came to repaying that. Even if the favor itself turned out to be completely harmless, and I did not believe for an instant that would be the case, the simple fact that I had her attention and a credit-debt relationship with her was terrifying. There just weren't that many people who could secure an invitation like this, and broadly speaking, they were the sort of people you wanted as little to do with as possible. This was frightening in an entirely different way than the assassination attempts. The phrase "fate worse than death" existed for a *reason*.

I just sat at the table staring at the piece of vellum in front of me for almost half an hour. I was busy contemplating the mistakes and life choices that had led me here. Those thoughts were bleak enough that when, shortly after sunset, I got a call from a vampire to set up her debrief about someone who was trying to kill me, it felt like a pleasant reprieve.

Lily had suggested a cheap hotel as a meeting place. I had no reason to argue; it was easy, anonymous, and close enough that I could suck it up and take a bus there without much difficulty.

When I got there, I found that it was a very cheap hotel indeed, really more of a motel and about as trashy as such places got. I found the right room, knocked to make it less likely I'd get shot in the face by a paranoid vampire, and then opened the door.

The door was neither locked nor trapped, I didn't get shot, and the paranoid vampire was actually there. It was quite the unexpected hat trick, really.

"Okay," I said. "How'd it go?"

Lily shrugged. "Reasonably well. I saw and tracked the attacker; he had a good veil up, but was insufficiently attentive to both scent and sound. He was able to maintain it while shooting, though, which suggests fair discipline. I was able to follow him back to what seems to be a headquarters of some kind, and I don't believe he was aware of my presence."

"That sounds like a win to me, great job. What can you tell me about him?"

"He's cautious," she said after a moment's thought. "He spread the accelerant, not one I recognize, then set up a fuse and retreated a fair distance before actually igniting it. Firearm was a heavy rifle, also not a make I recognize; not as large a calibre as a .50 BMG, I'm pretty sure, but close. As soon as the angle was bad and he would have to move to keep shooting at you, he left, kept the veil up as he did. He went about four blocks, then got into a car; it was already running, which suggests an accomplice to me, but they were already gone if so."

"Wait a second," I said. "He had a car?"

"Yes. Generic SUV. Looked like a rental if I had to guess. No plates."

"Sure, whatever. You managed to tail him on foot?" I was impressed by that, and more than a little spooked. Lily keeping up with someone who had a car and no traffic to speak of was…eerie to think about.

It didn't help that she just smiled in reply. Her teeth looked very white, and otherwise very normal, not like fangs at all.

I sighed. “Okay. Anyway. He got in a car, what happened next?”

“He drove west-northwest at a fair pace for roughly six miles. He dropped the veil while driving, and did not do any of the evasive driving I would expect of someone attempting to lose a tail.”

“Six miles,” I said, thinking through where that would be. Then, abruptly, I broke down laughing.

Lily gave me an odd look. “I take it you’re familiar with this?”

“Yes,” I said, still a little breathless. “Yes, I am. He’s based out of fucking *Fairywood*?” I sounded incredulous, because I was. Fairywood was...an excellent case study in urban collapse. There was an ambitious highway started that direction, west of the city, in the sixties and seventies when the economy seemed so good and optimism was running high. It never got finished, and now sits there as a few fragments of road, called the Highway to Nowhere by locals.

That was pretty much how the rest of Fairywood went, too. By now it was more urban prairie than actual city, with only a few warehouses and industrial plants still functioning in most of the neighborhood. There were a few residential areas, but by and large, it was almost abandoned aside from those industrial parks, and even those were sparse and barely used. Maddie said that Fairywood was where dreams went to die. I couldn’t really contest that description.

Lily paused then, and while she didn’t actually laugh, I got a strong impression of amusement all the same. Maybe between being undead and being reserved by nature, laughter just wasn’t something she did. “This does not surprise me,” she said after that momentary pause. “Because I’m almost certain he’s one of the Sidhe.”

My laughter had been dying down. But I broke out into giggles again at that, and they were only slightly hysterical. The Sidhe assassin was based out of Fairywood. Of fucking course he was.

“He went to a mansion at that point. East of the mansion, there’s a large parking lot. The nearest neighbor is on the other side of the lot, a warehouse complex that looks to be abandoned,” the vampire continued, once I’d gotten myself back under a semblance of control. “Probably a shipping depot, still has shipping containers around the building. The other three sides of the mansion face directly onto wooded hills; I don’t believe there’s road access except through that lot, and there’s a light screen of trees between the lot and the mansion. The building is warded, and the magic feels fae to me, as did the assassin himself. I wasn’t able to get inside.”

“No, that’s fine,” I said. “Honestly I’d be disappointed if you’d tried, because that would be a *really* stupid risk.”

Her lips twitched into another smile, this one thinner, more predatory, and more honest. “Tend to agree. But I can tell you he’s definitely not working alone. I could hear at least eight targets moving around inside. The wards are decently strong, but nothing beyond what I would expect. I was able to roughly estimate the building’s layout, but I don’t know how accurate that estimate is; it’s not listed in any official records, so I couldn’t get the actual blueprint for it.”

"That's fine. This is still pretty damn impressive." I hadn't been expecting to get nearly this level of detail from this gambit. Right about now, I was feeling pretty damn glad I'd cashed that favor in, because I wasn't sure I'd have been able to track them down without it. Not if his veil was good enough to get past Saori with ease.

"There's a reason Silas sent me."

"Why's that?" I asked. "Just out of curiosity. I really wasn't sure what to expect when I called him."

Lily looked at me for a few moments. I got the distinct impression that she was deciding how honest to be in her answer. Eventually, the vampire said, "I'm sort of a security consultant. I was born right as computers were becoming prevalent, you see. First generation to grow up using them."

She was my age, then, or maybe slightly older. Given that she also looked the same age I did, she'd probably been dead longer than she'd been alive now.

"Silas was looking for someone in that age band?" I asked.

"Mm, yes and no." Lily shrugged. "Silas is smart enough to see which way the wind is blowing. He knew that this technology was going to have a huge impact on the world. He also knew that he lacked the technical knowledge to use it effectively. He wanted someone with technical familiarity, but who had little attachment to the world, whose disappearance wouldn't draw much attention. An actual networking researcher was out of the question."

"Ahh," I said. "But, say, a college student who knew how computers worked wouldn't draw that kind of attention."

"No. It was straightforward from there. He offered me power and immortality in trade for a decade of service." She shrugged again. "I had no reason to leave after that term expired."

I nodded. "Yeah, makes sense. Would you do it again if you had the choice?"

"Yes," Lily said, with an immediacy and certainty that suggested she'd considered the question before and had no doubt about the answer. "Vampirism has its drawbacks, but I'm well suited to it. Another factor in why I was selected, I expect. Silas is too smart to antagonize the person telling him how his security and hunting patterns need updated."

I snorted. "Yeah. If he hadn't figured out that pissing off the Praetorian Guard is a bad idea by now I'd be deeply curious how he's survived this long." I paused. "Well. Existed. You know what I mean."

Her lips twitched again, a faint, thin smile that faded almost immediately. I could feel the amusement in her aura as well, a stronger pulse of crimson, a faint sound like the putting my ear to a cup and listening to my own pulse. "I do. Language gets odd sometimes. In any case, that's the gist of it."

"I am glad to know you better," I said, carefully avoiding actual thanks, and just as carefully keeping threat out of my tone. I was pretty sure direct thanks weren't dangerous with vampires, but it seemed courteous to treat her with that sort of caution, respectful somehow. And it was a

good habit to build, given I was apparently about to be meeting a whole lot of Sidhe and it was *extremely* dangerous to say thank you to the wrong fae. “Will you be going back to New York now?”

“Silas would be furious if I cut this short,” Lily said. “You bargained for up to a week. I’ll be in Pittsburgh for the remainder of that week. If you need something let me know; if not I’ll wait and then leave.”

Huh. I’d had Silas pegged as the type to see paying his debts as a matter of personal honor, rather than a transaction to be optimized. I wouldn’t have guessed it extended quite this far, though. Lily seemed to think he’d be actively upset with her unless she not only did what I’d asked, but did the *maximum* amount that applied, the most generous interpretation of what he’d promised me. That was…interesting.

I was starting to respect Silas more. He’d been this responsive to a cold call about a favor from almost twenty years ago, a debt he’d voluntarily taken on because of something I didn’t even mean to do. It wasn’t like I had any leverage on him, either; I was a nobody, irrelevant to the major players of the world. He was still this concerned with repaying that debt, and that was impressive to me. I could respect that sense of honor and desire to balance the scales.

I wasn’t sure what it said about me that I was thinking about how much I could respect a vampire. Hell, Lily seemed actually pretty likable; she was friendly, intelligent, and seemed like an interesting person. I could see myself spending time with her for pleasure, and given that she was an undead monster who perpetuated her unnatural existence by consuming people’s life force, that felt a little…odd.

But it was where we were. So I just grinned at her, and said, “Actually, do you think you could give me a ride?”

Lily said yes. She did not lock the motel door behind her; she did not look back. I followed, pretended I didn’t see Thorn in the passenger footwell of her car, and went to talk to an entirely different kind of monster that I called my friend.

Chapter Twenty-Two

There was no show at the Blackbird Cabaret tonight. But I could, just barely, make out light behind the blackout curtains in back, so I was pretty sure Capinera was there.

I was still somewhat nervous as I approached the building. I could feel the power woven into it like a thin, humming spiderweb I was brushing my way through. Those wards were pretty damn strong, for me to feel them from the parking lot. When the Blackbird Cabaret closed and locked its doors for the night, you'd be well-advised to take it seriously.

I had never asked Capinera what the wards would do to someone dumb enough to try and break in. Maybe I was afraid of what the answer might be. But I was guessing that whatever the answer *was*, it ended with dead people in the parking lot.

Capinera was a sweetheart, but at the end of the day, she spent much of her life as an assassin among the Midnight Court. That, alone, would be enough to have me a little nervous about walking up and ringing the doorbell.

It felt like I was standing there for a very long time. I was alone; Lily had dropped me a few blocks away, because I was hardly bringing a vampire here unannounced. Saori and Raincloud were still out being suave criminals who knew how to cheat at cards, quite unlike myself. I had Thorn with me, though, holding it loosely in my left hand. I wasn't sure why I was carrying it when I could have left it in Lily's car just as easily, but it felt right.

Eventually, I heard movement inside. There were quick, light footsteps coming up to the door. Then a pause. The pause, too, felt like it went on longer than I was comfortable with.

But eventually I heard locks start disengaging, and felt some of that humming tension fade as she lowered the wards. And then, finally, the door opened a crack, still with a pair of heavy chains keeping it to a crack. Capinera looked out at me, and she was holding her sword in much the same way I was Thorn, which felt strangely comical to me.

"Kyoko? What's up?"

"I need…I don't know. Someone to tell me just how badly I've screwed up, I suppose."

Concern was obvious in her features, and she closed the door just long enough to undo the chains before she was waving me inside. "Come in. What's going on?"

I sighed. "Some really…strange…person made a deal with me. The favor she asked for as payment seemed suspiciously trivial, and I don't like the situation at all, but I didn't see a lot of options. And now that I've seen what she was offering I like it even less."

Capinera sighed, soft and slow. "Let me get the door," she said, and turned to do so. I went and sat on the stage, because right now the idea of standing felt far too tiring. When she joined me, rather than say anything, I just handed her the invitation.

She read through it, twice, and then handed it back. "Well then," she said, in a voice that I couldn't read at all. "You don't do trouble by halves, do you?"

I laughed. “No. Not really. She said she would get me into a social event where I could find people who know about the situation I’m in. Asked for virtually nothing in return, and I *really* don’t like that, it feels deeply suspect to me. But I didn’t see a way around it that wouldn’t make things even worse. That was last night. Tonight I found *that* just sitting on the table. No message, nothing, just the invitation.”

“That’s…impressive.” Capinera looked at the sheet of vellum in my hands with the same wary respect she might accord a pit viper. “You don’t know who she was, I take it.”

I shook my head. “Nope, not really. Said to call her Dusk but I’m quite sure that’s not her name.”

“Unsurprising. But you can make some inferences, I’m sure. If nothing else, being able to procure this is…remarkable.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Got that impression. Can you walk me through what it means, keeping in mind that I have zero previous experience with the Courts?”

“Certainly. So, begin with the fact that it specifies both Courts being in attendance.”

“I noticed,” I said. “And it surprised me, seeing as they’re at war.” The Courts of the Sidhe had been at war…if not forever, close enough that from where I was sitting it didn’t make much difference.

“Mm. Yes, but it’s in some ways not so different from my father and I. They are at war, and the war can be a bloody one. But it can also sometimes be rather *pro forma*, and there are interactions between the two outside that context which are far less martial. But such events are rare, particularly on this scale. This one will likely attract attention and guests from outside the Courts as well.”

I nodded. That made…some kind of sense. The Sidhe were always just…strange by mortal standards. Simultaneously being at war with each other and attending the same parties seemed pretty believable for them. “I think I follow.”

“Good. So, the next factor is the host. Events involving both Courts are always on neutral ground, for obvious reasons. Something more significant like this will be hosted by someone who matters, who has significant personal and political power. In this case, Nephele, which is a name I recognize. She’s a nymph, a very old and powerful one.”

“Nymph,” I said. “So Greek?”

Capinera shrugged. “To a degree. The factions and beings which you’re used to thinking of based on their geographic distribution here are, of course, much more complex than that. But yes, Nephele is associated with that region and those beings. She is one of Artemis’s personal attendants and most favored hunting partners.”

“So, one step short of a goddess. Great.” I sighed.

“Pretty much, yes. Artemis would not host something like this herself; she is *too* powerful, and she is not interested in being dragged into Sidhe politics, as she inevitably would when various people tried to win her favor. But Nephele is very nearly as strong as one of the Sidhe Queens, and

moreover, well. No one sane wants to risk arousing Artemis's personal anger by attacking her favored attendant."

"Yeah, no shit," I muttered. People who did things like that were...well. There were so many fates worse than simply dying, and pissing off a major deity was a *great* way to sign up for some. Just ask Prometheus.

But what I was even more disturbed by, and why I was now looking at the invitation with at least as much wariness as Capinera, was the implication. This wasn't just being invited to high-society Sidhe parties anymore. It was being invited to a high-society Sidhe social event hosted by a nymph, when my current problems involved a Sidhe assassin and a nymph who was trying to kill me. Events like this did not happen often, and there were plenty of possible neutral parties. The idea that there just *happened* to be a gathering of the Sidhe hosted by Nephele exactly when those were the two groups I most urgently needed to know about by coincidence was laughable.

"Precisely," Capinera said quietly, and I got the impression she knew exactly what had just been going through my head, just from my expression as I realized this. "Danger on all sides, it seems. Now, it says it's a New Year celebration, which tells you several things. One, it's linked to the mortal world, and as a result there will be more attendees who have associations with this world. Two, you don't have to worry about time dilation. Because it's closely linked, you can be sure that the party begins at sundown on New Year's Eve, and you will return the following day."

I let out a sigh of relief. That...was something I'd been worrying about. There were tons of faerie tales about people spending a night with the fae and returning to find that years or decades had rolled past in the mortal world in their absence. "That's...something, at least."

"Yes. And you can be sure that the peace will be maintained, as well. Nephele is extremely well-known for her neutrality, and the truce will be enforced strictly. You will not be at risk of any direct harm."

"But that's not the same thing as saying it's *safe,"* I said quietly.

Capinera smiled, though it didn't show teeth and felt more sad than anything. "No. Not at all. The Sidhe are at their most dangerous in this kind of setting, I think. They can be quite lethal on the battlefield, but their bargains and games are a qualitatively different kind of danger. Particularly because they tend to be very patient, and they often use misdirection to conceal their true aim. You might think you have gotten the better of one of the Sidhe in some contest or bargain. And then, years or even decades down the road, you suddenly learn that you won only in seeming. Their goal wasn't what you thought, and they won the game that actually matters. Ever since, you've just been playing into their hands."

I nodded. That was about what I'd heard from other people, the reputation they had. "Any advice for mitigating that risk? I assume 'don't go to this party' would be best, but I don't see that working out so great for me in other ways."

Capinera considered that for a moment. "Don't move in straight lines," she said eventually. "That, I think, is the most common and perhaps the most dangerous mistake people make. I think

that people tend to decide that because the fae are better at misdirection and trickery than they ever will be, it is better not to contest them in that arena, to instead act in direct ways."

I snorted. "Yeah, because that works out so great in faerie tales. Everyone knows that if you try for obvious, predictable solutions, the trickster won't know what to do."

Capinera laughed softly. "Quite. It's an understandable impulse, but yes, it's a treacherous one. If you think in straight lines, you will be easy prey, and they will play you like a fiddle. You have to approach things sideways with the Sidhe, to move so far away from your target that you come at it from behind."

"I know this may surprise you," I said dryly. "But thinking in nonlinear ways is kind of a thing I do anyway."

"Well then, you'll be well suited to this, won't you?"

"I guess I can hope so, but I doubt it will be enough." I sighed. "It says I'm allowed to bring an escort. I don't suppose you'd be willing?"

Capinera shrugged. "I am willing," she said. "But I recommend you think carefully before you ask. I have...many enemies among the Courts."

"I thought you said the truce was reliable."

"Oh, absolutely," she agreed. "They would not attack there. But you have to consider why they haven't attacked me *here*. For some it's because of this...unofficial exile. An informal understanding that I will stay gone, and they will let me stay that way. For others, it is because Clíodhna has declared me to be under her protection and one does not lightly risk her anger. If you were to show up beside me, and especially if this were your first impression upon the Courts, neither group would have a reason to hold back. I would not be surprised if they were to hunt you down afterwards."

I paused and turned towards her. "You think there will be someone there who hates you that much?"

"I give it better than even odds," she said quietly. "And you have enough enemies of your own without adding mine as well."

"Walking in blind might be even worse," I replied. "I mean, I'm all for jumping in the deep end, but that's a little extreme."

"True. I would not advise going alone. And if you want, I will come with you. But I would personally recommend trying to find someone else if you can."

I nodded. It felt implausible to me that Capinera had so many enemies that a random sample of attendees drawn from a single Court event, of whom we would only interact with a small portion, would include someone with that much of a grudge. But the whole reason I was asking her about this was that she knew what she was doing on this topic, and I did not. I'd be an idiot to then ignore the advice she gave me.

"I'm sorry," Capinera said after a moment.

I blinked. "Sorry? About what?"

"I don't know. I feel like I should be able to do more here."

I just paused and stared at her. It took me a few moments to even formulate a response to that, and even when I did manage one it was still a bit…well. It was very me.

"Capinera," I said slowly, "you're very sweet, but there are times when I really want to slap some sense into you."

The expression on her face was absolutely priceless. I wasn't sure what response she'd been expecting, but it definitely wasn't this one, and the startlement on display was glorious. "What?" she said, sounding absolutely dumbfounded, which was kind of her because I didn't get to use that word very often.

"You heard me. Like…let's look at the past week or so, okay? In no particular order, you have: Provided me with personal and emotional support; given me useful insight into a situation I have no prior experience with; offered me food and shelter when I showed up without warning; and now you're providing me with insight about another, comparably dangerous situation I also have no prior experience with. All with no expectation of payment. That's in addition to going out of your way to make coming here comfortable for me in an ongoing way and aforementioned personal support and friendship over the past several months. And you're apologizing for not doing *more*?"

I started out counting on my fingers. By the time I was done I was onto my second hand, and hadn't yet gotten to the part where within a couple days of meeting me she was risking her life in the forest in a fight she had no personal stake in. I was still staring at her.

"When you put it that way," Capinera admitted, "it does sound rather silly of me."

I snorted. "Is there another way to put it?" I asked. "Look, I'm sorry for being that blunt, but just…it feels like you're breaking yourself into pieces trying to meet a standard no one can reasonably be expected to. You don't have to martyr yourself like this."

"You care very deeply about your friends, don't you?"

"You already told me that. A few days ago."

Capinera smiled, mostly visible around her eyes. "I know, but it hasn't stopped being true. And since the theme of the evening seems to be compliments that are true but somewhat uncomfortable to hear: You care about people. You're a good friend, Kyoko, better than you think, and people want to be in your life for valid reasons. You don't need to also take on responsibility for other people's wellbeing and happiness."

I shifted uncomfortably where I was sitting on the stage, which probably meant she had hit her target. "I guess not," I said. "It just…I haven't had many friends in my life. And most of the friends I have had…things didn't go so well for them. I guess I'm prone to worry as a result."

"What happened?" Capinera asked softly. "If I may."

I shrugged. "Eh. It varied. Two guys from the Yakuza who got shot in a drive-by, another that I killed when I went berserk. Boyfriend got weird after a breakup and I ended up basically

having him killed. Two casual friends who killed themselves. None of them were all that close, but still."

"There's been a lot of death in your life, hasn't there?"

My lips twitched into a wry half-smile. "We make a great pair, then, don't we? But even the friends who are still around, I mean. None of us have had a great time in life."

And that might have taken the understatement-of-the-week title, right there. When I looked at the people I was still friends with, the trend was pretty fucking clear. Melissa's kidnapping and captivity had been so over-the-top horrific that I didn't even like to contemplate it. The dvergar had provided her with extensive support since then; officially it was as compensation for a lapse in security tangentially related to her, but personally I had always suspected it was more that Audgrim had pushed for it. They provided her with a fully supported living environment, arranged for therapy of various kinds, the works. Even with that, and after years of recovery, she was barely able to function and even managing that was impressive as hell.

Pepper's family and society had literally been breaking her since before she was born. Capinera herself had such a dysfunctional family that assassination attempts were their equivalent of greeting cards. I didn't know as much about Maddie or Saori's history, but I knew both had more than their fair share of scars. Hell, even Derek had his humanity torn away in a sudden, violent assault.

My friends hadn't had great lives. Understatement of the week.

"Few people do, it seems," Capinera said quietly. "Life is kind only rarely, and gentle almost never."

"Yeah," I said, just as quietly. A human sitting beside us probably couldn't have made out the words. That felt…odd to me, poignant and somehow sad. "That's been my observation as well."

We sat in companionable silence for a few minutes before Capinera spoke again. "It's nice having you here, you know," she said.

"How so?"

She shrugged. "I get lonely. It's nice having you around."

Loneliness seemed to be another common trait among my friends. And, as with pain and insanity, I was aware I was no exception. I had spent so long, so isolated, and why? Why had I actively cut myself off from social bonds for over a decade? I had no real answer, and in some ways that was the worst part.

"How do you feel about hugs?" I asked after a few moments of quiet.

"They're pleasant. Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't remember having asked you before, and some of my friends have…issues with them." I thought about trying to, for example, impulsively hug Melissa, and had to work not to shiver. I had seen someone try, once. Some drunk guy had decided to take liberties one night, not too long after we had rescued her. That had been the first time I'd seen her kill someone, and

while I'd been too busy comforting Melissa to pay much attention to him, I knew his death had been slow, nasty, and miserable.

"That makes sense, but why do you ask now?"

"Ohh," I said, realizing what she meant. "Because you're lonely, and I like you, and I'm pretty tactile in how I express affection. Also you're cute, you smell like blackberries and it's nice, and I'm in an impulsive mood."

"Ah, I see. That makes sense. I smell like blackberries?"

I shrugged. "You do to me. I'm very sensitive to magic, and my brain interprets it as sensory input, so it tends to get woven into my perception of people. Yours smells like, hm. Blackberries, blood, occasionally lilacs. It's beautiful." I actually did shiver now, though it was for a very different reason than it would have been a few moments ago.

Capinera smiled, showing teeth like needles. "I see. Hugs are pleasant. And you are also beautiful."

I blinked. "Are you flirting with me?"

"Yes. Is that unwelcome?"

"No, not at all. Just unexpected." I grinned at her. "Like I said, you're cute and I'm tactile. So the flirtation is entirely sincere on my part. If you're ever in the mood."

"Would Saori be troubled by this?" It was almost the same question Derek had asked, but I found it didn't strike me in the same way, and not only because of who was asking it. There was less of a presumptive tone when Capinera asked. Derek had asked like he already knew the answer, knew what the situation was. Capinera asked like she was curious, and wanted to understand. The difference, I found, was significant.

"Doubt it. Neither of us is really into monogamy as a concept. Are monogamous relationships common among the Court?"

Capinera shrugged. "No, not really. The Sidhe are immortal, and all the fae have a certain…caprice about them, it is in their nature. The notion of indefinite commitment is alien to many of them. Marriage, to the extent it happens at all, will generally be more a political union than a romantic one. But I have found it to be common here, and I would rather not hurt either of you."

"You're sweet. But rest assured, no one is being hurt. So yeah, sincere on my part."

Capinera smiled, and slid closer to me, leaving her rapier lying on the stage beside Thorn. Her teeth were as sharp as they looked, and she tasted bittersweet, like blackberries and lilacs and silver fire.

Chapter Twenty-Five

We met up again at a motel, very similar to the one Lily had picked. It was cheap, it was convenient, and perhaps most importantly, it wasn't something I'd done before. That, I had observed, seemed to be a common factor. I could get away with something once, but this Sidhe assassin learned quickly. I had met with Toby in a public park safely, but when I did the same with Johnny, there was a sniper waiting. The second time I went back to my house, it got burned down. My best bet currently seemed to be to keep moving, keep changing up my patterns.

Strictly speaking, Saori could have just met me at the Blackbird. We would be going back there tonight, anyway. But I didn't want to sit still for that long. It would be too obvious, too predictable. It would also, I thought, make that sanctuary almost useless. The whole reason I was relatively confident in my safety there was that the attacker would likely wait for me to be more vulnerable. If I didn't actually make myself a better target sometimes, they would have no reason to wait. This was…tidier.

Raincloud was flopping across my lap pretty much the moment I sat down on the bed, squirming around so that her head was in Saori's lap. I could feel the excitement and pride in her like a burbling spring, a phrase I rarely had cause to use but which was undeniably the correct one for the moment. There were no words in it, but the emotion was very clear.

"She managed to go better than even," Saori explained. "Which is pretty damn good, considering who was playing."

"I am suitably impressed that my dog is better at cards than I am." I wasn't even being sarcastic when I said that. There was a deep, albeit surreal, feeling of pride in seeing Raincloud flourish like this.

"Also better at dice," Saori informed me. "And I was right. Camellia knows Ekaterina personally, as it turns out. Not exactly friends, but not exactly enemies, either. Associates, I guess, is the word I'd use."

I grunted. "Did she know anything useful?"

Saori shrugged. "Maybe? I don't know how useful it will be, not really anything tactical. You were right about her being a maenad, so that's something I guess. And I heard a little about her personality. She has a quick temper, but it's just as quick to die back down. If you manage to actually make a personal enemy out of her, though, she'll hold a grudge."

"How much of a grudge are we talking about?"

Saori grinned at me. "Let me put it this way. From what Camellia said, Ekaterina will not only kill you and dance on your grave; she'll go back every now and then to dance on it again, for years afterwards. Literally."

I blinked. "Wow. That's hardcore."

"I know, right? I have to respect the hustle." Saori shrugged again. "Anyway, that's pretty much all I got. A few anecdotes, apparently she's fantastic at billiards but only when she's drunk, that kind of thing. But that's about it."

"Still might be useful, though," I said. If nothing else, that note about her being vindictive was...interesting. And I was almost sure, from how she'd talked to me when we met, that she wasn't really upset at me. The kind of spite that would go back to dance on someone's grave for years wasn't easy to reconcile with apologizing to that person for one of your minions disrespecting her competence. Ekaterina might want me dead, but it wasn't personal.

"Hope so! Plus, seeing Camellia's face when 'Cloud came out ahead of her? *Priceless*."

I could feel Raincloud agreeing with this sentiment, as well as a sort of smug eagerness to do so again. She really was fitting right in with the rest of us; I wasn't sure who all was included in that "us", but I was sure she belonged in the group.

Saori laughed at my expression and curled into me a little more. "So what's new on your end?" she asked.

"Well, the good news is that I know what Dusk was talking about," I told her. "The bad news is that I know what Dusk was talking about."

"How bad are we talking?"

"It's, uh. It's pretty up there. On the bright side, I get to go to a party, and I'm told there will be a buffet." I took out the invitation, being careful not to crease it, and handed it to her.

Saori read it. Then she read it again. Then she looked up at me, with a grin that didn't quite cover up the underlying unease, and set it on the bed. "You know, you might actually be better at getting yourself into trouble than I am," she said. "And that's *saying things*."

"Yeah," I sighed. "I'm not thrilled about it. But I think turning down the invite might be an even worse idea now than going to this."

"Oh hell yes." There was no hesitation in Saori's response at all. "That...I mean, even ignoring the fact that Dusk would turn you into something unpleasant for spoiling her fun, it would still be stupid. It would be an insult to decline now, especially for someone in your social standing, and I kinda doubt you want to insult Nephele's hospitality."

I shuddered. That prospect was...well. Archaic rules of hospitality were kind of a big deal among the supernatural crowd, probably tying in with the intense focus on oaths. I'd picked that one up myself just from hovering around the periphery of the local supernatural crowd, and as far as I was aware it was essentially universal. Similarly, a fixation on hospitality, on the rights and responsibilities of guest and host, was widespread.

I did not want to tell a nigh-deific nymph that hers wasn't good enough for me. I *really* didn't want to do that. That was the kind of insult where if the punishment was simply death, you could count yourself very, very lucky.

"Pretty much my thoughts, yes," Saori said, clearly able to read that dread in my body language. It probably helped that she was currently cuddled up close enough to feel me shuddering. "So yeah, you're going to want to make at least a token appearance."

"The temptation to just shoot myself now and get it over with is great," I sighed. "Ugh. I…don't suppose you'd be willing to go as my plus-one?"

Saori gave me an odd look, one I couldn't read well. It didn't help that I was looking at her face upside down, and I had no idea how her spine could even *do* that. Then she glanced at the invitation resting on the bed. "Capinera's like. A thousand times better equipped for this kind of thing."

"Yeah, she was my first pick, no offense intended. But when I asked, she uh. Gave it better than even odds that being seen with her would be enough to get me put on someone's hit list."

"Wait, what?" Saori looked like she was trying to decide between being impressed and unsettled, and landing on reckless fascination. "She thinks someone will whack you for that? Being seen in her presence one time in a setting where everyone has someone more important to do than you?"

I shrugged. "I don't really get it either, but she seemed pretty serious about it."

There was a moment of silence as Saori processed this. Raincloud was thinking through it, too; I could feel it, even if I couldn't feel the shape of the thoughts. Saori hadn't put music on yet, so it was actually silent, too, rather than just surreal.

"You know," the kitsune said at last, "one of these days, I'm going to have to hear what she fucking *did*. Like, I get it, she killed people, sure. But how the fuck did she make *that* many people want revenge on her?"

"Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction. She's a workaholic who barely sleeps, but it's still hard to believe she even *could* murder that many people. Or anyone powerful enough for most of these people to care."

"For real. Okay. So the girl who actually knows what she's doing is out. And you've never even been to the Otherside. You are so far out of your depth I don't even have words for it." Saori paused. "Though I suppose at the rate you're going I should invent some. Not going to stop needing them."

"Pretty much!" I was grinning now, and I wasn't sure if it was sincere. "And you're the only other person I know with any relevant experience at all, so. You wanna come? I'm guessing the buffet will be excellent."

Saori was grinning too, and *that*, I was confident, was sincere. She was scared, underneath; she wasn't an idiot, and you'd have to be one hell of an idiot not to be nervous about this. But the fear was solidly drowned out by her trademark devil-may-care enthusiasm, and her wide thrillseeker's grin was definitely an honest one. "Fuck it, why not. Someone has to keep you from getting yourself defenestrated. And I'm a sucker for a buffet."

"First exsanguinated, now defenestrated. You have a very high opinion of my ability to die creatively."

"I have a list of these," she said. "Because, as noted, not going to stop needing them. Okay, let's see if this works." She flipped the invitation over to show blank vellum, and rested one hand on the back of it. I felt a faint, subtle stir of magic, something that smelled like Saori but also had another element in it, something that smelled like mist and hummed with birdsong. I'd never encountered that signature before, but it was pleasant.

Moments later, writing started to appear on the back of the invitation. It was strange, written in a mixture of familiar Latin characters and another script I didn't recognize, all in a very small print that still managed to be beautiful, each character perfectly formed.

"What's that?" I asked, staring.

"Travel instructions and such," Saori said absently as she read. "It's not displayed by default, mix of aesthetics and etiquette. Don't want to waste your time if you aren't going, or insult you by suggesting you don't know the way. I've never done something quite like this, but I've done a few Court events before. Apparently they use the same system for this."

"Wait a second," I said. "You did Court events?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, a few. Sketchy ones for the most part. One or two mixers like this, but not for a special occasion like this one is, nothing this classy."

"When you say sketchy," I said after a moment, "I get a distinctly bad feeling."

"Yeah, uh, you don't want to know," Saori said. "When the Sidhe do sketchy, it gets...let me put it this way. They made *me* go 'what the fuck is wrong with you people', and this was *before* I got all soft and squishy."

I considered, for a moment, what it would take to get that response from Saori now. Then I considered what she'd been like back then, for this to count as soft and squishy. I only knew a very little bit about what she'd done when she was younger, but I knew it was fucked up enough that she didn't like to talk about it, and that spoke volumes.

I think I'm willing to take her word for that, Raincloud commented, while also nuzzling Saori to solicit ear scritches, successfully.

Agreed. I was pretty much certain she was correct. And it wasn't like when she'd said the same thing about the grenades, either; then I'd been certain Saori was right that I wouldn't enjoy knowing, but not confident I didn't want to. With this, though, the details really didn't matter to me. Nothing I did was going to change the Sidhe, and it wasn't like Saori was still going to those parties. I didn't want to know what they'd been like when she did.

"So what's it say?" I asked instead.

"Well," Saori said with the same devil-may-care grin on, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is that it will be very easy to get there. The bad news is that's because one of the Ways being used is just outside the city."

"Um. I take it that's important?"

The kitsune laughed and rubbed her cheek against me in much the same way Raincloud was nuzzling at her. I stroked her hair obligingly. “Yeah, little bit” she said. “Okay, so there’s basically two ways to move between domains, right? One is a direct portal, which is what I use.”

“And those suck.” It wasn’t a question. I’d seen what she looked like afterwards.

“Yup! They’re also hard to make, you have to know exactly where you’re going in great detail, and if you fuck up then bad things happen to you.”

“What does that mean, anyway?” I asked, driven by a sort of morbid curiosity. “I’ve heard it a bunch now, but I don’t have a clue what ‘bad things’ really means.”

Saori considered that for a few moments. “There are a few possibilities,” she said eventually. “Option one, it just flat doesn’t work. You don’t have a clear enough target to establish a connection at all. Option two, you get contact, but it’s not stable enough to form the actual portal. If that happens, it’s like any other spell getting interrupted.”

“Which means what?” I interjected, while Raincloud wriggled further into my lap. She felt curious too, which was interesting to me. “Keep in mind I’m solidly in the remedial studies class here.”

She shrugged. “If it happens early on, it just dissipates, you don’t have much real power in the working yet. Once you’ve already pulled a fair amount together it starts getting risky, though. If you lose your grip, you might take some backlash when the structure you’re trying to put it into collapses. Usually bleeds out as heat or force. Worst case, you already have the structure of the spell fully established, but something goes wrong before you release it.”

“So instead of feedback as a simple force, the energy is structured enough to do something?”

“Yeah. It’s the equivalent of bumping someone’s elbow while they have their hand on the bomb’s detonating mechanism. Usually blows up in a way related to what you were trying to do, but not targeted right or something similar. Pretty rare with quick and dirty magic, since the window is really brief, but complicated stuff it’s a risk. With a portal that backlash usually means either kinetic force, or weird mental effects. You lose your mind, go comatose, stuff like that.”

I absorbed that for a few moments. “Okay,” I said after a few moments. “I think that all makes sense.”

“Cool. There is a third option, though.” Saori hesitated a moment, and I got the impression she was trying to phrase something. “You can get the portal working, but something goes wrong while you’re using it,” she said eventually. “And nobody really knows what happens to someone then. But nobody’s come back from it to tell us, either, and nobody’s in a hurry to find out firsthand.”

“Considering how awful portals sound even when they work, I can see why,” I said dryly.

“Trust me, it’s worse than it sounds,” she assured me. “Anyway, that’s how those work. Miserable, limited, and hard. Like, I’m good at portals, always had a knack for that kind of magic, and it still takes a solid fifteen minutes to open one. Traveling through a Way, on the other hand, is easy, painless, and very safe.”

"I'm sensing a 'but' coming, given that people still use portals."

She laughed. "Yeah, because Ways only connect two set points, and they're ridiculously hard to establish. Anyone can use a Way once it's set up, but actually making it in the first place is more complicated and takes much more power than a portal."

I was getting a sinking feeling in my stomach, which was impressive given how low this prospect had already sunk it. "When you say more power," I said, "how much are we talking?"

She shrugged. "For a permanent Way, one of the major players. Gods, Sidhe Queens, a few other fae heavyweights, maybe a couple of human mages could pull it off, people on that level. Temporary ones are easier, but still way out of reach for people like you and me. For something like this, because most of the people who are invited won't know the place well enough to open a portal, they have a couple dozen Ways listed that are either permanent or set up for this specifically."

"Ah," I said. "A couple dozen, across the entire Otherside. And one of them just *happens* to be right here."

"Yep! Like I said, we're going to need to invent new words to describe how screwed you are. On the bright side, I guess it means you don't have to sample portal sickness yet." She was still grinning.

I sighed. "Silver linings, I guess. Anything else I need to know?"

She glanced back at the directions, then shrugged. "Not really. Truce agreement is pretty standard. Do *try* to wear something nice."

I snorted. "You've seen my wardrobe."

"Hence why I emphasize 'try', yes. New Year's Eve, so you've got today and tomorrow to find…something. Maybe you can at least manage to look slightly less like a drowned rat than usual."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime."

Shows at the Blackbird Cabaret were always an exercise in surrealism. But the degree varied. The building and audience were always enough to get some amount of surreal and bizarre, but some shows were much stranger than others.

Synchronized sleeping was about as strange as I'd heard of. I could have stayed in Capinera's room again, but that phrase was just so damn weird that I had decided to watch instead, and was now sitting in the audience. It was a small crowd tonight, only about fifteen people, and I recognized over half of them.

Three were regular attendees, all of whom had been there the first time I came, back in September. The man in the absurd silk opera cloak burned with dark crimson magic, pulsing in time with my heartbeat; so soon after meeting Lily, I could easily recognize it as a vampire's

signature, though he was considerably stronger than Lily was. The woman who always wore a mask made of stained glass and the woman whose nails were a constantly-shifting flow of metallic color seemed to attend the same events often, though I had no idea what either of them was. A few of the others I'd seen around, here or at Softened Dreams, and if I tried I could probably have dredged up some of their names.

With the crowd so small, there was plenty of space. Some nights it was standing room only, but either because it was in the awkward week between Christmas and New Year's or just because the basic concept of the show was so weird, there was plenty of open space tonight. I ended up sitting on the floor in the back corner with Capinera, Saori, and Raincloud, losing at cards while listening to a dozen or so people snoring in harmony.

The strangest part might have been that it actually sounded pretty good. I had legitimately heard choirs less melodic than this. When I glanced at the stage, the coordinated sleepwalking was better than some dance recitals, too; they made the shuffling, stumbling gait associated with sleepwalking look intentional and graceful, and they weren't tripping over each other or bumping into each other at all. I was certain they were genuinely asleep, too. I had no idea how that worked, and was guessing there was some form of creepy magic involved, but the end result was pretty impressive.

"Call. So where do you even find these people, anyway?" Saori, as expected, had not been hurt by recent developments. In fact, she had already escalated far enough towards affectionate herself that she was currently draped across Capinera's lap, and seemed quite pleased with that state of affairs. I frankly had no idea how she was keeping her cards concealed well enough to play poker effectively. Then again, I also had no idea how Raincloud was pulling it off, and I was the one holding the cards for her, so I had to admit I was the least equipped person at the metaphorical table to understand these things.

"Raise five." Capinera slid a blue poker chip into the loosely defined area of concrete between us. They didn't represent any actual currency, because I couldn't remotely afford the fortune I'd lose otherwise, but they made it easier to play the game, and tracking the size of that imaginary fortune was entertaining. "And mostly they find me. At first I contacted a fair number of people I knew from my time among the Court, but at this point people seek me out looking to perform."

At a mental nudge from Raincloud, I set her cards down to show that she had folded. I'd already dropped out of this hand a while ago, because a pair of threes was just not impressive enough to be worth playing out. I would lose regardless, but it seemed more sporting to at least put up a token resistance while the other three bled me dry.

"Call." The kitsune slid a chip into the pot, then laid down her hand. Flush in diamonds. "It's impressive, honestly. Not every day someone manages a genre of music I've never heard, but I have to say, this is a new one."

Capinera laid down a straight. Not quite enough to beat Saori's hand, but they were both very strong hands, far better than mine. It was not *only* because of my atrocious bluffing skills that

I always lost these games. I had no idea how Saori was able to cheat this effectively, and I was dead sure I would never know all the different methods she had, but she was very good at it. “Thank you,” the half-fae woman said, starting to gather up the cards, “but I can’t take much credit. Their manager called me; I had never heard of such a thing before that.”

Saori grinned, and raked in the pile of chips. It was a little awkward, given that she was currently sprawled over Capinera’s lap, but they were both graceful, and they made it work. Capinera was obviously bewildered at how abruptly her social life had shifted, but had raised no objection at all to Saori’s affections. “Can you get me their number? Because this is fantastic.”

“I should be able to,” Capinera said, passing the deck to me. It was my turn to deal; we were rotating around the table, though I was the one actually handling the cards for Raincloud’s turns for obvious reasons.

I started shuffling, while on stage a whistling contralto went into a brief solo. There was definitely magic involved in that performance, though I wasn’t sure whether the sleepers were the ones doing it, or were being used as an instrument by someone else. I wasn’t planning to ask, either. There were some things I was happier not knowing, and even my neurotic fixation on understanding things wasn’t enough to overcome that in this case.

Between that, shuffling, and petting Raincloud, I was distracted enough that I didn’t notice someone walking up behind me. The first I was aware of it was when I noticed Saori looking over my shoulder, and for a moment it felt so much like the moment last week at Softened Dreams that I was already tense and starting to reach for a weapon.

But no. This time, a glance back just showed Melissa. She had a loose, easy smile, and she didn’t look perturbed by my reaction, which was good; sudden movements could startle her, at times. She must have come in late, because I was sure I’d have seen her otherwise, particularly given how empty it was.

“Hi!” she said, in a bright, cheery tone.

“Heya, honeybee,” I replied. As usual, I kept my voice softer and more subdued than hers, and not only because of the venue. “It’s nice to see you.”

“Yeah, glad to run into you.” Saori, too, had a much more subdued tone than usual. The kitsune had consistently done well about that, something I’d worried about at first with how much of a prankster she was. Then again, Saori wasn’t *entirely* heartless. Earlier I’d been thinking about what it would take to leave her truly appalled. I was pretty sure what happened to Melissa would have tipped the scale even before Saori went soft.

“Likewise! Deal me in?” Melissa was smiling. Which didn’t mean much with Melissa, given that she was usually smiling regardless of what was underneath, but this one seemed like it reflected genuine happiness.

“Sure,” I said, scooting over to make room. That left me, Saori, Capinera, and Raincloud more or less in a pile, but we were all fine with that, and it left Melissa with enough personal space that none of us would touch her by accident.

Sometimes I felt guilty about doing things like this in front of her. It felt like I was flaunting something that she couldn't have. Melissa had made a lot of progress, and had even managed a few careful hugs with me at this point. But this kind of casual, affectionate touch just was not something she was likely to have in this lifetime. She had way too many memories of…less affectionate touch for that. Melissa had said that she didn't object to affection being displayed around her, but then again, given the nature of the damage her mind had sustained, she wouldn't know it if she did.

Probably Capinera was right. Probably I worried too much.

"So what's the game?" Melissa asked, jolting me out of that line of thought. I resumed shuffling, a little more awkwardly now that I was in a cuddle puddle with the bulk of the other players.

"Five card draw. Do you know the rules?" Capinera's voice was also soft, though in her case that was a default state rather than something she did specifically for Melissa's sake. For a moment, I idly wondered whether this was another area in which she was limiting herself as some strange form of penance, but then dismissed the thought. I suspected it was more that Capinera's voice was a weapon when she wanted it to be, and Capinera wasn't the type to brandish a weapon for no reason. Even at her most violent, I was guessing she had still been the kind of person who didn't draw a weapon of any kind unless she were planning to use it. She had just…planned to use those weapons often.

"Yep! Stakes?"

"Nonexistent," I said dryly. "Because I want to be able to eat tomorrow. But we have some chips for tracking how large of a fortune I would have lost if this was real money." I was confident that Melissa, too, would kick my ass. Bluffing by its nature requires one to mask outward expressions of emotion. That was a lot easier when her emotional expression was so badly damaged that it could be hard to read even when she was actively *trying* to be open.

She was smiling now, though, and something about her spine as she leaned forward to take her cards made me think there was genuine happiness to that smile. It was usually easier for me to read her emotions in her posture and movement than her expression, maybe because those cues were less conscious. I was pretty confident she was happy.

But if you asked her, she wouldn't know. Not for sure.

That, in some ways, was the deepest tragedy of what had happened to her. It wasn't just that fear had been pushed to such extremes that now she didn't notice anxiety until it became a total panic. That was disruptive, and the events that led to it had been terrible. But in terms of the scars, I tended to think it was the positive emotions that were most tragic. It was her inability to recognize, experience, and enjoy the good things in her life.

Melissa had told me, during one of our more maudlin conversations, that sometimes she wanted to go back. That she missed being subjected to that kind of psychological torture. I didn't blame her, no more than I blamed any other addict for their suffering—less than most, because she hadn't had any choice in developing that addiction.

She had experienced feelings of joy, of loving affection, of curiosity and pride and satisfaction, that she would never find again. There was no drug, no experience, no relationship that could provide them. She might get a glimpse now and again, just enough to be reminded of what she'd lost, but she had to push herself to the extremes of natural experience just to get close to what she'd once had for weeks on end.

Of course she sometimes wanted to go back so much that she woke up in the middle of the night shaking and crying. I imagined it was the equivalent of going from my overclocked sensory inputs to being nearly insensate, and the idea of that was disturbing enough to me that I couldn't remotely blame Melissa for that longing.

I couldn't give her those feelings. But we spent the evening playing cards and listening to a truly surreal choir, with laughter and friendship, and the night was as happy as I knew how to make it.

When the show was over, and the small crowd had left, it was quiet again. Just the four of us, which was still three and a half more than could comfortably fit in Capinera's usual living space. We slept in a pile of tangled limbs on the stage again instead. Capinera joined in this time, though I knew she would only actually sleep a short time.

My dreams were disjointed and confused, a blur of bright laughter and broken glass, lost homes and absent friends, bloody snow and dark fires and wind that sounded like the keening song of mournful wolves as it rustled the leaves of trees I couldn't see. They were not sweet, but they felt clean, and that was better than I usually got.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A day and a half was an awkward interval of time. It was brief enough that I wasn't doing much of substance before the party. While Lily had located the headquarters of the more dangerous threat facing me, she'd also gotten enough other information to make me very nervous about assaulting that headquarters. I knew that there were multiple people involved, and that they had the building fortified, and very little about their actual capabilities.

So, a direct assault was risky at best. And, furthermore, even if I pulled it off, there was a good chance I'd be injured in the process. I was well aware that either going to this party while injured and vulnerable or failing to go at all was risking things *much* worse than simple death. Even Saori had agreed that attacking now rather than waiting until after the party would be idiotic, and when *Saori* told you that an idea was reckless to the point of stupidity, you knew you were in the realm of genuine insanity.

But I didn't have a lot else to do, either. I was so completely out of my depth when it came to this party that I really didn't even know where to start. Hell, I barely remembered how to manage *human* high society at this point. Add in the fact that the only interactions I'd knowingly had with the fae were either with Capinera or one conversation with Lord Cerdinen, and the sheer degree of spooky that my invitation now represented, and I was so far into the range of ominous dread that it wrapped around to the far side and became macabre comedy.

But business and busyness had always been what I resorted to, when I had too much time and the time had too much room for thinking. So I did what few things I could, over the course of the day on Friday. Saori was there for parts of it, but she had her own preparations to make as well. I was well aware that the kitsune was…not really all that much better equipped for this than I was. She might have been to some Sidhe events in the past, but they'd been about as far from high society as it was possible to get.

She did not tell me what she needed to do before tomorrow night. I didn't ask.

For my part, I got something resembling a nice outfit assembled, ate, and spent a while thinking about what I might want to accomplish at the party. At this point, I was mainly going for fear of what might happen if I didn't, but this *was* still a potentially priceless opportunity. It was also a profoundly dangerous one, but it was the only game in town.

So, I pulled up the running list I kept going of shit I needed to look into, and copied some of the more relevant entries onto paper, since I was assuming electronics wouldn't work in Nephele's realm. I thought it was probably a good idea to have a list written out ahead of time, much like a grocery list and for much the same reasons.

Around noon, I got a text from Toby. It was, startlingly enough, good news. *Narrowed it down to a three block radius or so. You're looking just southeast of Homestead cemetery. Best I'm getting. Good hunting.*

I was increasingly impressed by his work. That was just...much more than I'd been expecting to get, and not only because I was on a budget. For him to have gone from virtually no information to locating a headquarters in the space of a week was remarkable. And, I mean, granted I wasn't actually sure yet whether the people he had been tracking were the same as had been hunting me, but it seemed pretty likely.

Time slid past. Raincloud spent a while chasing squirrels while I worked on my list. We weren't in an actual park, this time; I'd learned my lesson about those, and at least for the time being had no intention of spending time in one. We'd just hopped a fence into one of the random patches of forest that dotted Pittsburgh's urban landscape instead. Tucked into the brush under the trees, it would be very hard to find me, and I wasn't sure where a sniper even *could* go to have a clear line of sight on this spot. It meant my ass was cold from sitting in the snow, but that was the cost of doing business.

This event was sufficiently classy that I was actually going to wear jewelry, something I did so rarely that I had to actually go to a jeweler to get it. As a result, Raincloud now had a ruby dangling from her collar, and it did, in fact, look good against her fur, very striking. She felt happy, carefree even. She was still aware of the gravity of the situation, and she was smart enough to be nervous about it, but she was much better than I was at letting that anxiety go while she was doing other things.

While she chased squirrels, the cypress spirit that shared space in her mind was planning with me. His intelligence was...slightly alien even to me, but he *was* quite intelligent, and he contributed some useful insights. My connection with him was clearer than with her, for all that he rarely said much; particularly without direct skin contact, I got more detail from him. From Raincloud I was currently getting little more than that generalized emotional impression, but with him I had actual language, abstract thought and complex planning. It was surreal, in a way; all three of us had this intimate connection, but there were still these very different conversations happening in parallel.

Around sundown, I finally gave up and admitted that I wasn't going to be making any more progress. I hadn't been for a while, if I was being honest, but it was better than sitting around waiting. Wasn't like I had a whole hell of a lot else to do, anyway.

Eventually, though, I had to call it a wrap. If nothing else, I was aware that I did need to get some rest tonight. Sleep and I had never been on the best of terms, but even I wasn't dumb enough to think pulling an all-nighter right now was anything resembling a good idea. And so, eventually, I gave up, put my notebook away, and stood up. "C'mon," I called to Raincloud, out loud because why not. "Let's get moving."

She was at my side within a couple of seconds, with a feeling of affection that made me smile. We started walking through the trees. It felt...peaceful, here. The snow was undisturbed except for our footprints, and there were enough conifers that it smelled like pine. That always felt peaceful to me, for reasons I wasn't totally clear on but which probably had a lot to do with my synesthesia.

We were going a different direction than we'd come from. I didn't really expect that anyone would have tailed us here and then stopped outside the tree cover to wait for us to come back out, but then again, I also hadn't expected a car bomb. I had to admit that the Sidhe assassin *was* at least making me better at seeing possible angles of attack. Ekaterina wasn't, not really; that gang's operations had been so direct that I only called them assassination attempts for lack of a better name. But the Sidhe was creative, sneaky, and doing a great job of turning my resting-state hypervigilance into active analysis of possible threats.

So, we were leaving a different side of the forest than we'd come from. It was a large enough copse of trees that it was unlikely someone watching our entrance point would also have a line of sight towards where we were going. Saori already knew and was planning to pick us up as soon as we hopped the fence on the other side. Keep moving, keep changing up my patterns. In principle, I should only have to do this for a short time longer. Which was good, because maintaining this strange balance between putting myself in position to get killed and making myself seem like a hard enough target that attacking a fortified position made sense was strangely stressful.

It didn't help matters when I got a phone call shortly before we made it out of the woods. I answered without looking. "The hell do you want?" I asked, in a more surly tone than I usually used when I answered the phone, which was saying something.

"Hello to you too. Are you okay?" Caleb didn't sound too bothered by that tone. Then again, he knew how much I disliked phone calls.

"Eh, more or less. Why?"

"Because your house burned down and I haven't heard from you since," he said dryly.

"Oh, right." I had somehow almost forgotten that little detail in the chaos of the past week. "Yeah, I'm fine, didn't get hurt or anything. I'm staying with a friend."

"I'm still kinda worried about you, Kyoko. Can we please have an actual conversation?"

It was a bad idea. It was a really, really bad idea. I knew that. I was well aware that I was past the point where I needed to cut ties with Caleb. I had been past that point *before* things started blowing up around me. It had been bad enough when the only hazard involved was my nature being…difficult to reconcile with vanilla human life. Now that there were also serious, obvious safety issues?

This was a terrible idea. I knew it. I'd been intentionally neglecting that relationship hoping he'd eventually get frustrated with me and leave. Caleb being Caleb, that clearly wasn't going to happen, which meant I had to take more active measures. But he'd been a very good friend at a time when I'd really needed that, and I didn't have it in me to tell him we were done over the phone.

I became aware that the pause had gone on too long, and sighed. "Fuck. Uh. Yeah, sure. Tomorrow morning?"

"By which I assume you mean afternoon. Yes, that should be fine."

"Great," I said, in a voice that did not remotely sound like this was great. "Uh. Can you meet me somewhere public?" Which was a request that would immediately sound suspicious, but I wasn't sure how to get around that.

He didn't sound surprised, and didn't hesitate. "Sure. Does the dining hall at the college work?"

Easy. Effective, too. Public, visible, but with enough room to have a private conversation. The public setting clearly was not enough to really guarantee safety right now, but this wasn't a known location where it would make sense to have a bomb in place, and it did not have easy sight lines and accessible sniper's nests. Hell, it was also elegant in how it conveyed the details; even if someone was listening in on this call, they wouldn't necessarily know what he meant. He and I had established when we were both going to undergrad that his school was the college and mine the university, so it would be easier to distinguish the two in speech. Without that personal context, there were enough colleges in this city that it would be challenging to guess which he meant.

This was a good enough suggestion, and a fluid enough one, that it was almost unsettling in itself. It was so obviously safe that I immediately felt nervous about it. Which, I mean, as Saori had recently pointed out, that kind of thinking was extremely characteristic of psychotic paranoia, which wasn't a mode of thought known for accurately assessing safety.

On the other hand, almost immediately after she said this we had been ambushed and then nearly blown up, so this observation wasn't as comforting as it might have been.

"Fine," I sighed. "See you then."

Oakland was an odd neighborhood. Pittsburgh, in general, had a lot of individual character in its neighborhoods. Some cities feel monotonous, like the whole city was more or less homogeneous. Others are a patchwork made up of individual neighborhoods, districts, boroughs, and cultural enclaves, where one part of town might feel completely different than another, like you aren't even in the same city. Pittsburgh was solidly in the latter category.

Oakland, specifically, was a neighborhood defined by academia. I went to Carnegie-Mellon University, a school famous for its engineering and computer science departments. Caleb had gone to the University of Pittsburgh, which was more generalized in its focus. It also had a forty story Gothic cathedral as the centerpiece of the campus, which made it pretty damn hard to forget that the university was there. They had an affiliated teaching hospital, which had grown into a large network of hospitals and insurance departments that ran medicine in this city with the ruthlessness of a Mafia protection racket. Toss in Carlow University and a few smaller schools and R&D groups, and you got a neighborhood that was entirely defined by academics.

I didn't spend much time in Oakland anymore. I didn't feel any great desire to revisit those memories. They were...in many ways the last moments of another life. I'd already begun peeling away from mortal society by that point; I had known at least the broad strokes of my heritage, had

known that I would never truly belong among vanilla humans. But it wasn't until after I had graduated that I had truly withdrawn from that world.

It felt weird being back here. Much the same, in a way, as how I'd felt the last time I went back to the house I'd lived in for so long. This place had been familiar once. It had been home. But that was a long time ago, and I had been a different person. I felt awkward and alien here now, out of place, like I was trying to fit myself into a shape I no longer knew how to make.

You can't step in the same river twice. No matter how many times I rediscovered that truth, it always felt strange to be reminded that I had changed and couldn't go back.

Saori was loitering somewhere nearby, as was Raincloud. It would be pretty damn awkward to have them with me for this, but Saori had wanted to be in the vicinity in case this became a conversation of the explosive variety. She hadn't tried to talk me out of it, though, somewhat to my surprise.

I guess maybe Saori knew a bit about goodbyes, and how it felt to walk away from a life you couldn't go back to. And it wasn't as though the kitsune was averse to bad ideas or explosive conversations, anyway. She hadn't objected at all.

There were a number of dining halls on Pitt's campus, but only one that we'd ever spent time in together. I had no idea what the name of the building was, and was a little surprised I still knew how to find it. I paused at the door long enough to check on various weapons; I wasn't carrying the shotgun simply because wearing a trench coat would make me look way too obviously like I didn't belong here, but I had a pistol in a shoulder holster that felt awkward to move with. Hopefully the baggy hoodie was enough to cover for that. Thorn was available whether I was carrying it or not, but I also had a couple of knives, a plastic-fiberglass composite dagger in case I needed something nonmetallic and a bowie knife in my hoodie pocket in case I needed to cut something but didn't need to be using a sword comparable to freaking Excalibur to do it. The pepper spray was easier to explain, and a canister of tear gas was, well. Probably by the time anyone searched me and figured out what that was, I would have bigger problems than whether I was legally allowed to own lachrymatory agents that strong.

I wanted to delay longer, but it wouldn't help, and I was aware that I was on a timer. I was supposed to be doing stupid, possibly suicidal things in another world at sunset, and the days weren't that long in winter this far north. So I sighed, confirmed that Raincloud was close enough to get at least a vague emotional impression from me, and then went inside.

The dining hall was set up in a pretty basic way. There was a large seating area, separate from the actual kitchen, which worked like a buffet. You had to pay to get into the latter, but the seating wasn't restricted, and it wasn't a particularly busy time of day. It was primarily oriented at students, but they didn't actually stop other people from going in, and I looked like a college student anyway with how much I didn't age. And I was pretty good at looking like I belonged; in my experience, if you walked into a room with full confidence that you belonged there, people usually wouldn't be willing to challenge you.

So I walked in, completely ignored the actual dining part, and wandered around the open space looking for Caleb.

It took a minute for me to spot him. He had a small table tucked into the corner, well away from anyone else in the room. It was definitely him, too; I knew him pretty well, even if we hadn't spent much time together recently.

I sighed and walked over. He waved at me when I got close, further removing any lingering ambiguity, and while there were plenty of beings capable of mimicking someone's appearance, he was too clearly human for that; his aura was a faint shimmer, lacking any powerful magic at all. This did, in fact, appear to be Caleb wanting to have a conversation rather than another assassination attempt.

I wasn't sure which I would have preferred. But this was the one I got, and there was no way out but through. I walked over and sat in the one other chair at the table, which put my back to the wall. I appreciated that; I was feeling twitchy enough as it was.

"Hi," I said. I felt awkward, clumsy.

Caleb didn't look too comfortable himself. He looked...tired. And he looked old; even by human standards, he looked older than his years right now.

In a way, he looked like he belonged here as much as I did. But anyone watching would assume that he was a professor meeting with a much younger student, not that we were peers. He was even dressed for it, wearing business casual and dress shoes rather than my hoodie and jeans. I hadn't bothered with the cosmetics I usually used around him to try and mask how ageless my appearance was. There seemed little point, today.

"Hi." There was a noticeable delay before his response, but his voice was steady when he did, casual in a way I couldn't muster. "You doing okay?"

I shrugged. "More or less."

Caleb just looked at me for a moment. "Kyoko," he said eventually, in a gentle tone. "You are a terrible liar. What's wrong?"

What wasn't? But that answer wouldn't help anything. "Things are just stressful lately," I said instead, somewhat lamely. "Long week."

"I imagine so, given that your house burned down. To the ground, from what I hear."

"Pretty much. Yeah."

"You said you have somewhere to stay, though?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, for the moment at least. I'll figure something else out soon."

"That's good." He sipped at a glass of water. He hadn't gotten any food, either.

"Yeah. But it kinda..." I trailed off into another awkward pause. I wasn't sure how to broach the actual topic I was here for. Which didn't usually slow me down, but my usual approach of careening between topics without much transition didn't seem right for this.

Caleb seemed content to wait, and so the silence just settled in and became oppressive. Eventually, I managed, “I probably won’t be coming around much going forward. Or, well, at all.”

“Why is that?” He didn’t sound surprised. Though I suppose that to be fair, I had been actively avoiding him for months now.

“Because continuing to talk to you would be a bad idea,” I sighed. “For all parties involved.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because bad things will happen,” I said simply. “I…fuck, this was a mistake. Sorry. Don’t call.” I stood up and started walking away, fully expecting to never come back.

I was brought up short after two steps when Caleb said, in a gentle tone, “Kyoko, I know you aren’t a human.”

I froze, literally midstep. “Excuse me,” I said, not turning back towards him. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.” Caleb still sounded gentle, and he sounded so very tired.

“Yes, but I don’t think what I heard can possibly be what you meant to say.” I sounded, at least to myself, blank in a way that never meant good things with me. “Not unless you’ve read too many novels and picked up a drug habit lately.”

“Kyoko,” he said, sighing. “You are an absolutely terrible liar. We both know it. So can we *please* just accept that you aren’t going to be able to bluff your way out of this and move on with the conversation?”

I hesitated, seriously considering just continuing to walk away. But at the end of the day, I simply couldn’t afford to risk it. If Caleb had already caught on, I’d fucked up badly, which was not implausible but certainly was a problem. I had to know what conclusions he’d reached and what he intended to do with them. And, well. Depending on the answers to those questions, I’d have to respond in one way or another.

I was hoping my response wouldn’t have to end with him dying. It was one thing to have a shitty ex killed after he decided to be both an asshole and an idiot on a nearly incomprehensible scale. I’d much rather not do the same with someone who was, all things considered, a pretty decent person. But I was aware it was a distinct possibility, depending on exactly what Caleb meant and what he was planning to do with that information.

And besides. He wasn’t wrong. I was not a great liar, at least not in this way. I could conceal things, I could put on an act, but masking emotional reactions from people who knew how to see them in me was…well. There were reasons I always lost at liar’s dice against my friends, and not *all* of those reasons boiled down to “Saori is absurdly good at cheating”.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not.” I turned and went back to the table, with one hand on the knife in my pocket. I doubted I would need it; even if I did need to kill Caleb, and even if for some insane reason it was best to do it here rather than wait for a less public opportunity, and even if he somehow put up enough of a fight I needed to think about weapons, I’d be better off just calling Thorn. But the feeling of it, the weight in my grip, was reassuring.

“Thank you. Now. I think you maybe owe me an explanation. Yes?”

I sighed. “Maybe. You’re probably better off without it, but apparently it’s a little late for that.”

“Just a touch,” he said, in a very dry tone. That tone, in itself, told me quite a bit about what he was thinking.

“How long?” I asked idly.

He shrugged. “A few years. Strong suspicions for at least five, but I’ve only been sure for two or three.”

I paused and stared. “Five years? And you never mentioned it?”

“It seemed polite to wait for you to tell me on your own.” Caleb smiled a little, though it still mostly looked old and tired. “But at this point it doesn’t seem like that’s going to happen, so here we are.”

“Fuck’s sake. Ugh.” I sighed. “I kinda botched this one, huh?”

“Does seem that way, yes. I’m guessing there are reasons you don’t want people to know.”

I snorted. “To put it mildly. Not sure where to start, though, honestly. Never really done this.”

“Done what?”

I gestured vaguely. “This conversation. Explaining things to someone who has no context. I guess I should start by asking what you’ve figured out already.”

“Not a lot,” Caleb admitted. “The fact that you haven’t aged a day in fifteen years is pretty obvious. I’ve picked up on some other oddities. But it’s hard to find information, and I don’t know how much of what I’ve heard to trust.”

“Yeah, well. There are reasons nobody talks about this stuff.” I paused. “On which note, and I cannot stress this enough: Don’t talk about this stuff. Very bad things will happen if you do. That’s not a threat, to be clear, more just a warning.”

“I do have some practice with keeping information confidential, given my profession.” He sounded a little amused now.

I laughed, though it came out sharp and bitter. “I am aware. But the consequences if you spill someone’s secrets in my world are…different. And that’s particularly the case when you’re talking to vanilla humans, hence why I haven’t.”

“This conversation poses a risk to you, then.”

I shrugged. “Not directly, not quite. Telling individuals is one thing. Telling society as a whole is quite another. If you try to go to the news or whatever, I might survive, or I might not. You…would be very lucky if all that happens is you die.”

“They wouldn’t believe it anyway. But I take your point.”

“Good. Okay, uh, where to start.” I was quiet for a moment, thinking.

This was, honestly, almost a worst-case scenario for me. Caleb had clearly figured out exactly enough to get himself into serious trouble, but not enough to have any fucking idea how to avoid it. Worse, he knew this about and because of me, which meant that he was liable to get me into serious trouble as well.

“Maybe with what you are? Like I said, I know the answer isn’t human, but very few details beyond that.”

"Right," I said. "I'm...ugh. Explaining from scratch is such a mess, and I don't have that much time right now. This was supposed to be a short talk, I have things going on tonight that I can't miss." I paused. "Also, I shouldn't stay here too long. Standing still is a pretty terrible idea for me at the moment, for a whole bunch of reasons. So any explanation right now will be necessarily brief."

"Understood. Should we go somewhere less public?"

"Nah. Nobody's sitting close enough to hear, there are no cameras with a good view, and I don't trust you enough to go somewhere alone with you. No offense, just kinda...I'm up to five assassination attempts in the past week, and it has me a bit twitchy."

Caleb paused. "That's reasonable, I think. You're sure you're okay?"

I snorted. "Of course not. But I *definitely* do not have time to go into that. So. Short version, a lot of the things you're used to thinking of as myth or folklore are very much real. They've been staying quiet for the past thousand years or so, and while I don't really know why, I do know that very bad things happen to anyone who breaks that rule. My father's human, my mother wasn't, the output is, well, this." I gestured vaguely as though to indicate a variety of things about myself. I wasn't sure what all he had noticed, and I would rather not give any *more* information away thinking he already knew it.

"About what I figured. It's not a great act, by the way. If you don't want people to notice, you might want to be more careful."

"Reasons I don't spend much time around humans," I muttered. "I should have known better with you. I mean, I did know better, but I'm kind of a dumbass and too stubborn for my own good."

"I know, but at least you can admit it." Caleb was grinning now.

I managed to sulk for about three seconds before I was grinning too. "Jackass."

"I know, but at least I can admit it." I snickered, and his grin got a little wider, more satisfied. "I've missed this, you know. Actually engaging with you."

My smile faded fast at that comment. "Yeah," I said. "I'd apologize for being distant, but frankly it would be more fair to apologize for not doing a better job of it. Vanilla humans who stumble into things like this...don't tend to fare well. You end up with all the isolation and danger involved, and none of the perks."

"Maybe so." Caleb didn't immediately contradict me, which was somewhat reassuring. It meant he might take me seriously when I told him this stuff was dangerous, and *that* would make things much easier for all parties involved. "So what happens next?"

"I go somewhere with fewer civilians," I said dryly. "Before the next bomb goes off. We'll talk more later, but for now I need you to promise that you won't discuss the topic with anyone else before that conversation."

"I already said I wasn't going to tell anyone."

I shook my head as I stood up. “No, not good enough. I need you to actually, directly promise me. I can explain why later, but it’s important. Think of it as being a bit like the attorney stuff around confidentiality.”

“Okay,” Caleb said, in a tone that sounded like he was humoring me. “I promise that I won’t discuss anything that you have told me in this conversation with someone other than you before we talk again.”

“Good,” I said, and walked away without saying goodbye.

“So how’d it go?” Saori sounded appallingly cheerful. So did the music, which was currently an uptempo ragtime song happily describing the singer’s descent into corruption at the hands, or rather the paws, of a demonic cat.

“Turns out he already knew I’m not really human, has suspected for years and been too polite to tell me,” I said, similarly cheerful. “Also told me I’m a terrible liar, which you already know, and he enabled my hypervigilance enough that I’m starting to wonder whether he has experience with this kind of thing and I just never realized.”

“So what I’m hearing here is ‘not great’,” Saori said dryly, taking a corner sharply enough that even Raincloud felt a little unsettled by it. I thought we might also might now be going the wrong way down a one-way street, but I wasn’t about to open my eyes long enough to check.

“Yeah, not ideal,” I said. “Not quite a disaster, but definitely suboptimal.”

“I look forward to the inevitable escalation,” Saori said, still sounding cheerful. “So, wanna go get ready for the guaranteed disaster tonight?”

“Sure,” I said, and the rest of the drive dissolved into wind and laughter and pulsing drums.

We stopped at the Blackbird Cabaret to do the last bits of prep before leaving. There were a few reasons for that. I hadn’t wanted to wear the formal outfit I’d put together to meet with Caleb, for one thing. For another, it allowed for a group hug first, which was nice.

But probably the most significant was that Raincloud needed somewhere to wait. Even if I’d thought that dragging her along was a good idea—which I definitely didn’t, and I tended to think the less attention she was getting from people like this, the better off she was—the invitation had specified one escort. I was guessing even vaguely pushing the bounds of that permission was a terrible idea. This was the safest, and probably the most pleasant, place for her to chill while Saori and I were off being lunatics.

I sat with her for a few minutes while Saori was getting dressed, which she did in another room for some reason. It felt nice, in a way, to sit there and brush her fur out some while she made happy noises. Raincloud was important to me, and I tried to make sure she knew that. I hadn’t spent much time specifically with her over the past few days. Correcting that felt good.

As I was sitting there, I got another question from her. It was somewhat fascinating to me how many she'd had over the past week and change. They were almost the only things she'd even said in words so far, and the curiosity that implied was interesting to me.

In this case, there was a mental impression of Caleb, one that I thought was probably mostly drawn from my own memories, given that Raincloud hadn't actually seen him. That was probably why it felt somewhat vague. Then another question, in words, simply phrased but undeniably still words. *Do you want me to kill him for you?*

I sighed, slow and soft. The question was...not unfounded. It was, I knew, the smart choice. Caleb was currently a vulnerability at best and quite possibly actively dangerous to me now. I was pretty sure I could trust him not to hurt me with this, but I'd also been pretty sure he didn't know what was going on with me, and apparently I'd been wrong about that for years now. The smart thing to do would be to just trim that loose end now, and do it in a way that made sure I wouldn't need to worry about him again.

No, I replied eventually, feeling tired as I continued to comb out the tangles in her fur. *For a few reasons. One, I'd rather not kill him if I don't have to, and I don't know for sure that he will be a problem for me. Two, I don't know what he may have already done with this information. Caleb is a smart guy, he has to know that there are dangers here. He might have set up a deadman's switch of some kind, and if so he's had years in which to construct it. If you kill people first and ask questions later, you don't get answers.*

She considered that for a moment, and then I felt a sort of agreement or understanding from her. *What will you do if he does turn out to be a problem?*

I don't know, I replied honestly. *Too many unknowns, too many possible avenues things might take. It would depend heavily on what kind of problem that is. Even if lethal force does become necessary, though, I wouldn't ask you to do it unless I have to. All other factors aside, I'd feel weird about it, like I was trying to hide from the responsibility. I try to own the choices I make. And at least for the moment, I don't think I have to make that choice; getting that promise out of him buys me a lot of safety for the time being.*

You think he'll see it as being that important? Raincloud felt distinctly dubious at that.

Which I couldn't blame her for, because I was laughing at the notion myself. *No, almost certainly not. But the threat Caleb poses is mostly that he'll make* other *people want me dead by implicating me in a security breach. As it stands, he'll be making himself an oathbreaker in the process, and the people I actually would be in danger from* do *care that much. I think I can spin getting that promise as due diligence, and if I behave appropriately after he breaks his word I'll be seen as being the wounded party and as having fixed the problem myself, rather than a conspirator in his choices.*

The agreement settled out into a sort of contented understanding. I finished brushing her, and then stood up and started getting myself ready for the evening.

"You told me to wear something nice."

Saori looked me up and down. "Yeah," she said. "You did pretty good, too. I'm impressed, you barely look like a drowned rodent at all." She was, in fact, openly leering at me, which was probably a good sign.

"Thanks," I said. I had thought so, but it was nice to have the confirmation. I'd ended up going with something relatively simple. A black sleeveless blouse, on the logic that the tattoos had been made by a master of the art and were appropriately gorgeous, and I was better off relying on his work than my own aesthetic skills. Loose black pants, because a skirt was far too restrictive and I wanted to be able to sprint if I had to run from security or something. Boots for the same reason, though they were at least passably formal. A few pieces of jewelry, silver partly because it was cheaper than gold and mostly because I'd always liked it more, set with emeralds partly because they were cheaper than diamonds and mostly because they complimented my eyes well.

"I'm happy to check your ass out anytime, don't worry." She was grinning now.

"Which is great and all, but not what I meant." I was also staring at her, but in a much less pleased way. "You call that nice?"

"Nope!" the kitsune said cheerfully, starting the car. "No, this is trashy."

Trashy seemed like a bit of an understatement. She was wearing a tight black T-shirt that had "YOUR GIRLFRIEND WANTS TO SCREW ME AND YOUR BOYFRIEND WANTS TO BE ME" printed on it in neon pink. Her jeans were more patch than original fabric, and she'd somehow managed to replace the dark red streaks in her hair with even more vibrant electric green ones. Technically she was also wearing jewelry, but hers consisted of cheap facial piercings, cheaper bangles, and a spiked leather collar. It was...certainly a *striking* visual.

"I think I might need to invent new words for that, because you're far enough into trashy that calling it just 'trashy' seems almost criminal," I said dryly.

"Thanks! That means a lot to me." She sounded appallingly cheery this evening, really, all around.

"Okay, but why do I have to wear nice things and you get to be trashy?"

"Because I have the charisma and persona to pull it off, and you would just look like you don't know how to dress yourself." Saori was smirking. I couldn't see it, but I could hear it in her voice.

I sighed. But I was just as glad that she had put on harp dubstep at a volume that made conversation impractical, because I had to admit she probably had a point.

The Way was set to open at sunset, at some random spot in the forest just outside the city. It was actually relatively close to Lord Cerdinen's manor, though thankfully not close enough to make me think he was involved. He might owe me, and he might like me, but as with Silas, relying upon a lord of the Midnight Court for help was...delicate at best. Saori got us there a little early, and then got several hundred imaginary dollars out of me playing gin while we waited.

It was much more dramatic, when the Way did open, than Saori's portal had led me to expect. Rather than a slow, vague web of magic gradually building until it was visible as a faint heat haze, it happened almost instantly. Exactly as the sun dipped fully behind the horizon, I felt a sudden surge of magic, one that felt as anonymous as the first parts of the portal had, magic without any of the overtones I was used to perceiving. But there was no gradual focusing in this time. The spell formed patterns in an instant, patterns that I was only seeing part of but undeniably *patterned*. The structures formed, extended in a direction I had no name for, and a moment later, there was an oval of darkness a little taller than I was just…floating in the air.

Looking at it, I had the same odd feeling that I was seeing something extending in a direction I didn't understand. The opening itself was so thin I thought it might be literally and impossibly two-dimensional, with no width whatsoever; from the side it wasn't even there. But when I looked into it from the entrance side, there was depth. I could barely tell, because it was all pitch black, but there was a feeling that I was seeing depth perception extending in a direction I had never seen before.

It was freaky, frankly, and I shivered. But Saori was moving with total confidence, and there was no way out but through. I checked that the invitation was secure and accessible, and then stepped forward into the Way.

To my surprise, it really was painless. Portals apparently sucked so much that even a relatively tame one had left Saori semiconscious at best for several minutes, and while she had said that Ways didn't have the same effect, I had still on some level been expecting this to be at least a little unpleasant.

It wasn't. I moved forward into the darkness, and I had the feeling of continuing to move forward, just with "forward" pointing a direction I didn't usually see. I wasn't sure I was walking, and I had little awareness of my body; the world was dark and deep. But it wasn't unpleasant, just foreign, and it only lasted a couple seconds before I was stepping out the far side. I didn't pass out; I didn't even lose my balance.

We emerged into the heavens. I had no better description than that. It wasn't that it was impossibly pleasant, or that I had a feeling of benevolence here, nothing like that. But the only comparison point I had for the environment I was now in was fictional depictions of heaven. The ground under my feet wasn't ground at all, it was clouds, which were impossibly thick and strong. More than enough to hold my weight. The feeling was odd, springy in a way that reminded me a tiny bit of a trampoline, but not enough to actually throw me off balance.

I looked around, and saw nothing but more clouds in all directions. There were walls to both sides, but they were all built out of clouds, varying in color and consistency, varying in size. We seemed to be in a sort of enclosed courtyard, one so large that recognizing that it was enclosed rather than being outside the castle entirely took me a couple seconds.

And it definitely was a castle, too. The buildings around the courtyard were at least five stories tall, and looked to be fortified heavily. Ahead I could see a sort of central keep large enough that it was hard for me to fully conceive of it as a building. The tower at the center of that larger complex had to be as tall as a skyscraper, and not a small one at that. And every bit of it was, impossibly, made out of clouds, like we were walking through an architect's wet dream set in a traditional European idea of Heaven.

And the best part? I wasn't even seeing the whole castle. This was the view from *inside* the castle, able to see only the portion of it that loomed over the surrounding parts of the structure. I had no idea how large the structure was taken as a whole, and I suspected I was glad for that. I wasn't ready to see that tonight.

"Holy fuck," I said, in a voice that registered even to me as awestruck, looking at Nephele's castle. "What the fucking hell."

"Yeah, she did a pretty good job on it," Saori said. She didn't sound awestruck. She sounded like a jaded urbanite humoring her rural cousin who had come from the country to visit the city. It was casual. But when she then added, "The rules here aren't like what you're used to," there was a distinct thread of warning in her tone.

"Yeah," I said, shaking myself out of it and starting to move. "Yeah, getting that impression." A glance back confirmed that at least the Way seemed to still be open, a dark oval hanging in the air just like the one I'd walked into to get here.

Then I paused as something else occurred to me. "She built this whole thing out of clouds," I said, poking the one underneath of me with my foot.

"Yup! You uh. You do realize her name literally translates as 'cloud', right? Nephele is a weather nymph, this is her thing."

I sighed. Of course it was. Of fucking *course* it was. Because really, if I were to get a creepy invitation to a Sidhe event hosted by a nymph exactly when those were the two classes of creature I was currently being threatened by, why *wouldn't* it also wrap in my involuntary-but-constant storm motif? That would just be inefficient.

Nothing else was said between the Way and the castle interior. I was trying, with limited success, to acclimate myself to the surroundings here. Everything felt just...slightly *off* as though it weren't quite anything I was accustomed to. The light was steady, though there was no sun above, and I had no sense of what time it might be. The air was cool, but comfortable, and so still it was a little eerie. On a more metaphysical level, the whole place felt saturated with the same cool, mist-and-birdsong feeling I'd momentarily noticed when Saori activated the travel instructions on this invitation. It was stronger here, enough that I could also feel fainter elements, a note of amber in the scent, a rainbow overlay on my visual field. The energy flows around me were, in general, significantly stronger than what I was used to, and significantly less varied.

Taken as a whole, it was a little disorienting, and I didn't like that. If just walking across the courtyard screwed with me, that did not bode well for my ability to tolerate the party itself.

Someone waved us over once we got close to the wall, a tall, wispy humanoid creature I did not recognize and did not try to. I was keeping my perceptual filters as strong as I knew how, and still didn't feel like it would be enough. Actually making sense of what the beings around me were was a *terrible* idea.

Instead, I just showed it the invitation. It read through it, carefully and closely, and then passed it back to me and bowed. "This way, my ladies," it said in a voice that sounded like whistling, and turned to walk into the castle. I followed, holding Saori's hand a little too tight, like a child clinging to her mother's hand for comfort in an overwhelming place. The kitsune smiled at me, a gentler smile than her usual wild grins, and we followed the strange, wispy being into the castle itself.

Nephele's ballroom was exactly as impossible as the overall construction of the castle had led me to expect. It was the size of a factory floor, and not a small factory, either. Everything was still made of clouds, but they'd gotten more artistic in here; there were sculptures in the walls, and abstract designs made with clouds of different colors and consistencies. All of that art was, naturally, amazing.

It had taken a while to walk there from the courtyard. I didn't even try to keep track of the path; there were too many twists and turns, and I wasn't sure how geometry even worked here, which made it hard to tell where we had ended up in relation to the entrance. But it was a long walk, through wide corridors paved with clouds.

In a way, the sheer degree to which the place felt unreal was starting to be helpful. It was like my surroundings were so far removed from what I was used to that it had stopped registering as a real place. It felt more like a dream or a vision, and that made it easier, made it so that I could process events without trying to make sense of an environment that was not amenable to any sense I knew.

"Wow," I said once we reached the ballroom itself, looking out over the space. We had come in at the top of a small staircase, and I had an excellent view. The whole room, the size of a factory floor, was full of the Sidhe, and there was nothing that could possibly have prepared me for that.

They were, on the whole, beautiful. Not all of them, but the majority seemed to favor forms that looked mostly human, and most of those forms were beautiful in ways that humans simply couldn't be. A model or a world-class beauty might come close to a few of the Sidhe, but they would still fall far short of the more beautiful among them. And, at least as importantly, the model would be nowhere near as graceful, not remotely close to the elegance of movement on display here.

"Yeah," Saori said, looking out at the crowd as well. "Yeah, that's, uh, that's a lot of faeries."

"I have no idea where to start," I admitted. I was still watching the crowd milling about, struggling to pull my eyes away. It was just…so much.

"Find some landmarks," Saori said, somewhat surprising me with the practicality of her advice. She didn't even throw in any bizarre, disturbing, and/or obscene details. "The buffet is to the right, and across the hall. The throne is to the left. You can use those as anchors so you know where you are, and the food in particular will be quieter than the rest of the room, if you need that."

I blinked, with some effort, and then looked to the right. She was, I saw, correct. There was a whole line of banquet tables over there, and at a glance they were covered in food. Other tables were scattered around that general area, too, probably for the guests to sit and eat at. Because of that use, there wasn't as much movement there; the Sidhe, and whoever the hell else got invited to this, were seated. It was…easier to pull my attention away when they were still.

"Right," I said. "Nothing for it, I guess. Start with food, I guess?"

"I'm a sucker for a buffet." Saori grinned. "And nobody does feasts like the Sidhe. Oh, and it's safe to eat at an event like this, by the way. No drugs, no poison, no curses or whatever. It's in the truce agreement."

"Good," I said. I'd been worried about that; there were so many stories, in both faerie tales and Greek myths, about people who ate food of another world, and found themselves trapped there

as a result. But it made sense this would be relatively safe, and I trusted Saori when she said it was in the terms of the invitation, which made it sacrosanct.

We started down the stairs in that direction. And then, halfway down the staircase, I looked the other direction, towards the throne. That…was a mistake. Because that's where the dance floor was.

I had thought that the crowd of fae was beautiful. And it was, but *this* was something else entirely. The dancers were so graceful, so beautiful, and the magic slid over me like rainbows and dappled sun-and-shadow patterns on the leaves of trees. I watched, captivated, and the rest of the world was forgotten.

There were no words for the high Sidhe dancing, none whatsoever. Human languages were never made with the intention of capturing visions like this. There had to be a hundred of them, and they were all impossibly beautiful, even the ones who were incredibly ugly. And their dance, their movement, was impossibly perfect. Every step, every tiniest shift of weight and change of posture, was perfect. There were no missteps, no errors. They whirled and spun and flowed past each other with wild abandon, and never got in each other's way, never stumbled or collided with another dancer.

I was accustomed to tearing my attention away from beauty before it overloaded my perceptions. There was always a temptation to sit and watch the parallax movements of light on the river, or the chaotic dance of energy flows and emotional echoes, always a temptation to let go of myself and drift in the music and emotions and vibrancy of a concert. There was always an impulse saying I should just keep going, when I did those things, that they were so beautiful and so wondrous that I should just lose myself in them. Pulling myself back from that edge was a familiar thing, one I had been practicing for decades now.

What I learned now was that none of that had prepared me for seeing the high Courts of the Sidhe dancing. I was captivated, staring, tracking the various patterns of movement of one relative to another, fascinated by the display. Beauty did not describe it, was entirely too small a word. This was nothing humans had ever had a word for. It was graceful and beautiful and vivid and amazing and terrifying and distressing and wonderful all at once, all those things woven through each other into a single concept that dominated my attention.

I wasn't sure how long I spent like that. Time didn't seem to be real, during the moment; someone could have told me it had been anywhere from a minute to a day, and I would not have been able to confidently dismiss their estimate. I was lost, and the urge to just keep watching, to lose myself completely in it, to go and join the dance and be subsumed into that beauty, was immense. As with my usual sensory overload, I knew that it would feel good, would feel *amazing*—right up until it felt terrible.

But with most of my experiences, "terrible" just meant that I would have a seizure, pass out, and wake up a while later feeling sick and headachy and in a bad mood. I was pretty sure people who lost themselves within the Sidhe Courts' dance didn't get off anywhere near that easy. I was

pretty sure those people never found themselves again. I had a strong suspicion I would never even want to.

Pulling myself back, closing my eyes and turning away, might have been the single hardest thing I had ever done, in terms of the sheer willpower it required. I couldn't think of anything that could compare. Even with the ridiculous amount of experience I had at this exact task, even knowing the danger and knowing what to expect, it was still the hardest thing I had ever done in terms of the mental fortitude and force of will it required. I managed it, but it was close.

When I opened my eyes again, I found Saori still there, holding my hand tight, like she was wondering whether she would have to pull me back by main force and knew she couldn't overpower me if she tried. She looked more than a little worried, and that was interesting, because I hadn't seen that in her before. Not this clearly. There were moments of concern, flickers of anxiety, but I couldn't remember seeing anything quite like this. She had been concerned about me, wondering whether I was okay after seizures or such, but this was the first time I had ever seen actual worry, seen this kind of anxiety that something bad was *about* to happen to me.

I wasn't sure quite how to define the difference. And I only saw it for a moment, so briefly that I wasn't totally sure I'd seen it at all. All the same, it seemed...important to me somehow, significant. I filed that tidbit away to think about later, and stood up straight, and carefully did not look anywhere near the dance floor.

"Took you long enough," Saori said, with mockery in her voice that couldn't *quite* cover the underlying concern. "Starting to wonder whether I'd have to get a bucket of water to throw on you or something."

I laughed. "Yeah. Uh. I'm sorry. Kind of a lot to take in."

"No, *I'm* Saori. You're someone else." That was a pun she made often enough that there was a nonzero part of me that wondered whether she'd literally picked the name because it worked as a near-homophone like that. It still got a laugh out of me, though, and felt oddly reassuring in its familiarity. More quietly, she added, "And it is a lot. Especially the first time."

"Yeah. First time for a lot of things, I guess." I shook my head once, trying and failing to clear it, and then started down the stairs again. I had stood still like that long enough for it to mark me as prey for anyone who had been paying attention already. I didn't want to make it any more pronounced than it already was.

"Yup!" Saori was back to grinning now. "You're stacking *so many* bad ideas on top of each other right now. I'm very proud of you. I wonder if they have popcorn at the buffet. We should go check on that."

I sighed, but I also laughed.

Saori had said that no one did feasts like the Sidhe. This proved to be true, but as expected at this point, it was true in ways that I had no ability to really grasp, *a priori*, no context in which to place the words. The Sidhe did feasts like no one else, like no mortal ever could.

To start with, the sheer scale was staggering. There were so many tables covered in so many dishes that it would have probably taken me hours to even identify all of them. Many were things that were surreal, excessive, or even outright impossible by mortal standards. I had never tasted unicorn steak before, for example, and while I wasn't quite willing to do so tonight either, the simple fact that it was *there* spoke volumes.

The dishes were all made of glass, including the cutlery, glass so clear that it was hard to tell it was there at all. I grabbed a plate and started going down the table, picking things more or less at random. There didn't seem to be much order in how they were laid out, anyway, at least not one I understood. Cream puffs with elaborate, delicately spiced sauces were sitting next to what appeared to be butterflies roasted with herbs on one side, and thinly sliced sheets of grilled salmon on the other.

Every culture imaginable seemed to be represented, too, though I wasn't sure how much of that perception was just because I was used to thinking of foods based on where they happened in my world. Then again, this party was apparently particularly linked with the mortal world, so maybe it *was* imitation. Regardless, I saw everything from barbecue and traditional Aztec meat preparations to elaborate French desserts to century eggs from Southeast Asia.

Saori found me at the end of the table feeling a little lost and a lot overwhelmed, but with a fairly large portion of food selected. The kitsune didn't seem to have any, though she had acquired a cup of what smelled like coffee, a small bowl of popcorn, and a distinctly unhappy expression.

"Hi," she said. "Doing okay still?"

I shrugged. "So far, I think mostly?"

"Good. So, um. I saw an old friend, and I really ought to at least talk to her." Saori's face and voice were not those of someone going to meet an old friend. Friends did not inspire that kind of agitation.

"And I shouldn't be there for it?" I guessed.

"No. You *really* shouldn't." Saori sounded unusually serious as she said that, enough that I found it interesting, and surprisingly compelling. Saori rarely took much seriously, and that she was right now was…indicative. "I'll only be a few minutes. This is just…she would be salty if she learned I was here and didn't at least say hello. I'd rather avoid that. Think you'll be okay on your own for a couple minutes?"

I laughed. "Probably not, but I think okay is an implausible target regardless. I don't think I'm in any immediate danger without you, though."

"Awesome. Find a table and I'll meet you there in a bit." Saori grinned, and kissed me. Her mouth tasted like coffee and spice and fire, and then she was walking away, and she was lost in the crowd almost instantly.

"Find a table," I repeated, turning to look at the seating area. I did not see any unoccupied tables, and I extremely did not like the idea of asking someone if I could join them right now. "Right."

Abruptly, and without any warning whatsoever, I heard a voice directly next to me. “I can give you a hand with that,” it said, and I damn near jumped out of my skin. I was glad that my plate was on the table at the time, because if I’d been holding it there was no way I would have kept it in my hands. It was just…so close, and so sudden, and I was already on edge just from being here.

I moved a step away, turning towards the source of that voice. Predictably, I saw Dusk. Predictably, when she had said last time that I should see her when she dressed up, she had not been joking. She did not, superficially, appear so very different from last time. The basic elements were all the same. She had the same dusky skin tone, the same basic body shape. Even the outfit was much the same.

But it was all pushed several steps further. She wasn’t wearing a black-and-white tiger print coat, now. Nothing so mundane. No, she was wearing a black-and-white tiger *pelt*, and one so fresh that rather than pink trim, the edges were red and bloody, left streaks of blood on the skin beneath. She had nothing on underneath it, which made that easy to see. Her pants were forest green, and I thought they might be made of living moss. She still had a garland of skulls, but they were not even close to being plastic holiday trinkets. They were actual fucking skulls, small enough to be both comfortable to wear and uncomfortable to think about, definitely real bone. And her face…well.

The last time I saw her, Dusk was wearing red-rimmed sunglasses. In a way, this was the same. There was red surrounding black. But it wasn’t sunglasses. The rims of her eyelids were scarlet, like she was weeping blood. And the space where there should be eyes just…wasn’t there.

I had no better explanation. It wasn’t that her eyes were dark, or even that they were solid black. That would have been mild by comparison. It was more like they weren’t even there, but neither was anything else. She had void where eyes should be, darker than dark and endless.

I made the mistake of meeting those eyes, and fell into the emptiness. It was, in its way, at least as captivating as the Sidhe dancing, and similarly, I couldn’t say how much time was passing. It might have only been moments; it might have been forever. I had no sense of time, had no sense of my body or my surroundings. Her eyes had depths that were so dark, so much deeper than I was ready for, that I was pretty sure I could literally fall into them and be lost forever. It was like looking out at the void of space where no stars burned, and the darkness was full of mad, vibrant laughter.

Eventually, she chose to blink, and I staggered backwards, bumping up against the table hard enough to knock a few glasses over. When Dusk opened her eyelids again, she had eyes, though they were still creepy, bloodshot with irises as black as the pupils. They didn’t seem to be exerting the same effect anymore, had only been that endless darkness for a single moment.

I didn’t care. I was so freaked I was hyperventilating, just from that momentary eye contact. This…was not a woman. I was not sure what she was, but there was nothing mortal in those eyes, and nothing sane. I still couldn’t feel her signature at all, buried under the noise of the surrounding

party, but I had gotten a taste, just the tiniest taste, of the degree of power she held in that endless moment lost in the darkness, and I was fucking *terrified* by it.

"You should have seen your face," she said brightly. Her lips were so red I thought they might literally be painted with fresh blood. "Priceless. Anyway. Good evening, glad you could make it, et cetera."

I just stared at her, trying and failing to find words. And then, suddenly, it clicked.

It was the skulls that did it. The rest of her appearance was creepy, but not in a way that was specific enough to have registered. But a garland of skulls worn as a necklace was just so specific that once I registered its significance, once I put it in the context of what I had just seen in her eyes, I went from hyperventilating to almost too scared to breathe at all in less than a second.

"Dusk," I said, not responding to what she'd just said at all, and I was rather proud that my voice sounded only moderately thin. "As in, the onset of darkness."

Her smile spread a little wider. Her lips were so red, and her teeth so very white. She said nothing.

"Does that darkness happen to be of the great, primordial variety?" I didn't sound like I was asking a question, not really. I sounded like I was very much hoping that I didn't know the answer, and very sure I did.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to catch on," she said by way of answer. "I was considering just using Dark, but that felt a little too melodramatic. It would just be tacky in English, you know?"

"How about in another language, then," I said. "Good evening, Kali."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kali.

Kali, the dark goddess of the Hindu pantheon. The mother and the destroyer. She was the kind of goddess who consumed a whole army of demons in one sitting, and wanted to keep going. She was the endless darkness outside of time itself, the primordial night that had given rise to all things, and that would one day consume all things. She was the goddess of the cremation grounds and the birthing room, the patron of mystics and midwives and murderers alike.

And she was talking to me. I *owed her a favor*.

I was fucked beyond the capacity of my language or my mind to truly apprehend.

"I was worried I was being too obvious, but I guess at least you got there eventually. And your face really was priceless," she said to me in a casual tone. "But this is a terrible place for a chat. Grab your plate, drinks are on the left."

I did as instructed, feeling numb, like I was so overwhelmed by the magnitude of what I had just realized that I couldn't perceive any other emotions through it. I had no ability to even consider what I should do right now, but ignoring her seemed like literally the worst possible idea at the moment, so I grabbed my food and a glass I hadn't looked at, and trailed along in her wake.

She brushed through the crowd like they weren't even there. Now that I understood what I was dealing with, that did not surprise me in the slightest. This was a festival of the scariest, most powerful Sidhe, the high nobles of the Courts. But she was fucking *Kali*. No one sane wanted to be anywhere even close to somewhere that might potentially be in her way.

I didn't even put any thought towards the possibility that I was wrong, or that she was lying. I couldn't convince myself of that even for a moment. The darkness I had seen in her eyes was...enough to be pretty damn convincing.

I followed in her wake, passing through the crowd effortlessly just by dint of being behind her, and thought furiously. It went without saying that I was screwed, but I had to figure out how to manage that, how to behave towards Kali now that I knew who she was.

The first thought that occurred to me was to be deeply respectful, to be humble and subservient towards her. This thought was a treacherous one, though, and I quashed it almost instantly. I still trusted my initial read of her as being playful more than menacing towards me, and I was pretty sure she had genuinely been amused when I was a wiseass.

And as soon as I thought about that, it made total sense. Kali was one of the most dangerous beings in existence, but people *knew* that. I expected that people were humble sycophants towards her all the time. She heard trite honorifics and servile tones all the time. I imagined it was probably quite a bit rarer that someone who knew who she was mouthed off to her. Weirdly enough, I was pretty sure that being overly respectful right now was a phenomenally bad idea. It would make me boring, and I *could not* afford for Kali to be bored with me.

Maybe Capinera was right, I mused idly, with a sort of detached, dissociated amusement. Maybe I really was well-suited to this social situation for once.

All of these thoughts flickered through my mind as we walked. It wasn't a long walk, and unsurprisingly, Kali did not have any difficulty finding an open table. I barely noticed my surroundings, too numb and too overwhelmed all at once. But within a few moments, she was pulling out a chair and dropping into it, in a posture so casual it was eerie in this setting. She was practically lounging, and she was gesturing to one of the other chairs. There seemed to be three at this table, one of the smaller tables, and tucked away in a quiet, relatively empty part of the room.

I sat down, set my plate on the table. Both chair and table seemed to be made out of clouds, though they were dark clouds this time, storm rather than calm skies. I had to admit, the food did smell amazing, and I was sure it was far better than any human cooking possibly could be. I wasn't sure I would be able to eat any of it through the anxiety, but still, it smelled good.

"So how are you finding the party?" Kali asked me, with a loose, lazy smile that didn't touch her eyes.

"Well, I see that you were not lying about the buffet," I responded. "Better than snacks from my kitchen, I have to admit. And Nephele's interior decorating is very impressive, albeit a little bit one-note."

"Tiny bit," she said, grinning wider. "She's definitely got a theme going. Very…enthusiastic about it."

"Quite." I prodded a shrimp with my fork, trying to convince myself to actually eat it, with little luck so far. "And the guests are quite…striking."

"Tiny bit," Kali repeated. "I notice you haven't spoken with any of them."

"In fairness, you found me before I'd even started eating," I pointed out. "It seemed like it would be a shame to do something stupid and end up in indentured servitude to faeries somehow without at least sampling the buffet first."

"An attitude I can respect," Kali said. She was still grinning, and I was pretty sure it was sincere, but I was fully aware that I lacked the capacity to actually tell. Not with Kali.

Nor was I at all capable of predicting what she would do. That, in some ways, was the part that had me truly scared right now. I knew nothing about her beyond her vague reputation, the parts that had made it into Hindu myths and theology. And those scraps, as far as I knew, were almost totally useless for actually predicting Kali's behavior. The problem was that she embodied both creation and destruction, that she was depicted as both the nurturing mother and the mad, frenzied warrior. I had no idea which I was going to get, and I knew with full confidence that if it was the latter, there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

I wasn't sure what to say, so I just ventured the shrimp instead. It was delicious, strongly spiced and tender. I managed to swallow it, though with some difficulty.

"Have to say, though," I said after another moment's thought. "When you said I should see you when you dressed up, I was hoping you meant you had *more* taste when you took it seriously.

I'm not sure even a blind pimp would opt for that coat, I think they'd smell the blood and realize they grabbed the wrong pelt. It's kind of amazing, honestly."

I was very tense, as I said that. This was...a unique sort of stressful. I was trying to be enough of a wiseass to avoid boring her, without being insulting enough to actually piss her off. And if I fucked up in either direction, things might be about to get...very unpleasant for me.

But apparently I was doing alright so far, because Kali was laughing like a jackal. "I don't normally go this traditional," she admitted. "But your face when you caught on? Priceless."

I sighed. "I'm glad *someone* is amused. So what's next, then? Cackling at the noises I make upon seeing a centipede?"

"No, but I'll make a note for next time," Kali said with an easy, infectious sort of grin and the sound of breaking glass and wild, frenzied laughter behind her voice. I could understand a little better, now, why those overtones didn't feel like an ordinary signature to my senses. "No, for tonight I think I'll just let you enjoy your meal. Maybe nudge someone over this way who might want to chat, that sort of thing."

And just that fast, she was getting up and leaving, looking very little like a dark, dangerous goddess. She just looked like a smug woman with terrible fashion sense. I didn't even have time to start kicking myself about the centipede thing, having now virtually guaranteed that was in my future.

I skipped straight to kicking myself about how *easy* it was, instead. There was no way that was real. The notion that I had interacted face to face with Kali and come out of it this unscathed was ludicrous. No, the question was more what I had overlooked or was about to experience, and I didn't think I was going to like finding out the answer.

But she was already gone in the crowd, and I wasn't remotely stupid enough to chase after her. And now that I'd managed to swallow something, my stomach was politely reminding me that I had literally the best food I'd ever seen in front of me and hadn't eaten since lunch.

I started eating. It was still a little halting, and I wasn't appreciating it as much as I might have, but even through my current terror it was still delicious.

Saori found me less than two minutes later, and dropped into the chair Kali had just vacated. The kitsune had acquired a plate, now, and seemed...not any *more* uncomfortable than before, so presumably the talk went okay. "'Sup," she said, grinning at me and popping a piece of some fruit I didn't recognize into her mouth.

She knew I was scared, I was sure of that. But she wasn't going to acknowledge it, wasn't going to let her standard presentation of reckless amusement slip. I knew why, and for once it had nothing to do with either of us being dysfunctional wrecks.

No, this was a response to the environment. We were currently surrounded by a whole lot of very powerful people. All of them were dangerous, and many were outright predatory. Acknowledging my anxiety would just make both of us look more like prey to them, and that was a terrible idea.

So, while I was not anything like the actress she was, I didn't comment, either. I grinned, a little too wide, and picked up what appeared to be a piece of sashimi sliced paper-thin and folded into an origami flower. I didn't miss much about Japan, but the food had been good, and I was indulging my nostalgia a bit tonight. "Well, the good news is, I know who Dusk is," I said. "The bad news is, I know who Dusk is, and however much you're expecting to hate me for the answer, I can pretty much promise it's worse than you're guessing."

"Of course it is," she retorted, flicking a candied walnut at me. "It's you. You do disasters like I do pranks."

"So…surreal, violent in really strange ways, confusing for everyone involved, and so bizarre that you can never confidently say that I'm making a story about one of them up on the spot?" I guessed.

Saori laughed. "I mean. I was just going to say 'to ridiculous and spectacular extremes', but I like yours more, so let's go with that."

"I do my best," I said, with poorly-feigned modesty, and sniffed at something I had initially thought was lettuce but which smelled like fresh cherries and black pepper. "So how was your thing?"

She shrugged. "Eh. It was about what I was expecting. Little awkward, but not awful."

"No, see, you're totally missing your lines. You're supposed to have a bizarre story that I can't confidently say is false. Are you sure you're feeling well?" I was grinning more sincerely now. This exchange felt weirdly stabilizing, more than I usually found bad humor to be when stressed, which was saying something. I wasn't sure why, but I actually felt almost level again, if still filled with a deep sense of dread.

Naturally, this was when my next, ah, guest arrived. Though I had to admit he was more polite about it than many. Where Kali had just fucking *appeared* directly next to me and already talking, this guy actually walked up like a normal person and cleared his throat politely. "Kyoko, yes?" he said, in the kind of tone that made the question mark a formality. His voice was a pleasant baritone, one that managed to sound a little rough but feel smooth to my synesthesia, almost like honey.

That was a good description for the rest of his appearance, too. He was rougher than most of the fae here—not ugly, but less refined, less perfect. His hair was a little mussed, and he had a couple actual scars on his face. He was wearing simple clothing, most of it leather; it was all high quality, but it wasn't high fashion. The overall impression wasn't ugly, but it was more roguish charm than impossible perfection. It made me like him more, and therefore I naturally distrusted him on sight.

"So I am told," I said, watching him warily.

"Excellent," he said, flashing a rakish smile. I wasn't sure quite what made something look rakish in general, but he captured it so clearly there was no ambiguity. "Mind if I sit and chat for a bit?"

"Feel free." I did not look away from him, hadn't resumed eating. I was pretty sure that distrust was showing through in my voice, too.

If so, it didn't bother him. He grinned, grabbed the third chair at the table, and sat down. His movements gave me the same impression as the rest of him, a little rougher than the Sidhe around us, still agile but in a way that evoked a burglar more than a dancer. "Excellent. And you would be Saori, then. Of the Shadowed Flame, as I recall?"

"Something like that." Saori was watching him too, and while she covered it better, I was pretty sure she was as wary of this guy as I was. Maybe more so, once he mentioned that title.

"Excellent," he repeated. "Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

"It's challenging for me to say the same," I said. "Given that you've not introduced yourself."

"Ah, my apologies. My name is Gwydion."

I frowned. That name felt...familiar. I couldn't quite place it, but I was sure I had seen it before.

Saori, on the other hand, immediately broke out in a wide grin. "Wait," she said. "Gwydion? The Welsh jackass?"

"I see my reputation precedes me," he replied dryly.

"Dude. You wingman so hard that you *started a war* to get your brother ten minutes alone with a girl. Obviously I'm going to know who you are."

"It was not my finest moment," Gwydion said.

She shrugged. "Maybe, but I have to respect the hustle. Can I get your autograph?"

"Hey," I interrupted, in a mock-offended sort of voice. "I *literally* just seduced a girl *for you*. I think I'm doing a pretty good job here."

"Yes, and I am duly grateful," Saori said. She was actually batting her eyelashes at me, which was not a phrase I could remember having ever seen happen in real life before.

Gwydion broke down laughing at that point. It was, like the rest of him, a little rough. Not ugly at all, but it felt like real laughter rather than the windchime-shiver-song laughs I could hear occasionally from the crowd of Sidhe. "You're good," he said. "You two do parties?"

"Obviously, considering I'm here," I pointed out. This got him to laugh harder. I ate a piece of fish and waited for him to calm down.

"Point taken," he said eventually. "And I suppose that's as good a segue as any to chatting about *why* you're here."

"Which you already know." It wasn't a question. I could barely remember who he might be in the old folklore, but honestly, if he was powerful enough to be here and he already knew who we were, it was a sucker's bet that he knew what was going on. That he was a big enough deal for Saori to recognize his name just further cemented that impression.

"Well, yes. And to save us all some time, I'll just tell you outright that I know quite a bit about the people who have been trying to kill you, and I'm willing to share."

"I'm sensing a 'but' coming," I said.

"Surprisingly, not much of one." Gwydion grinned at me, a broad, friendly sort of grin that didn't get anywhere even close to his eyes. "I'm proposing a fair exchange. Three questions each."

"What is it with people thinking I'll accept open-ended offers without details?" I wondered aloud. "This is getting a bit silly. What do you mean, *specifically*?"

He sighed. "You're not a very trusting person, you know. But fine. Three questions asked of the other, in this conversation. If you don't care to answer a question, you can pass in favor of another. And similarly, if I don't know the answer to something or if answering it would involve something I'm not at liberty to share, you can ask something else."

I was staring at him. "I notice," I said after a moment, "that there's nothing fair about this. Not to undermine my own bargaining position or anything, but I think we both know that there's no way my fund of knowledge is worth a one-to-one exchange rate here."

"Nope!" he agreed cheerfully. "Not a chance. But I'm not really looking for that kind of information here. I'm more…going to ask you some broad philosophical questions, and see what you have to say. I want to know more about how you think. No lies, but you can answer in as much or little detail as you like."

I kept staring. "It's still hard for me to see how that's worth your time. I'm not important relative to the degree of power and knowledge I'm guessing you have."

His smile didn't slip. "But maybe you will be someday, and if so I'll be glad to know then. And, hell, since you made me laugh I'll even give you a freebie that might explain some things. The more…measured…person hunting you lately is a Sidhe nobleman who goes by Cormac Goldenblade. I know this because I despise the man. I've wanted Cormac dead for almost two hundred years, but his political position would make doing it myself…awkward."

"Ah," I said. "Plausible deniability, it never goes out of style."

Was it true? Almost certainly; I got the vibe that Gwydion wasn't quite one of the Sidhe, but he was definitely some kind of fae, and they don't, can't, lie. He was probably playing another game underneath, but the vendetta was enough to explain why he would offer information on this topic specifically as part of that game. And a glance at Saori showed her to be wary, but not hostile, so his reputation probably wasn't *that* bad.

"A perennial favorite," he agreed. "So, do we have a deal?"

I considered for a moment, then shrugged. "Sure, with the caveats we've discussed."

"Excellent," he purred, and I could feel a faint stirring of magic, something like tiny teeth biting into my skin over my whole body. It wasn't exactly painful, but it sure as hell felt odd. "I think I'll go first. So, Kyoko Sugiyama, tell me. Why are you doing this?"

I laughed. "Wow, not kidding about the broad questions. Hm. In an immediate sense, I'm here partially because I thought I might find something valuable, and partially because I did not want to offend our host. But that's very proximate. In a larger sense, I am currently acting to preserve my own safety, in large part because my life is finally going well and I'd like to keep it. At

the most basic level, my long-term motivations mostly have to do with my own experience of life or that of my friends."

Gwydion nodded. "A good answer, and thorough. You've thought about your motives already, I see. Now, tell me. What did you sacrifice to get here?"

I winced at that, and I took longer about answering. Much longer, enough that a human conversational partner might have been pretty frustrated with me. But Gwydion had seen millennia flow past, and I was pretty sure this pause barely registered by comparison.

"To start with the immediate sense again," I said slowly, once I'd sorted through my answer, "so far I've paid for entry to this party mostly in peace of mind. I haven't lost much of material value, but I'm quite nervous about future costs. At a broader scale...friendships I've lost, some material belongings and security recently. And on a fundamental level I think the largest sacrifice I've made is in the ways I've had to structure my life and the parts of life that I've had to cut myself off from, activities I've given up on doing, things of that nature."

He nodded again, slower this time, thoughtful. "Very aware of intangible losses. Interesting. Tell me, was it worth it?"

I sighed, and shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not sure how I could really say, because I don't know what it would have been like if things were different. On the whole, I think maybe? I like my life pretty well now, and while it's definitely a disaster area, I don't think it really would have been *better* if I hadn't had to make those sacrifices."

"I see." Gwydion was quiet for a moment, and then nodded, once. "I look forward to seeing how your answers change in the future. But for today, you've satisfied my curiosity."

Which meant it was my turn. I was quiet for a long moment again, thinking. I had to approach this carefully, because I was certain if I asked general, predictable questions I would get nowhere. In a way, Saori had done a fantastic job of preparing me for this. At this point, I knew how easy it was for her to lure someone into her insane rabbit holes. She left obvious questions open and dangling, and as long as people kept taking the bait, she would always have another layer to pull them into.

Similarly, if I asked obvious questions here, I would get useless answers. If nothing else, Gwydion had clearly planned this encounter, and he would have considered how he meant to answer those obvious questions. Generalities would get me fucked right now. But he couldn't outright lie, so if I could find small, specific questions that he might not expect, I would do better here.

"What," I said slowly, "is the current relationship between Cormac Goldenblade and Ekaterina, daughter of Coronis?"

"Utter hatred," Gwydion replied immediately. "Cormac took offense to something Ekaterina said, around forty years ago now, and responded by killing one of her friends. They've been at each other's throats since then, to the point that it's comical."

I nodded. Not entirely unexpected, but interesting all the same. I'd already been thinking about how she didn't seem to have anything personal against me. But this made sense, and it made me almost peripheral to the existing relationship. Which meant….

I paused and then laughed. "Wait, so. They're squabbling over *who gets to kill me*?" I sounded incredulous, which was why I then continued more sharply, "Which is an exclamatory comment that might invite response with its tone but is clearly a statement in its sentence structure, and *not* a question."

Gwydion already had his mouth open, and looked a bit crestfallen. "Oh, you're no fun," he said. "But you made me laugh, so I'll take the invitation anyway and say that they are and it's hilarious."

"Glad someone thinks so," I muttered, and then went quiet again, thinking. Saori apparently agreed with him, and was suppressing laughter with limited effect. Gwydion was waiting with the patience of a statue while the party continued around us.

What had Capinera said? Don't think in straight lines. Move so far away from the target that you sneak up on it from behind. I didn't need or even want to enforce linear thought here. And then, abruptly, I realized he had left me a massive loophole in exactly that way.

"Who was responsible for a contact of Saori's recommending her services to a guy named Chris in Pittsburgh?" I was grinning now, a little too wide. Saori started when I mentioned her, and even Gwydion looked a little taken aback. It took him a moment to answer, too.

"Ravindra Kalivallabha," Gwydion said after that momentary pause. "He's a rakshasa raja of moderate status. Incidentally, I was expecting you to ask about the whole, you know, reason you're here."

"I'm sure, but you didn't specify." I was still grinning. "And I figure, hell, might as well take the chance while I have it." And then I was quiet again, thinking. I had gotten quite a bit more information than just the name, though that was also useful and something I was going to make careful note of. I'd also confirmed that Gwydion *knew*, which strongly suggested that his interest in us hadn't started with this incident. And I'd confirmed that odd, lateral questions were a good idea.

So, then. Might as well do something completely out of left field. "Why do plants grow well around me?" I asked, watching Gwydion closely.

Thus, I could see him narrow his eyes, very slightly, and the pause had a different mood this time, one I couldn't quite place. "That," he said after that momentary pause, "is not my place to explain. Ask something else."

Which, really, provided almost as much information as if he had answered me. First off, I'd confirmed that he knew this too, which had *implications.* I'd also moved that topic from "funny quirk" to "important secret", and that had even more. So, what else to try? What did I need to know that less…rarefied sources couldn't tell me?

And just like that I had my question. “Why do I feel giddy when I draw Thorn from its sheath?” I asked, still staring at him and grinning like a wolf.

Gwydion went completely still, and just looked at me. He stayed that way, dead silent, not even blinking, for long enough that I got weirded out and cleared my throat. “Um. Hello?”

“Pardon,” he said absently. “Just thinking. You know, I think that’s the most unexpectedly insightful question anyone has asked me in years.”

Well, that wasn’t ominous or anything. I’d just been going on the logic that Thorn was far beyond my ability to analyze, and this was the part of its magic that Alice had the least understanding of. I certainly hadn’t expected this response.

“You’re definitely not *supposed* to know,” he continued after a moment. He was smiling now, a tighter expression, colder and more honest than his previous rakish grin.“But I don’t think that one is actually out of bounds, and I respect the creativity, so here we go. Weapons like Thorn always have a sort of…self-regulating function, and that sword specifically uses euphoria for it. The sword and wielder influence each other, you see. If you didn’t feel euphoric while killing people, you couldn’t bond with it at all. If that euphoria were of a more destructive sort, then it would spiral out of control and you’d get yourself killed in short order. Fortunately, you’re mostly just a giddy lunatic who gets off on the adrenaline rush, and that’s much more stable when amplified.”

There was so much to unpack there that I was left just sitting there trying to grasp it all. I was guessing I looked like I’d just taken a heavy hit, though whether that was followed by “of a drug” or “to the head” was an open question.

“And with that, I believe our bargain is concluded,” Gwydion said into the silence that answer left behind. He stood up, and directed a shallow bow in my direction. “I shan’t keep you longer.”

I watched him go, then fished a small notebook out of its pouch. I wanted to write the conversation down as close to verbatim as I could get, because I was definitely going to be going over those notes in detail later. Then I went back to my food. Saori took a few moments longer, but not many, probably because the desserts were as impossibly good as the rest of the food.

“That was interesting,” I said after a few minutes of eating quietly.

“Seriously. And it is, in fact, hilarious that you have people squabbling over your prospective murder like kids arguing over a toy.” Saori was grinning.

“Glad to be of service,” I sighed. “So. Ravindra Kalivallabha.”

“Yeah. Which, incidentally, isn’t anyone I know. Never had anything much to do with rakshasas.”

“So definitely not an innocent recommendation, then.” I sighed. “Somehow, I just know this is going to turn out to be so convoluted it makes my head hurt.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say it’s because it involves you, me, a rakshasa, and probably some faeries. So, you know, given any one of those would make things bizarre….”

I had to laugh at that. “Okay, fair. I guess at least this wasn’t a waste of time, then. And you were right about the food. I haven’t had decent imagawayaki in years.”

At around that point, for the third time in just over a week, I realized that Saori had gone quiet and was looking past me at someone behind me. The first time, with the satyr at Softened Dreams, had been mildly frustrating, but that was about it. The second was Melissa, and my flinch had been entirely unnecessary.

Somehow I didn’t think I was getting that lucky a third time.

Turning, I looked behind me and saw a woman of roughly average height and build. She had pretty ordinary features and clothing, and in general didn’t seem nearly threatening enough to explain the feeling of subtle but intense danger I felt. But I got a sort of quiet, predatory vibe from her, something that reminded me of a leopard waiting to pounce. And when I looked up, I met her eyes, and saw that she didn’t exactly have them. But where Kali’s eyes had been momentarily a darkness without end, meeting this person’s gaze was like looking in a mirror. Literally; her eyes were solid, reflective spheres, casting a reflection as sharp and strange as a funhouse mirror. And currently, they were directed straight at me.

“Um.” I swallowed hard. “Hi?”

She tilted her head to the side slightly. “Hi,” she said. “Why are you in my chair?”

Sometimes, I really hate being right.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"What the fuck were you thinking? *Were* you even thinking? Seriously, bitch, you just…what kind of shit did you use to replace your brain, because I need to find whoever produced it and rip their intestines out." Saori was pacing back and forth around the cage, in a way that reminded me of an agitated cat, and cussing me out. She'd been doing that with great enthusiasm and remarkable creativity for the past several minutes. I didn't think she'd repeated herself yet, and I'd heard at least four languages in the mix.

"I already said I was sorry." I sounded less agitated and more just tired. I was also sitting down and leaning back against the cage wall. I had plenty of room for it; they'd been courteous enough to put us in the same cage, a literal freestanding cage, but it was large enough that there was no crowding.

"And I already told you it was bullshit, yes," she retorted. "I remember. Unlike *some people*, I still have enough cognitive functioning that I can recall basic information for ten minutes." The kitsune sounded…not angry, precisely, but the insults felt less like an affectation than they usually would. "Look, sneaking into the VIP section and taking the table reserved for an actual VIP, I can respect that. It's got style. But you could have at least *told me* that was what we were fucking doing."

"I already told you it wasn't my idea," I said. "And if you're done blowing off steam, I can tell you why, and you'll have plenty of new and exciting things to yell at me about."

Saori considered for a moment, and then shrugged. "Yeah. Okay, I think I've got it out of my system. What's up?"

"After you walked away," I said, "almost literally the moment you did, 'Dusk' showed up out of nowhere and started talking to me. And I uh, found out who she was." I hesitated before continuing; saying it out loud felt unsettling somehow, like it was making this be a real thing. But pretending otherwise wouldn't help anything, so eventually I concluded by just saying, "Turns out that invitation came from Kali. Directly."

She stopped pacing and turned to stare at me. "Kali," she repeated.

"Yup."

"The Hindu goddess."

"That's the one, yes."

"You're sure of that?"

I shrugged. "She confirmed it. And I…looked in her eyes, which by the way I really do not recommend doing that. It was *very* convincing."

"Well fuck." Saori hadn't resumed moving. "Even by my standards, that's…*fuck.*"

"Like I said, new and exciting things to yell about. Anyway, she led me straight to the table, probably why nobody gave me shit about being sufficiently very important to be there. I didn't notice, too distracted by, you know, freaking out because I was talking to Kali."

"Yeah," she said, "that's...fair enough. Even by *my* standards, that's spooky."

"Yep!" I sounded cheerful now, and it was mostly sincere. I felt like I'd gone so far into so many extremes of emotion in the past hour or so that I didn't have any more room for dread, and had wrapped around into laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all. "On which note, mind if I ask a question?"

"Sure?"

"Cool. So, uh. What's with that bit about the Shadowed Flame?"

Saori stared at me for a moment, and then sat down on the other side of the cage in much the same way I was. "I was wondering when you'd ask that," she said, sounding about as tired as I had a few moments ago.

I shrugged. "I didn't want to pry. And, I mean, you don't have to answer or anything. But it's two people now who have called you that, and they're both pretty important people. I had to at least ask."

"It's fine. Or, well, it's not, but it's not your fault." She sighed and shrugged. "It's about the Order of the Shadowed Flame. They're...the people I made my deal with a few years ago."

"Kinda figured it was something like that," I said quietly. "And it's a known affiliation."

Her lips twitched into a smile. "You don't leave. You can stop working for them, they don't care about that. But once you get inducted into the Order, you're not actually *leaving* it alive."

"This would be where you get the grenades I've seen, then." It wasn't a question. Didn't take a genius to figure out that if she had an affiliation with something related to dark fire she didn't want to tell me about, and she had terrifying incendiary devices she didn't want to tell me about, they were probably related.

"Yeah. It's not a model you'll find elsewhere. The base is a white phosphorous incendiary, pretty standard. But then it's laced with magic to make it nastier, cursed fire." She shrugged. "I'm not sure whether that magic is why they picked the name or it's just an affectation, and I'm not asking. But yeah, Shadowed Flame is the only group I'm familiar with that manufactures those."

I nodded. "Alright. Sorry for prying at it like this, just...concerned."

She shrugged. "It's fine, really. I was mostly trying to keep you out of it for your sake, anyway. Shadowed Flame is the kind of organization where the less you know about them, the better off you are."

"Alright. Thanks for trying, then."

Saori looked at me oddly. "That's it?" she said. "Not going to get all upset and shit?" She sounded uncertain, like she wasn't confident in her metaphorical footing.

I shrugged. “I mean. You’re the one who knows what they’re like. If you think they’re bad enough news that knowing they exist is a step in the wrong direction, I trust your judgment on it. I’m a little sad you felt like you couldn’t tell me what was going on. But I get it.”

Saori was still just looking at me. At first there was a sort of wariness in her eyes, and then that shifted through confusion into something I couldn’t name, which was there for a couple of seconds before she resumed her ordinary grin.

“Given that you’re *apparently* on Kali’s radar, I guess the entanglement in profound hazards is a mutual thing anyway.”

I laughed. “Yeah. On which note, I apologize in advance for whatever bizarre circumstance in my life inevitably ends up being linked to Shadowed Flame despite any efforts you make to the contrary.”

She snorted. “You, uh. Actually kinda did that already. You remember how you had that oracular shit a few months ago?”

“Not likely to forget anytime soon.”

“One of the things you started talking about was a black moon,” she said. “And the Order of the Blackened Moon is…another branch of the same organization. Probably a worse one than Shadowed Flame, overall.”

I sighed. “Of course it is. They’re big on corny-villain names, huh?”

She just stared at me. “These are the people who thought giving *me* a house in fucking *Fox Chapel* was a great joke.”

I paused, then laughed. “Okay, yeah, fair point. So, now you’ve gotten the yelling-at-me-being-an-idiot out of your system for the moment and we’ve done the spooky revelations part, think it’s time for immediate practical stuff? I’d rather not still be here when they finish their party and have attention to spare for us.”

“I’m not opposed, but not totally sure what you plan to do about it.” The kitsune gestured vaguely at our surroundings.

I had to admit she had a point. We were in a freestanding cage, large enough to pace comfortably in, but with the bars too tight for me to squeeze between them. Even if I could, the spaces between them weren’t really any better; almost the first thing I’d done was check that, and found the entire cage to be surrounded by a kinetic barrier. I couldn’t get my hand an inch past the bars without hitting an invisible wall that felt like concrete. I couldn’t see much further than that, either; this cage was lit, but only dimly, and the rest of the dungeon was totally dark.

It was hard to tell, but the faint echoes made the room sound cavernous, and I got the impression I didn’t want to see what all was in that darkness. I didn’t even like the implications of Nephele *having* a literal dungeon, much less one this huge.

“I don’t think they have an alarm on this,” I said after a moment. “I can’t feel one, at least. Just the barrier itself.”

"Sounds reasonable." Saori didn't question it; we'd established that while my education was lacking, the exceptional sensitivity to energy flows and magical structures could make up for a lot. If I could only feel one spell, it probably meant there was only one there.

"So if we get out of the cage, we should have a few minutes before they notice." I frowned. "I have no clue what their security is like, though."

"You also suck at being sneaky," Saori told me. "So you might want to factor that in on this planning."

"True," I admitted. "You don't, though. And I'm pretty sure you could squeeze through the bars in fur."

"I already do not like where this is going, tell me more."

I grinned. "If I crack the barrier, think you can look around some without anyone noticing?"

Saori looked insulted. "Do pandas need to stop slut shaming before they celibacize their way to extinction?"

"Thanks, I hadn't had *quite* enough disturbing mental images yet today."

"Anytime. So, can you crack said barrier?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. I'm game to find out, though. And then I think if you manage to get the door open I can get out and we can leave before people remember they're pissed at us."

She grinned. "Sounds like fun. I might take a while, though. Have to figure out where we are relative to the Way so we can get there with as little of you pretending to sneak around as possible."

I sighed, then paused as something something occurred to me. "I take it you can't just open a portal yourself?"

"Nah. She's got the...fabric, for lack of a better word, pulled pretty tight. Not sure if that's always the case here or Nephele has those veils strengthened for this event specifically, but I'm not getting through them."

About what I'd figured. It seemed like an obvious thing for any kind of prison over here, but I wasn't sure how things worked enough to be sure.

"Well, I'll try not to disembowel myself while you're gone," I told her, and she laughed, the golden-fire flickering I felt in it stronger than usual. I was feeling extremely raw after the overwhelming experience that was the party itself, everything hitting a little harder than it should be. I was kind of surprised that I'd been able to maintain *any* degree of perceptual filtering through that, though, so I wasn't complaining.

"Thank you kindly. I'll try to find a path with light enough security that you don't alert someone, so we can keep this a courteous jailbreak rather than a bloody one." Saori paused. "Also a knife in case that doesn't work. And maybe a set of picks. I have a lot of things to find, is what I'm getting at here."

I coughed. “Uh, actually. On that note.” I reached up under my blouse, which was loose enough for that to be easy. Saori watched with a mixture of curiosity, confusion, and lust. I really wasn’t sure what she was expecting to happen.

But apparently, from her expression, it was not for me to produce a small fabric bag and toss it to her. It landed on the floor with a muffled clink; even in here, the floor was made of clouds, and it didn’t produce a very sharp sound.

“You’re kidding. You brought *lockpicks*?”

I shrugged. “There’s no iron in them. Aluminum alloy.”

“Which is clever,” she admitted, “but not really what I meant.”

“I figured that if anyone searched me, which they clearly didn’t do a good job of that, and found them, I could spin some bullshit story about wanting the option of conductive chopsticks. Which would be true, incidentally,” I added. “I’ve done that, and it feels *really* interesting. At least to me, probably less fun for wimps who can get electrocuted. I haven’t used those for it, but the set of actual chopsticks I have is steel, so I could say I’m trying to be respectful to the Sidhe and come out looking pretty okay without telling any actual lies.”

Saori was just staring at me. “You know,” she said after a moment, with a kind of respect in her voice I wasn’t used to, “you’re garbage at lying, but apparently pretty good at insane, twisty doublethink. I’m impressed.”

I grinned. “Thanks. Knife you’re on your own, though. I didn’t bring one, figured I already have that covered. And on that note, I have to say, I’m really curious how this will go, because I have *no* idea how this works. You probably want to be ready to go just in case, ’cause if it *does* work, it might not stay open for long, hell if I know.”

Saori changed and wriggled her way over to the edge of the cage while I called Thorn. As I’d expected, being in a completely different world where the veils were too strong for portals didn’t even slow it down, and when I reached out I found it waiting for my hand.

I held it for a moment, reluctant to draw it. I hadn’t gotten any *less* spooked by this sword when I learned that even what had seemed like a relatively harmless quality was actually some kind of kill switch that I just happened to meet the criteria to be dodging. And I had no doubt Gwydion was telling the truth about that being what the euphoria was, either. Even ignoring the fact that he couldn’t lie and wasn’t likely to be mistaken, it just…made sense somehow. I’d felt that sudden surge of bloodthirsty glee a few times now. I had no difficulty seeing how it could spiral out of control, and felt nowhere near as confident as Gwydion had sounded about my ability to resist that.

But I needed to break a piece of magic. And I in no way had the kind of skill required to do that elegantly, so it was going to have be a brute force approach. A glance showed Saori was already in fur sitting next to the bars of the cage with a pouch of picks in her mouth looking impatient, so I might as well get it over with. I took a deep breath, and then undid the restraining strap and pulled Thorn out of its sheath. The world went still for a moment, and the overpowering feeling of blood and flowers and claws running along my spine hit hard enough to stagger me.

This was the first time I'd drawn the sword when I wasn't already running pretty high on adrenaline. I'd killed Audgrim, killed some girl when she jumped me with a sword, and fled from a destructive fire; I hadn't exactly been calm for any of those.

Now that I was, it felt...much stranger. I didn't have any reason to *be* feeling giddy, bloodthirsty laughter bubbling up from inside me. And yet there it was, pushing the fear mostly out of the way to make room. I was grinning, and barely managed to restrain a giggle as I turned towards the cage. Experimentally, I tried to poke Thorn out between the bars.

It felt...strange. There was resistance there, more than when Thorn cut through steel. It felt different than when I had touched the barrier with my hand, though. That had been like rapping my knuckles on a wall, the same rigid kinetic stop. This was more like pushing two magnets together against their natural alignment.

Confirmation that Alice had been right, and this thing could cut through magic, too. I nodded to myself and drew the sword back. Absently, I saw that there was fur on my hand now, and the sparks of emerald-green lightning dancing through it were also running down the length of the sword.

I slashed at the barrier, a quick overhand slice with the inner curve of the sword. I wasn't swinging full force, but it was plenty strong by human standards, and that feeling of intangible resistance wasn't up to stopping me. Thorn ripped right through it, and cut through the bars too for good measure.

The moment I had my balance back, Saori was darting forward, and apparently this trick worked, because she wormed her way right through the barrier. It was sort of surreal to watch, because I hadn't actually shattered the barrier, just cut a hole in it. So she was basically squirming over an invisible wall in the air, through that slit in the spell's structure.

In principle, I could probably cut a large enough gap to fit through myself. The sword was cutting through the bars of the cage, after all. But that seemed like a bad idea, for a whole lot of reasons. I wasn't sure how easy this was to detect, to start with, and it seemed plausible that a smaller slice would be subtler. And Saori was better off alone, really, for this part; having me along while scouting would probably go...poorly. There was also a smaller but nonzero consideration for keeping the damage as minimal as possible, because if I offended Nephele enough for her to actually care once we were gone, I was going to be fucked. Even more fucked than I already was, and considering this situation had started because Kali had arranged for me to give a public insult to someone important enough to be a very important person *here*, that was *saying things*.

Besides. It was fascinating. I could...not exactly see the damage to the barrier, but I could feel it. The kinetic barrier itself had the same mist-and-rainbows as the rest of the world around us, and hadn't been easy to parse as a result. But once it was damaged, I could feel how the cut was interfering with its functioning, and it was surreal as hell. It felt like there was a sort of caesura, a partial break in a pattern, a subtle and complex pattern which I could only clearly perceive because the break drew my attention.

It got even trippier once it started changing. It took a moment for me to be sure, but with my attention focused like this, it was hard to miss the ways that those structures were shifting. I could feel power being pulled in from the rest of the spell, like it was pulling in more energy and weaving it through the gaps. It was rapidly starting to repair itself, like a dynamic network pulling resources in from other structures to seal the gap Thorn had cut through it.

That was what reminded me that I was still holding the sword, and I went to sheathe it. That was when I got my...I'd lost count of how many nasty surprises I'd had today, but this was the next one on the pile. I couldn't do it.

I had never actually tried to sheathe Thorn before, I realized. When I first got it, the spirit associated with the guardian tree that had been holding Thorn up to that point had been the one to do it. I'd left it out of the sheath both of the times I'd drawn it since then, having accurately guessed that the sheath would be as indestructible and impossible to lose as the sword itself.

Now, as I tried to sheathe it, I felt a sort of resistance that was hard to explain. It was like the bloodlust I could feel radiating from it, the scent of blood and flowers and dark flames along my spine, sharpened in response. The sword wanted to be used, it *wanted* to cut and pierce, and it wanted it badly.

A little experimentation confirmed as much. I could let go of the sword easily enough. It felt disappointed when I dropped it to the floor, but I could do it. But when I tried to actually return it to its sheath my fingers just *would not* let go of the hilt, like they were paralyzed in a way I didn't understand. It didn't stop me from doing anything else, but as soon as I tried that, my hand just stopped working.

I had to actually, physically peel my fingers away from the hilt with my other hand, and even that took a serious effort of will. My hands were trembling by the time I finally managed to let go, and the feeling of longing and eager, enthusiastic craving for violence sharpened, and I let out a soft but audible moan. My fingers shook badly enough as I tried to put the restraining strap back into place that it took several tries to operate a simple snap closure.

The moment I fastened the strap, the whole mess of feelings faded, all at once. There was still a sort of disappointment far enough to the back of my head it was down into my spine, but that was all. No overpowering aura of dangerous, intoxicating power. No giddy bloodlust and eagerness. No difficulty in handling the sword.

I felt a little ill. I wasn't sure how much of that to attribute to what causes; there were plenty to pick from. I set the sword down, and then retreated to the opposite corner of the cage and watched it like it was a viper.

It probably didn't take anywhere as near as long as it felt for Saori to get back. Fifteen minutes, tops. But fifteen minutes can feel like a lifetime under the right conditions. As it turned out, sitting alone in a cage in a world I didn't understand, unable to see the cavernous room around me, with nothing for company except a deeply unsettling sword, while waiting for someone to get back from scouting an escape route? Pretty fucking good for that kind of time dilation. It felt like a *very* long wait.

But eventually she did return. I didn't notice at first; she was very good at sneaking around, after all, that was kinda the whole point. I had no warning, barely noticed her before she was back in skin in front of the cell door. She was grinning in a way that said I wasn't going to like learning why. On the bright side, she was also naked, so at least I got a pleasant show while she worked.

"So I've got good news, bad news, and fun news," she said, shaking my picks out of their bag and starting on the lock. "The good news is, I've got a relatively good idea of where we are relative to where we're going. The bad news is, it's going to be a bit of a hike. We're something like six floors up, and she didn't exactly go for short ceilings."

I nodded, somewhat glum but not surprised. I hadn't noticed us going up any stairs, but that didn't mean much. Geometry could get really wonky on the Otherside, from the stories I'd heard over the years.

"Okay," I said after a moment. "I'll bite. What's the fun news?"

Saori grinned at me with too many teeth and popped the cage door open. "The fun news," she said, "is that I get to pay you back for getting us into this mess sooner than expected. I've got a way out, and you're going to hate it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was quiet on the way out of Nephele's dungeon, and dark. If there were any other lights than the dim glow that had illuminated our cage, I couldn't see them. I didn't look too closely, anyway. I didn't want to know, especially when I was already so overloaded.

Fortunately, neither Saori nor I needed much light. And we could both produce it, anyway. I had lightning crawling through my fur, which cast a dim, eerie green glow. And Saori had some sort of fire magic playing through the fingers of one hand. She'd never done that around me before. I wasn't sure whether that was just because she'd never needed it, or because she'd wanted to keep her link to the Order of the Shadowed Flame private.

Learning about that had explained more than a couple things about her. I'd noticed on numerous occasions that in addition to the fox-and-spice smell of kitsune, there was an admixture of something else in Saori's signature, smoke and dark incense. It wasn't hard to guess that had come about because of her association with Shadowed Flame, and I could feel that scent of smoke particularly clearly right now.

Her fire was a low, bloody crimson light. Taken together with my emerald lightning, we looked like a macabre parody of American Christmas traditions, something that was so funny to me that I had to work to keep my giggles quiet when I noticed. It was, I noted absently, probably hysterical in nature.

In any case, we didn't leave the room bright enough to see more than our immediate surroundings. I was just as glad for that. I got to confirm my initial impression that Nephele's dungeons were huge, cavernous even, and we passed several other cages, all empty, all made of clouds. I didn't feel the need to see more than that.

"Alright," Saori said, after what probably wasn't nearly as long a time as it felt. We were approaching a wall, and she pulled open a door set into it that I hadn't even noticed was there, the clouds of the door and wall fading into each other too smoothly to see. "C'mon, it's a little cramped through here but not bad."

To my surprise, she was telling the truth. Even by my standards, the hallway concealed behind the door was small, never mind by comparison to the rest of the castle.

"This is kinda ridiculous," I told her as she closed the door and started walking. The hallway was lit, at least, the same sourceless illumination that had characterized most of this domain so far. "You found a secret passage?"

"Something like that." She shrugged. "I think there's a whole network of these. I'm not sure whether they're supposed to be secret or just, like, servants' hallways or something. But I don't think there are any guards in here."

"Damn." I was legitimately impressed by this stunt. "And you've never been here before?"

Saori grinned at me over her shoulder. “Not once,” she said. “The Court events I did were nowhere near this fancy. And I never had much to do with nymphs, definitely not on this level.”

“The hell did you find these things then?”

Saori kept walking. “This is kinda what I did for Shadowed Flame. They handle a lot of infiltration and sabotage stuff. I’m good at it.”

“Huh.” I was quiet for a moment, then said, “You know, I was expecting you to be cagier about them than that. I thought you were trying to keep me out of that whole topic.”

She shrugged. “I mean, I’m not telling you how to contact them. But you already know I like to sneak around blowing shit up, so I kinda doubt it’s a huge surprise I did it then too.” She paused for a moment, then said, “Ah, yep. Here we are.”

The kitsune pivoted to the side and opened another door, just as invisible to me as the last until she pulled it open. I looked through, and then just…stared.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“I mean. Probably? Not a psychic, but it seems pretty likely you’d figure it out.”

“You’re right,” I said after a moment. “I hate it.”

Saori grinned. “Come on. It’s just a little skydiving.”

“It’s a ninety foot shaft straight down,” I said. “This seems like a pretty bad idea.”

“I thought so at first too,” she told me. “But stick your hand through the door.”

I did so, and felt something very…strange. As soon as my hand crossed the threshold into the open shaft in front of us, I could feel a very strong wind coming up from below, like a wind tunnel running at full force. But right up to the edge of the shaft itself, the air was perfectly calm.

“How the fuck does this work?” I asked, suddenly and deeply curious. This just…wasn’t how wind *worked*.

Saori just shrugged. “Not my magic,” she said. “I guess a weather nymph gets good at some things. I’m pretty sure this is just another part of the same network of passages, something like an elevator. Step in, and drop or rise to the floor you want. It’s like indoor skydiving.”

“I’ve never actually done that,” I said. “Skydiving in general, I mean.”

“Why not?” she asked. “It seems like you’d enjoy it.”

I shrugged. “I haven’t done much of the physical thrillseeker stuff in general. I mean, you already know my feelings about rollercoasters.”

“Sure, but skydiving isn’t like that at all,” Saori said. “The only strong sensory input is kinesthetic, and that’s pretty manageable from what you’ve told me. The hard part is mostly controlled body movement and how fast things can change, and you handle both of those fine.”

“Maybe,” I said, feeling a little dubious. “I mean, I trust you on it. I guess it just never came up.”

“Well,” the kitsune said, grinning, “first time for everything. You’re racking those up pretty good today, I guess. We’re dropping about halfway to the bottom, this keeps going underground.

We'll go tandem, so I can help you balance and show you where we're going. I'm pretty good at this, and you've got great reflexes and enough fur for decent air drag."

"This is a terrible idea," I said after a moment. "You do know that, right? Like, a *really* terrible idea."

"It's the fastest, most direct way down. I can look for a staircase if you want, I guess, but…." Saori shrugged. "This is the only route I found that I don't think has any security at all."

I considered it, and then sighed. "Fine," I said. "But I want to note that this is more than enough to make up for getting us tossed in that cage to begin with, for your vengeance tracking purposes."

"That's fair, I suppose," Saori said. The kitsune was grinning. Then she stepped closer, and wrapped her arms around me.

It felt…strange. We'd hugged plenty of times, of course, but there was a kind of intimacy in this embrace that felt different. It probably helped that I was about to be doing a trust fall down a vertical wind tunnel with her, but it felt like it was more complex than that.

I took a deep breath. She smelled like fox and smoke and laughter. I felt dizzy, wasn't sure why. The height didn't bother me, and I was pretty dissociated, but not enough to be light-headed.

That was all the time I had before she was pushing off, falling backwards into the void without any hesitation. I went with her, and suddenly we were falling.

It felt…strangely simple. I'd been pretty damn nervous, but once we were out in thin air it was simple. I could feel Saori starting to adjust my posture, but I was already moving ahead of her, twisting to catch the wind on instinct. Everything felt so *slow* as we fell, and the wind sounded like silver laughter. I let Saori guide where we were going, since she was the one who knew, but actually maintaining my balance and manipulating air resistance to control height was instinctive, like I didn't even need to think about what I was doing.

When she guided us over to one of the many doorways that opened onto that shaft, I didn't even fall down. I stepped out into the hallway, and it was the sudden *absence* of wind that actually made me stagger a bit and have to lean against the wall.

"Well," Saori said, while I was still struggling to get my thoughts in order. "That went well."

I laughed. I felt a little breathless, but more from adrenaline than either effort or fear. I felt excited, and it felt good, right up until I thought about it, and remembered what Gwydion had said.

Fortunately, you're mostly just a giddy lunatic who gets off on the adrenaline rush, and that's much more stable when accelerated. The memory was strong enough that I didn't have to work to recall the exact phrasing.

"I guess it did," I said, feeling a whole lot less carefree than I had while actually riding that adrenaline. "You know where we're going next?"

"Yeah," Saori said. I wasn't sure whether she'd caught the change in my voice or not. I couldn't read hers at all right now, was way too overloaded after the whirlwind that had been my day to process the emotions I could hear in it. "Not much further."

Little more was said as we kept walking. The halls down here were just as quiet, just as empty as those above. Eventually, Saori stopped and turned towards the wall again. "Through here," she said. "Cross the room, out the window, and we're pretty much there."

I nodded. I trusted her, certainly trusted her sense of direction more than my own. Even at the best of times, tracking position could be an issue for me. And this was *definitely* not the best of times for my cognitive functions in general.

"Sweet. This is fun." She grinned, and then popped the last door open.

We were in a larger space now, a large hall of some kind. I didn't pay enough attention to tell what it was in detail; Saori was running across the room, and I had to work to keep up. Then she dove, literally dove headlong, out a window. I wasn't sure why; there didn't seem to be anyone around, and it seemed kinda pointless.

But hey, when in Rome, right? And while I was guessing this was just something Saori was doing because she thought it was funny, it *was* possible there was a guard rotation or something that we were working around. I wasn't going to take the time to ask, even if she would have given me a straight answer, which was laughably unlikely. So, I sprinted after her, and dove out the window next to her. There didn't seem to be any glass, at least; I guess a powerful weather nymph doesn't exactly worry about keeping the rain out.

I regretted this decision about half a second later, when I saw that we were still twenty feet above the "ground" and this was not another wind tunnel. We were falling fast, and while the kitsune was enough of an acrobat to do a flip and land still in motion, I...wasn't. I managed not to seriously injure myself, but it wasn't a great time.

"Ow," I said, once I'd pushed myself upright again and gotten my wind back.

"Wimp. Okay, here we are." Saori grinned at me, and we walked across the courtyard to the Way. At least she didn't feel the need to make this part into a random action movie without telling my stunt double.

Somewhat to my surprise, the Way actually was there. It looked just the same as when I saw it last, a two-dimensional doorway made of darkness and extending in a direction I couldn't name.

I hoped it was the same one, anyway. I had no real way of telling. But I trusted Saori, as insane as that might be, and I was guessing it was the same.

"We just walk in again?" I asked, starting towards it.

Saori put a hand out to stop me. "Yes," she said, "but one more thing first." And then, grinning, she dug around in a pocket for a moment before taking out....

"Wait," I said, staring. "You couldn't fit lockpicks. But you brought fucking *spray paint*?"

"A girl has to have priorities," she said, grinning even wider as she shook the can. It was a small one, smaller than I'd known they made, but still, just…spray paint. Saori was so very much what she was.

The paint adhered surprisingly well to the clouds that served as paving stones here. I watched her work, pretty quickly all things considered, and then sighed and followed her into the Way.

Behind us, in jagged, sharp black lettering, she'd written KITSUNE SEZ HI on Nephele's floor.

The Way was as painless on the way back as it was the first time, and it did, in fact, drop us back at Saori's car. It was no longer visible from this side, but I supposed that made sense; the party had started at sundown. And apparently, when Capinera said that we could trust in it being just the night, she'd been speaking very literally. We stepped out into the first rays of morning sunlight.

I had to wonder how that worked. It didn't feel like we had been there that long, and we'd also definitely bailed before the party was over. Was it set up so that no matter how long one stayed in that domain, you would be done just as the night ended? Trying to figure out how that sort of time dilation even worked was way beyond the capacity of my brain right now, but it felt really weird.

I was staggering by that point. It had been rough before, but coming back to my native world actually made me feel way worse. Over there, there had been one energy signature that permeated everything. Here, while the flows of power were weaker, they were chaotic and disorienting. I couldn't close them out well, and at the same time abruptly leaving that vivid, overwhelming world felt almost painful. It was a lot like cutting myself off from the full experience of my own senses, really. Sure, Nephele's realm had been overstimulating in the extreme. But going from that to this washed out, pale reflection of those impossible experiences was…sad.

With all of these different strains on my mind I was barely even conscious by this point. I got myself into Saori's car, and then just zoned out completely into a semiconscious haze, somewhere between dissociation and sleep. I wasn't even sure whether I had my eyes open for most of it, and considering that I was riding in a car driven by Saori, that was *impressive.*

She had to nudge me a couple times when we got to the Blackbird, although to be fair she looked almost as rough as I felt. The kitsune looked exhausted, in enough ways that counting them was pointless. I could taste the fatigue in her gait, and considering how graceful she usually was that was saying quite a bit.

Capinera was up waiting. She looked worried as she let the two of us in, but not particularly surprised, and the blackberry scent had almost no yellow in it, so she wasn't anxious about the future, just concerned about our current experience. I got the impression that coming home looking like this after your first time at a festival of the high Sidhe wasn't unusual, though we'd probably had a more intense time than some.

Maybe for the same reason, she didn't ask a single question. Which was good, because I wouldn't have been able to parse enough language to understand it easily, and replying was out of the question, and Saori seemed to have spent all of her resources on the drive and was now barely more conscious than I was. Capinera just walked us over to her bedroom, literally holding my arm to help me balance, and put us to bed.

For once, sleep found me almost immediately. I collapsed into Capinera's bed and was out like a light.

My nightmares were a chaotic mess, running through a wildfire while being hunted by some strange, monstrous creature. I ran and bled and burned as this wild, howling beast hunted me down again and again. It caught me repeatedly, and each time I died screaming, and then it started over again. It wasn't until the last repetition of the cycle, having already died half a dozen times at least, that I got a clear look at the monster that was hunting me.

It looked sort of like a wolf. Black fur stained red with blood. Claws and fangs, likewise. A wild grin that had very little sanity and no mercy in it at all. Just a whole lot of glee, and a thread of what felt disturbingly like love. The monster leered down at me like a lover, and its eyes were mad, feral green storms, and it was only then that I realized this whole time I'd been seeing myself from the outside as I hunted amidst the wildfire.

As I realized this, I watched from behind a rabbit's eyes as I leaned down and tore her throat out, and drank the blood, and it tasted like love.

Chapter Thirty

I did not wake up from the nightmare in a good state of mind. That was an understatement of almost criminal proportion, really. I managed to dislodge Saori from my chest and roll out of bed before I started throwing up, but that was about it.

I spent a while like that, shaking and retching on Capinera's floor. I thought I might be crying also, but it was a little hard to tell. It was hard to tell how long it dragged on, too; time got weird when I felt like this, in ways I'd never quite been able to define.

Saori hadn't woken up. That spoke volumes about just how tired she'd been. She was a heavier sleeper than I was, but I was putting off a fair amount of electricity, and had just rolled her off my chest before throwing up right next to her. This…would ordinarily be more than enough to wake her up.

Capinera was sitting there watching me with Raincloud next to her; I *had* made enough of a commotion to wake Raincloud, and she felt as worried in the back of my mind as Capinera looked. The latter didn't say anything, but she had her rapier within easy reach, and it didn't look as casual as usual.

Eventually I managed to bring myself back under control, and spent a few moments longer lying there curled into a ball before pushing myself to my feet and stumbling out to the bathroom to rinse my mouth out and splash cold water on my face. I was trying to shake myself out of the nightmare, and it kinda worked, but not as well as it usually would. Even for me, that was a pretty fucked up dream.

After a few minutes I gave up and admitted I'd gotten as much benefit as I was going to, and went back to join the others. It was crowded in such a small space, but none of us objected to that. I still felt shaky, but at least I could maintain a steady gait now.

"Bad dreams, I take it." Capinera was quiet, clearly trying not to wake Saori, which got a shaky laugh out of me. If I hadn't managed to wake her just now, I was guessing the kitsune was out cold enough that Capinera would have a hard time screaming loud enough to wake her if she tried.

"Yeah," I said, my voice a little hoarse but otherwise mostly steady. "I hate nightmares so fucking much."

"You have a lot of them."

I sighed, slumping down on the floor next to her and resting my head against her leg. "Yeah. Not usually this bad, but…yeah."

"At times like this, I think I'm glad I don't need to sleep often," Capinera said. She stroked my hair gently, and Raincloud flopped down with her head in my lap with a concerned feeling. I petted her neck, and laughed softly at the recursion.

"Yeah. I…think I envy you for that. Sleep and I have never been great friends."

"It doesn't seem so." She was quiet for a moment, and then said, "I think I'd have nightmares too."

I sighed. "After the life you've lived? Almost certainly. Though mine are...worse than many, and this was a *really* bad one. In the lifetime top twenty for me, and considering the competition, that's a lot more meaningful than it sounds." I paused. "Oh, right. Sorry about your floor."

"It's concrete. Very easy to clean." Capinera didn't sound too concerned, and I realized suddenly that I had taken so long trying to shake the nightmare off that she'd already cleaned the worst of it up. She'd probably go back and actually scrub it later, but for now she just stayed where she was and stroked my hair.

I appreciated that. It was helping, really the whole experience was. It felt very normalizing, sitting there and listening to Saori snoring, feeling Raincloud's contentment now that my distress wasn't worrying her.

I'd only known any of these people for a few months. It was hard to remember that, sometimes. And in some ways it didn't matter. This was already easily the healthiest, most closely-woven social network I'd ever had. That being a really low bar didn't diminish the value this held for me. I rested my head against Capinera's thigh for a little while, and drifted in thoughts of lost homes and sanctuaries and prices paid, memories of falling leaves and the sound of some bird whose name I didn't know and whose song I hadn't heard in fifteen years, in scents of blackberries and foxes and blood that smelled like love.

It wasn't sleep. It wasn't dreaming, not really. But it was better than my dreams ever really got, and that was worth a lot.

There was basically no chance that I was going to be doing anything about Ekaterina and Cormac tonight. It was already almost sunset, and Saori still hadn't woken up. I was having a hard time focusing on much of anything, and my experiences felt distant, disjointed. I was, I thought, in part remembering the vividness of the Otherside and trying to find it here, and failing.

It troubled me that it had taken so little time for that to become a normal experience, that it threw me off balance to come back home. Though this had probably been an outlier, an extreme case. I was guessing not many people came back from their first time at a festival of the Sidhe Courts' high nobility unchanged, no matter what world they were from.

For example, Saori was still out cold, though she'd woken up long enough to eat something and cuddle for a few minutes before falling asleep again. I wasn't too worried about her. Really, she'd had at least as long a day as I did. That conversation about Shadowed Flame was clearly one that she'd been dreading for a while. She was drained as hell. I was exhausted and off-balance. I had to act soon, but it simply wasn't possible right now.

Nothing happened to interrupt that recovery. No attacks, no explosions, no weather nymphs showing up to express Nephele's displeasure. Nothing. I could almost convince myself that it wasn't going to. I almost thought that maybe Kali hadn't screwed me over as badly as I'd

expected, and the brief imprisonment was the only immediate-future consequence. I didn't actually believe those things, but as the hours ticked past, I could almost convince myself.

I tried to stay busy through the afternoon. I reviewed the notes I'd taken, brushed Raincloud, helped Capinera tidy up, looked at the estimated blueprint that Lily had put together. I thought I should probably feel nervous with what I was currently planning out, but the actual emotion wasn't there. If anything, I felt eager.

Mostly just a giddy lunatic who gets off on the adrenaline rush, Gwydion had said. I wasn't sure I liked the implications that held about where my life was headed. And I didn't at all like that *mostly*. I had to admit, at least to myself, that some of the eagerness I was feeling wasn't just a desire to be done with this, and it wasn't just looking forward to the adrenaline. There was a significant portion that was darker, a desire for bloody vengeance.

I didn't like waiting. It left me with too much time for thinking. I tried to stay busy through the afternoon, even spent a while helping Capinera with cleaning, but there was only so much to do. And then, as the afternoon was winding down towards evening, there was a sudden disruption in that busywork.

It was nothing dramatic. Just someone knocking on the front door. They weren't even knocking in a particularly forceful or aggressive way. Just four calm, evenly spaced knocks, at a polite volume. Nothing dramatic at all, and certainly not enough to explain the sudden, intense trepidation when I heard them.

I glanced at Capinera, and she shook her head slightly. She didn't know who this was, either. And I didn't like that one bit, but I somehow doubted that this person was going to leave if we ignored them. It was better to get it over with.

So I walked over, opened the door, and damn near had a heart attack.

Our visitor did not look remarkable, not really. She was a Japanese girl, roughly average height, just thin enough it wasn't clear whether she was slender or outright malnourished. She was slouching, and wearing jeans and a light hoodie that didn't seem like enough for the weather. Her hands, and what I could see of her wrists and forearms, had bright, colorful tattoos.

I'd been expecting to recognize the person who was knocking. And in a sense I did. I ought to; I saw her every time I looked in the mirror. This person was mimicking me *perfectly*, to the point that I wasn't sure even I could have picked out which was really me—with a single, glaring exception. Where my eyes were a leaf-green so vivid it was barely within human range, hers were far outside that range. They were mirrors, solid silver orbs casting a reflection as clear and distorted as the trick mirror in a carnival sideshow.

"Um," I said, trying not to stare and failing. "Hi?"

She tilted her head to the side slightly. It was eerie, really; the gesture was very familiar to me, but only from the inside. I did that exact thing very often when I was curious or interested in something, but it didn't seem like something most people did. Seeing it like this, seeing my appearance and mannerisms replicated so closely, was…surreal and unsettling.

"Hi," she said. Her voice, at least, wasn't quite identical. It was close; it had the same basic sound, the pitch and resonance. But at least to me, it also had a sort of overtone of breaking glass, much the same as Kali's voice had held mad, frenzied laughter. "Kyoko, right?"

"Something like that." I hadn't stepped out from behind the wards. They wouldn't do me any good, of course, not against someone who had a reserved seat in the VIP section of that party. Not against someone who sounded like Kali. But they were what I had.

"Would you be alright with going for a walk with me? I'd like to have a chat." She didn't sound threatening at all, sounded almost friendly. I had no idea whether that meant anything, though.

"Maybe," I said. "It would depend what kind of chat you mean."

"Just getting to know you, I suppose. You were in my chair. I'm curious why."

I'd already been pretty much certain that was who I was talking to, but it was kind of her to remove any lingering hope that I was wrong. "You seem to have the advantage in that already, given you know who I am."

"Oh, right. I didn't introduce myself, did I, apologies. Nemesis, pleased to meet you, et cetera."

My heart had already been sunk well into my abdomen, but now it felt like it was trying to tunnel into the floor. "I don't suppose you mean nemesis with a lowercase 'n'," I said, not sounding hopeful in the slightest. "Or maybe just, like, *my* nemesis or something."

"Afraid not." She sounded genuinely apologetic about that, which was simultaneously weirdly sweet and extremely disturbing.

Nemesis. The Greek goddess of vengeance, of divine retribution, implacable and relentless. I was talking to the literal patron deity of revenge, and given she was explicitly *not* the goddess of justice, there was no guarantee that revenge was of the proportionate variety.

And I'd personally insulted her in front of both Courts of the Sidhe.

Apparently I'd been right earlier. Kali *hadn't* fucked me over as badly as I'd expected. She'd done much worse than my expectations could possibly have extended to.

"Let me get my coat," I said.

I didn't bring any weapons. There didn't seem to be much point. Nemesis was in much the same position, in that way, as Kali herself. If she decided to end me, I wouldn't even have input on how she went about it, never mind trying to fight back. I was a featherweight. Nemesis was the kind of goddess who made other gods flinch when she said "Boo." It was that simple.

In a way, it was very freeing. I couldn't fuck this up for myself any more than I already had, really. There was an odd kind of peace in that.

But as we started walking, I still didn't detect any particular hostility—and if she were also mimicking my nonverbal cues, which seemed likely, I definitely would have. She just seemed...curious.

"Gotta say, I was expecting this to be a lot messier," I said, after we'd walked about a block and a half with no sound other than snow under two sets of the same footsteps. She matched my stride so closely I couldn't confidently tell the sounds apart, and those sounds came at exactly the same time.

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "I dunno, just thought I'd be bleeding or something by now. I'm not complaining, just really confused by my life at this point."

"You were expecting me to kill you?" Nemesis sounded curious again.

"Eh, hadn't really thought it through that specifically. But in the past two days I've gotten myself in debt to Kali, made a deal with Gwydion, broke out of Nephele's dungeon, and now I'm talking to you." I shrugged again. "I've gotten enough bad life choices in lately that I was guessing one of them would have caught up to me."

"I suppose that's a fair assessment," Nemesis said. We walked for a while in silence again before she added, "I'm not, by the way. No particular expectation that I'll kill you today."

"That's a bit of a relief," I said. I hadn't missed how limited that statement was, but it beat the hell out of nothing.

"It would seem to be a bit premature as a reaction. You caused me no harm."

"Maybe not," I said. "But I think that a lot of deities, if insulted by someone as trivial as me, would kill them whether there was actual harm or not."

She shrugged. It was exactly the way I shrugged—loose shoulders, a small movement, hands tucked into the front pocket of her hoodie. This reflection was perfect to the point of being eerie, and not getting less so. "I'm not a lot of deities."

"Getting that impression," I said quietly. "Sorry about my initial reaction, was just a little spooked."

"And you're apologizing for that?"

"When I think about it, I was assessing you based on reputation rather than how you actually behaved. That seems unfair to me, upon review."

"Interesting. Well, apology accepted, then. And that's a good policy, in general, by the way. Much of the time, the reputation of powerful beings has been intentionally constructed, and it can be deceptive."

I nodded. "That makes sense. I'll keep it in mind."

"A good plan," Nemesis said. We fell silent again, and two sets of the same footsteps were the only noise. We didn't seem to be walking *to* anywhere in particular, just wandering around the warehouses and alleys that made up this neighborhood, all of them empty today. I did pay

attention to that, though; I'd learned that lesson rather clearly last night, even if the consequence might not be *quite* as terrifying as it had initially seemed.

"I didn't mean to, by the way," I said, as that occurred to me. "Take your seat, I mean. I didn't even know that's what was going on; Kali led me to the table and I didn't realize where I was."

I could hear a sort of fond, exasperated smile in Nemesis's voice now. Weirdly, I was starting to be grateful for her mimicry. I knew that tone enough from my own voice when discussing Saori's antics to recognize it clearly, even through the breaking-glass tones that hid behind her words. "That sounds like her."

"She plays tricks on people often?"

Nemesis was quiet for long enough that I wasn't sure she would reply. "Not tricks," she said eventually, her tone thoughtful now. "Kali's not prone to those at all. Lessons, maybe, is the word I would use. She cultivates people. She can occasionally be mischievous, but only occasionally, and her actions always have purpose."

"Huh." I thought about that, and I had the feeling I was going to continue thinking about it for a while. There was...a lot to unpack in that comment.

She gave me time to process it. It felt weirdly peaceful. I was walking around with the patron deity of bloody vengeance, who hadn't even fully committed to not killing me today, and it felt tranquil somehow.

"Mind if I ask a question?" I said after a a while in silence.

She shrugged. "I might not answer, but you may ask."

"Why do people keep acting like I'm important? People keep treating me like I'm somehow significant. You and Kali taking the time to talk to me, Gwydion acting like knowing how I think is valuable, Lord Cerdinen and Silas Fleischmann both going out of their way to offer me gratitude for minor things. I don't understand it. I don't feel like I'm significant enough to matter to people like you."

Nemesis sighed, and I knew that sigh, too. It was the one I made when I felt sad, exhausted, and some kind of poignancy I recognized but couldn't name, all at once. "I don't entirely know, to be honest. I didn't even know about you until last night. And some of what I do know I can't share."

"That's fine," I said. "Kinda figured it'd be something like that."

"It does seem to be the way of things," she agreed. "And I can at least tell you that those great powers probably aren't concerned with who you are, so much as with who you might become. You have...unusual potential for growth."

I blinked. "What?"

She shrugged. "Just that. I don't have any details I can give you."

This was starting to actively freak me out, though I tried not to let it show. Gwydion had said almost the same thing, that my relationship to plants was out of bounds, against the rules to

tell me about. What the fuck kind of rules were there about me that would restrict even beings like them? And *why*?

Potential for growth. I was going to have even more questions to follow up than I already did, and my to-do list was getting uncomfortably long.

"I have to go, sadly," Nemesis said, and she did sound genuinely sad about that, at least a little bit, at least when heard in my own voice. "I have things to do. Just wanted to meet you first. Have a nice day."

Before I could respond, she was gone. It was almost the same stunt Kali had pulled the first time we talked, though Nemesis was at least less jarring about it. Where Kali had simply been *gone* with no sense of transition at all, Nemesis walked around a corner and vanished. The footprints stopped mid-stride, and I couldn't smell any magic from her departure, couldn't see any trace of her. I hadn't, I realized, been getting any of her emotional tones tinting energy flows.

I hadn't noticed her aura, either. I had a suspicion this was because she had been mirroring that too, and I was so accustomed to my own aura I tuned it out completely.

The reflective element felt…interesting. It didn't seem specific to me. I got the impression Nemesis did this habitually, particularly given that eyes like mirrors seemed to be kinda her *thing*. Something felt significant about that, though I couldn't fit it into words at all.

I sighed, and started walking back to the Blackbird.

Chapter Thirty-One

On the walk back, I was interrupted by a booby trap.

I saw the tripwire stretched across the alley in plenty of time. I wasn't quite sure what to do about it, though. It was...different than the other attempts. It had none of the blunt-object aggression of Ekaterina's approach, but nowhere near the elegance and precision of Cormac's side of things. And I wasn't sure, but I didn't think it was even connected to anything. I checked as best I could, which wasn't very, and I didn't see anything.

I hadn't gone close to it. It had occurred to me that it would make some sense to use an obvious trap as bait so that I would miss the actual trigger for another trap. But I wasn't sure what to do with that fact. I could just as easily say that the actual trap was in the next alley over, and this whole thing was a decoy. Falling into that kind of option paralysis was a terrible idea, too; staying still here was just begging for an ambush to hit.

So once I'd established to the best of my ability that it wasn't directly hazardous, I just shrugged and continued. I stepped over the tripwire with exaggerated care—I didn't want to risk breaking it, just in case—and put my foot down on the other side.

Specifically, put my foot down on a pressure plate someone had apparently embedded under the asphalt. I couldn't exactly feel the plate shifting under my weight, but there was an awareness that something had changed. And after the month I'd had, I wasn't going to wait and find out if I was right. As soon as I had that feeling I was diving forward, managing a surprisingly clean fall.

This was a good idea. It meant I wasn't standing there when what appeared to be an actual fucking *anvil* fell from one of the windows above me and crashed into the ground where I'd just been standing, hitting hard enough to crack the pavement.

Nothing else. No followup, no attacker, no gunfire. Just a literal falling anvil. I sat up and stared at it for a moment. Just...stared. Then, driven by a sort of morbid curiosity, I went over and, while cautiously squatting next to the wall, reached out and cut the wire with a knife.

This time I did hear the trigger mechanism. It was quiet, just a tiny click, but enough. I dove out of the way again, and was thus not there when a heavy steel dart hit the wall hard enough to embed itself in the brick. When I went to look at *that* more closely, I could see an oily sheen on the metal. I had a hunch I wouldn't want to test my innate resistance to toxins on this one.

It hadn't been aimed at where I would have been, if I'd actually tripped on the wire. It was aimed right at where I was when I went and checked after triggering the other trap. If I'd just walked into the wire without noticing it, I would probably have been unscathed by either one.

Deeply disturbed, and even more deeply baffled, I kept walking. I did not see any further assassination attempts on the way, sane or otherwise.

Capinera was giving me a look somewhere between what someone gave moldy food and a car crash in process.

"Look," I said. "It's not my fault that I've picked up a third assassin. I didn't even do anything for this one."

"To start with," she said in a rather dry tone, "I wouldn't call this an assassin."

"Oh, no, I already figured that much out," I assured her. "There's no way they're actually trying to kill me. Not with any serious intention."

It was a pretty obvious conclusion. This person had a scary amount of information and ability. They'd known what path I would take, known where to place the pressure plate to line up with my stride exactly, known I would go back and examine it out of a morbid and neurotic need to understand what was going on, and known where I would be when I did. They had known all these things, and used them to arrange some insane Goldbergian deathtrap.

If they were seriously trying to kill me, it would have been a landmine attached to that pressure plate, and I would be paste. It was that simple.

"Yes," Capinera said, and there was an odd tone in her voice, something almost like disdain. "This is *extremely* sloppy work to be any kind of sincere attack. I don't know what they wanted, but it's not you dead."

"I'm not sure what else it would be," I admitted. "First thought is that Nemesis said something about Kali arranging dangerous lessons for people. But she also said that Kali usually doesn't do it in silly ways."

"Which rules this out entirely, since it's nothing else," Capinera agreed. The tone was clearer now, and I could recognize it as a sort of professional contempt. She had, I thought absently, never sounded quite so much like an experienced assassin, for all that she wasn't saying a word about herself.

I frowned. "Doesn't mean the basic idea is invalid, though," I observed. "Teaching me something, in a hard enough school that me actually dying is an acceptable risk."

It felt right. Not exactly, there seemed to be other pieces I wasn't quite seeing yet. But it had the right vibe. I'd already damn well gotten more attentive to where I was walking, for example.

"True." Capinera shrugged. "And if so, you'd best learn well. Because that anvil would have broken your skull like an eggshell if you hadn't gotten out of the way. I'd rather you not do that, please."

"I will do my best not to get my head cracked open by a ridiculous deathtrap, yes," I said. "But only 'cause you said please."

She smiled and scritched Raincloud's ears some more. Raincloud herself was feeling an odd mix of concern, sleepy amusement, and annoyance in response to this incident, and had already directly told me she wished she had been there to see my face, because of course she did.

"Did Saori leave already, incidentally?" The answer was clearly yes, because she wasn't joining in making fun of my poor life choices, but I wasn't sure where she'd gone.

"Yes, while you and Nemesis were out walking. She said that since you were presently indisposed, she was going home to ready herself for tomorrow's activities."

My lips twitched. "I'm guessing not in exactly those words."

Capinera tried not to smile, but her eyes were too expressive for that. "No. Her exact phrasing was 'since she's busy getting herself Prometheused, I need to go get a bigger gun and a verb for death-by-eagles'."

I laughed. "Okay, yeah, that sounds more like her."

"You're aware she's lying, yes?"

I just laughed harder. "Yeah? Obviously? That excuse is incoherent, to start with. She already has her guns, and she wouldn't have to stay out if that were all, anyway. But also, even if it were sane, I could tell you she's lying."

Capinera looked quizzical, which was impressive given I had no idea what that looked like. "Why?"

I shrugged. "Because I know her. It's…hm." I frowned, trying to think both of how much to say and how to phrase it. I wouldn't usually be doing this at all, it always felt rude to talk about someone else's personal life, but in this case? If this little web of social ties was going to be anything like stable, and I did want that, some degree of information had to be available.

"Saori has issues with sincerity," I said eventually, working out the phrasing as I went. "I don't exactly know what all happened, the whole point is that she doesn't like talking about things like that. I *do* know that she has issues with anything that feels vulnerable, or that feels like she's admitting to vulnerability."

"I'm familiar with that pattern." Capinera's voice was low, and soft, and sad. I got the impression she had her own share of scars she didn't like to talk about, in this particular area.

"Yeah," I sighed. "Me too. For Saori, sincerity and expressing her emotions openly is…hard. The idea of caring about someone, or someone caring about her, seems painful for her." I shrugged. "She had to have some conversations she's clearly been stressed out about, last night. I kinda figured she would need to have some space to center herself again."

"But explaining she needed it would, itself, be a stressor," Capinera said, with a wry half-smile. "Yes, I follow."

"Figured you would. And so would explaining this to you, hence why I'm saying it for her." I sighed. It was sweet in a way that the three of us could empathize with each other's scars, but deeply sad that it was because we all had so many. "She'll be back tomorrow, I'm guessing."

"Likely, yes. And, frankly, you still look pretty drained. I think a little more time to rest will be good for you as well."

"Probably." I stroked Raincloud's fur some more. She was dozing, now, almost asleep. "You have anything going on tonight?"

"Yes. Open mic poetry."

"Cool, sounds like fun."

As Capinera had told me, she saw running the Blackbird Cabaret as a sort of atonement. My personal thoughts on that aside, it did show in her priorities. She wanted to provide freedom and a space in which to express or experience things, and mostly the shows there were doing so in one of two ways.

The first was with things so surreal and bizarre that they weren't going to happen elsewhere. I was, for example, not expecting to run into a synchronized sleepwalking performance anywhere else. With shows like that, I thought that Capinera was in part letting people put on a show they didn't have many venues for, and in part letting the audience have experiences that they otherwise wouldn't have.

The other basic type was letting people who simply weren't skilled or practiced or charismatic enough to perform most places do so. This was one of the latter, and it showed. Open mic poetry nights were always a mixed bag at best, and while this one was a hell of a lot weirder than most in terms of both audience and performance, the quality was still marginal at best. I sometimes liked poetry, and in particular spoken word formats; the emphasis on rhythm worked well for me. A really good performance could be enjoyable to listen to even disregarding the actual content, because the rhythm and sound hit pleasant synesthesia notes. It was like a concert, but less overstimulating.

But that didn't make mediocre performances less so. And I tried to be polite about it, applauding at the right times and showing attention. Doing this at all was probably somewhat intimidating, and they didn't need my lukewarm reaction to add more stress to that. A few had promise, and would probably be pretty good given several years' more practice. But the actual poetry on display *tonight* was...lacklustre.

I was just about ready to give up and go read or something when someone...different went on stage.

It was hard at first to say what it was about them that grabbed my attention. They looked odd, but no more so than most of the other people here. They looked like a *very* goth teenager, and at first glance there was nothing that readily explained why they felt like more than that.

And then they opened their mouth, and I was almost immediately captivated. There was no opening comment, just went directly into the poem. "The blossoms are still scarlet even when you close your eyes," they said, and while their voice was not itself particularly impressive, the rhythm and inflection was very smooth. "And something in you knows that when your mind says you can trust your sight, every bit of it is lies. Does it matter that what you see is rotting, when melting flowers still smell sweet?"

That was as far as I heard clearly. They kept going, and I kept listening. But as they continued, I felt something...else. There was magic moving around, dragging across my skin like a harsh wind. It was moving in time with their voice, so it seemed almost certain to be their doing.

I thought for about two seconds, and then carefully, delicately lowered the filters I normally maintained to mitigate perceptual overload. Not all the way; I didn't want or need that degree of clarity right now. But I wanted to get a better sense of this.

It was strangely difficult. It felt for a few moments like I couldn't quite get a sense of their signature; I could feel it, but it felt like I wasn't perceiving it *clearly,* couldn't quite tell what I was looking at.

Then I realized that it was quite a bit like Lacuna's signature, and similarly difficult to parse. It wasn't that I couldn't tell what I was seeing. It was that I was seeing it perfectly well, but their signature incorporated a strong element of not-quite-seen. Their power was a shape half-glimpsed that wasn't there when I tried to focus on it, like an image being lost in a saccade or the afterimage after a lightning strike. I got a taste like salt and ashes, a shivering sensation down the back of my neck like I was being watched, and through it all the wind, a constant, howling wind.

They kept reciting. I kept observing, and noted how the magic moving through the room was ebbing and flowing in time with the cadence of the poem. I could feel the emotional resonance in that energy, and it was exactly that of the poem itself, a sort of creeping dread with no clear impression of what was dangerous, apathy and turning away from what you didn't want to see, uncertainty and doubt in one's own perceptions and thoughts. It wasn't *comfortable*, but it was enjoyable, a sort of delicately creepy frisson that made the recitation significantly more intense for me than it would otherwise have been.

And that power didn't seem to be aggressive. Creepy, and I didn't know what it was supposed to do, *why* they were doing this. But I didn't notice any harm, and while I was guessing it would be amplifying the mood even for people who didn't have my direct perception, it wasn't forceful enough about that to feel hostile or damaging. It was just…captivating, and I was listening with rapt fascination as the mood kept building.

I wasn't the only one, either. People were captivated. Not enough that I felt like it was a magical compulsion or anything. But enough to be very apparent. I kept watching and listening as the feeling of almost-threat got clearer without it being any more clear what the threat was, until finally they concluded with another repetition of the opening line.

"The blossoms are still scarlet even when you close your eyes," they said again, and then fell silent. There was no applause; people mostly seemed to still be gathering their wits together, and hadn't quite figured out what they felt enough to respond.

It wasn't like the poet responsible was waiting to hear it, anyway. They didn't say any more in conclusion than they had in preamble, hadn't said a single word except for the poem itself. The just walked off stage and started towards the front door.

I considered for about three seconds before I got up and followed them out into the night. It was probably stupid and definitely rash, but I was curious, and I had always been great at getting myself into trouble because I was curious how something would go.

Somewhat to my surprise, the odd, supernatural poet actually was outside. They hadn't simply vanished when they walked out the door, and were in fact walking at a casual pace through the snow. They weren't dressed for this weather; just a black t-shirt and tattered black jeans, beat-up old sneakers, nothing like sufficient for a January night in Pittsburgh. They didn't seem to care, or even notice.

I caught up to them easily enough, since they were moving at a pretty relaxed speed. I made a point of moving up beside them rather than directly behind them, giving them time to register my presence before getting close. People who had any involvement with the supernatural often ended up...jumpy.

"Hi," I said, once I was close enough. "You want some company?"

They shrugged. "Sure," they said, and their voice was odd. I could barely detect inflection in it, certainly nothing like the intensity of the recital I just heard. It was just a toneless, calm voice in the space where male and female standard vocal ranges overlapped. They said nothing further.

This fit with the rest of their presentation. Now that I was closer, I could see that they looked...blank. They were entirely monochrome, to a degree that was creepy. Their skin was *white.* Not the pinkish shades people usually mean when they say that. It was white like paper, like bone, like the snow falling onto it. Their hair and irises were pure black, black like ink or a raven's darkest feathers. They wore black and white, exclusively, and the overall impression was lacking color to a degree that was kinda unsettling now that I actually saw it.

I was starting to wonder if this was a good idea. But I was already here, so I might as well keep going.

"My name is Kyoko, by the way," I said, as we continued walking. I wasn't sure whether they had a destination, though once again I was keeping track of where we were. I really had learned that particular lesson pretty well.

"Mine is Shadow," they said. Apparently my reaction to that was a little too obvious, because they smiled a tiny bit, and elaborated. "It's short for 'The Shadow You Cast In Brightest Light'. A friend gave me the name."

"Okay, that's at least slightly less cringe," I acknowledged. "Still a little over the top, but at least it's original."

"It was a joke," they explained. "It was...the light is not your friend in that place. It will burn your skin off in less than a minute, and keep going into the meat. We learned to stick to the dark places, most of us."

"Ahh," I said. "I see. A refuge, when the danger is most pressing."

"Yes. A reminder that however bright it was, you still cast a shadow. It was...a meaningful gift."

"I would imagine," I agreed. "And also a pretty good joke, have to say. At first I was thinking, you know, overly dramatic edgy posturing. That it's something kind instead is an interesting reversal of that expectation."

"Yeah," Shadow agreed, smiling wider now. Their lips were jet black, their teeth perfectly white. "That's why he phrased it like that. Little mindfuck for fun, you know?"

"Yeah, I dig it." I was quiet for a few moments, then said, "For clarity, I don't have, like, a specific goal here. You just seemed interesting, so I figured I'd come say hi."

"Huh. That's a first."

"That someone would want to talk to you?"

They shrugged. "More or less, yeah."

"Dunno why," I said. "You seem interesting."

"Thanks. And...likewise? I think that's the word."

"Might be," I agreed. "Do you have a hard time with that? Language, I mean."

"Yes and no." Shadow smiled a little again. "I used to be good at it. Things got...shattered down there, though. And now it's like I know the words, but I don't know why I know them, and that makes things hard sometimes."

"Huh." I was quiet for a couple steps, then said, "That's impressive, honestly. The poem was pretty good, even for someone who doesn't have any issues with language."

"Thanks. I think I used to like poetry." They shrugged, dismissive in a way I couldn't quite read. "It's something to do."

"You do it well." I paused. "Oh, hey, pronouns? Sorry if that's overly direct, just don't want to be rude."

"I think I used to be a boy," Shadow said, slowly as though each word had to be thought through before it could be spoken. "But I don't remember what that meant, or whether I cared. So I guess I don't really have much attachment to the idea." Abruptly, the pensive look was replaced with a playful, almost feline smile. "Let's go with 'it'. That seems likely to trip people up, it'll be funny."

I sighed. Well then. If that was what Shadow's sense of humor was like, it would fit in great with the gaggle of lunatics I'd somehow accumulated.

"Are you going anywhere in particular?" I asked after a few moments of quiet.

It shrugged again. "Not really. Figure I'll find somewhere to sit and think."

I paused. "Do you need somewhere to sleep?" I asked. It had occurred to me that if it was really that isolated, it might not have basic shelter.

It laughed. "No. I don't sleep. Traded that away a while ago."

"Traded it away," I repeated. "Uh. Not sure what you mean by that."

"Hm. I don't really know how to explain this." It gestured vaguely at itself. "It's…you give things up down there, you have to if you want to keep anything at all. You cut stuff away and replace it with something else. I gave up sleep, so that I didn't need to. That kind of thing."

That made…very little sense to me. I got the distinct impression that Shadow was referring to things that I had no context for, no way to understand. But I could at least get the basic idea. It had gotten the ability to function without sleep, in trade for giving up the capacity for sleep.

I felt a noticeable surge of envy at that thought. I tried not to let it show; I wasn't sure how well it was working.

"I have to go back to the Blackbird soonish," I said, rather than comment on that. "So we probably don't want to wander too far."

"Cool." It turned at the next intersection, starting to meander back in that direction. I followed. After about half a block, Shadow commented, "I like your tattoos. By the way."

"Thanks."

"Are they colorful?"

That one threw me for a second. "Uh," I said. "Yes? Can you not tell?"

It shrugged. "I don't have colors anymore."

"Ah," I said after a moment, recognizing what it meant. "That's why you're rocking the monochrome look?"

"Not monochrome," it corrected. "Achromatic. I don't know why I know the difference, but I do. And yes."

I laughed. "That kind of memory glitch sounds really confusing, wow." I paused. "Didn't you just do a whole poem themed around the color of flowers, though?"

"Do prisoners only write songs about the inside of a cell?"

I considered that, and then nodded. "Yeah, that's a fair point. Anyway. Yes, my tattoos are very colorful."

"They sound nice. I remember liking colorful pictures." Shadow sounded a little wistful, and a lot thoughtful.

"I like them," I agreed. "I'd show you if I could. Living without color sounds…hard."

It shrugged. "It is what it is. No one comes back the same."

I started to respond, then paused. Something felt…wrong. I wasn't sure what; there was just a feeling that something was wrong, out of place.

After the week I'd had, I wasn't about to question it. I dove forward and to the side, ducking behind a dumpster. It wasn't much shelter, but it was what I had.

And because I had, when a flashbang went off a few feet from where I'd been standing, I was…slightly less incapacitated. I did not, for example, actually lose consciousness. But it was still one hell of an intense overload, a light so bright it left me blinded and trying to blink away the

afterimages with no success. My ears were ringing loud enough after that piercing screech that I couldn't even hear the gunshots that started a second or two later, never mind speech.

And there *were* gunshots. Even if I hadn't expected as much, I could just barely see a plume of snow where I'd been standing, and it was still way too damn close for comfort.

This wasn't good. I could barely see enough to walk, and while it wouldn't take terribly long for me to recover from that, it would be longer than I had right now. And this wasn't enough cover to hold up for more than a few moments. The dumpster would only shield me from a limited angle, and it wasn't sturdy enough to hold up under heavier calibre rounds for long at all. I didn't know where the shots were coming from, and didn't know where to run even if I could see well enough to do so.

I could recognize how bad the situation was, but that was about it. I could barely even think through the ringing in my ears. That had been one hell of a nasty flashbang, and it wasn't like I was good at shrugging those off to begin with.

Before I could even try to form a plan, much less act on it, I felt someone grab my hand. I almost jerked away, but then remembered that I hadn't been alone, and while I didn't know if I could trust Shadow, it was a better choice than staying where I was. I let it pull me to my feet, though I couldn't see it through the afterimages.

It didn't appear to have any such difficulty. It pulled me up, and then tugged me over towards the wall; I was stumbling, but with its hand to help me balance myself I didn't actually fall. Then it took us through the wall, which was strange. After a moment, I realized that it was just a side door, still somewhat functional even though the warehouse it belonged to was long defunct. An ordinary enough escape route.

How it had gotten the door open so quickly, though, was beyond me. It had to have been locked, and even a gifted burglar needed at least a little time to get through even a basic lock. It couldn't have taken more than five or ten seconds for Shadow to recognize the ambush, locate an exit, get the door open, and pull me through it. That…wasn't normal.

The door slammed behind us with a thump I could barely hear, and Shadow was continuing to move. It was pitch black inside, and I couldn't have seen even if I could see right now; my vision was better in low light than human, but I needed *some* amount of light to see. Shadow evidently had no such limitation, because I could feel how precise its movement was, how confident. And following it into the dark was probably an objectively terrible idea, but I had no better ones, and if all it wanted was to kill me, I'd be bleeding out in the snow already.

I followed, and it kept a grip on my hand, steadying me as I stumbled along through the building. I had no real idea what was going on; I couldn't see at all, couldn't hear. Shadow's hand was cold and wet from the snow, and its skin felt odd somehow in a way that I couldn't pin down. I could hear the howling wind, could see the almost-visible flicker of its signature. In the absence of any actual sight or sound to interfere with them, the overall impression was that I was stumbling through the void while clinging to a cold, unseen presence, with the certainty that I could almost

see something I should be scared of. I could feel the emotional resonance very clearly, too, a sort of calm assurance. Shadow wasn't scared or unsure in the slightest, and it wasn't hesitating.

On the whole, it was one of the spookiest experiences I'd had in my life, and by the time my hearing started to recover, I was hyperventilating.

"We're almost to the street," Shadow said calmly, apparently recognizing the shift as my hearing started to recover. "They stopped shooting as soon as we were out of sight, so I think we should be safe."

"Okay," I said, somewhat surprised by how steady my voice was. "Ugh. Fuck. Thanks."

It shrugged. I could feel it from where I was still holding its hand, even if I couldn't see the gesture. "No problem."

"That is. An unusually casual attitude about getting dragged into a gunfight."

"It's not a big deal." Shadow sounded a little amused now. "I've seen worse things. Okay, we're at the door."

"Okay," I said, and it pulled open a heavy metal door. It wasn't bright on the other side—it was still the middle of the night in a sparsely-inhabited industrial neighborhood, after all—but by comparison to the pitch black of an unlit building, and coming on top of the overload of the flashbang, the dim light of stars and the occasional streetlight reflecting off of fresh snow was almost blinding.

That door had to be a heavy one. And at a glance, it looked like it might have been rusted shut; this garage hadn't been used in years. Shadow didn't seem to have any difficulty with it, and let it slam shut behind us.

"So," it said after we'd walked about half a block from the garage. There were no further signs of danger, and I was guessing that there wouldn't be. "Friends of yours?"

I laughed. My senses were mostly recovered now, which was a relief. "No," I said. "Not exactly. Some asshole who's been trying to kill me a lot lately." Which didn't narrow it down much, but I was confident this was Cormac's work. Or, rather, his assassin's. I was at this point pretty much certain he wasn't the one pulling the trigger on any of these attacks. The contrast between the aggressive, reckless disregard in larger strategies and the elegant, skilled mechanisms being used on the ground still felt very stark. And I was getting the distinct impression that Cormac was both the kind of asshole who wouldn't care about dragging bystanders into a gunfight, and the kind of coward who wouldn't take the risk of being on-site for it himself.

I was just as glad, in a way. Of the two of them, Ekaterina was by far the one I had more respect for. That was...convenient right now.

"Do you know what you're going to do about them?" Shadow asked me.

"Yeah, think so," I said. "Figure tomorrow I'm going to go try to kill the bastard before he gets another shot at it."

"You want a hand?"

I paused at that. “You literally just met me, like, fifteen minutes ago,” I said. “And you want to help me kill someone with no more information than that?”

Shadow shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. And I got back five months ago. You’re the first person I’ve talked to since. Seems simple enough.”

“You’ve said a couple things like that,” I said. I hadn’t started walking again. “The light in ‘that place’, stuff getting broken ‘down there’. Kinda wondering what you mean.”

“Oh,” it said. “Right. Forgot to tell you, sorry. It’s…hard to explain.” It was quiet for a moment, then said, “I used to be human. Not sure when. But I was.”

“But something happened.” It wasn’t a question. I’d felt its signature, and if there was any human in Shadow, the telltale shimmer of human magic was utterly drowned out by the howling wind.

“Yeah.” Shadow smiled. It didn’t look very happy. “Don’t know exactly what. Everything from back then is…fractured. Like a kaleidoscope, a little bit. I know what a kaleidoscope is and that I used to like them, but I don’t know what they were like. It’s just shards of memories that I can’t reassemble. There was some fucked up shit going on, though. I know I tried to kill myself when I was seventeen, and then I fell through the cracks and things got a lot worse.”

I hesitated. But Shadow looked pretty distressed by those memories, and it had taken my hand earlier, so I was guessing it didn’t have the kinds of problems with touch that, say, Melissa did. So, delicately and giving it plenty of time to opt out if it wanted, I reached out and patted it gently on the shoulder.

It smiled a little more, and it still didn’t look happy, but it at least seemed to take a little bit of comfort in the touch. “Thanks,” it said. “Anyway. Apparently I fell into this part of the Otherside called Limbo. Didn’t know any of this at the time, I was just a normal kid. I called it the Badlands, kinda my little joke. That part of Limbo does look like Badlands National Park, just taken to an extreme. But it’s also a *really* bad place.”

“And no one comes back the same,” I murmured. Even if it hadn’t told me, I’d have known that. Privately, I had to wonder both how an ordinary kid had survived there, and what it had sacrificed in the process.

We all paid a price for our sanctuaries. I was guessing Shadow had paid more than most.

“No one.” Shadow shrugged. “Limbo takes things. I think that’s the whole point, what it’s for. It tears things away, and you have to find something else to patch yourself up with, or else you die. Hardly anyone gets back out, and even if you do, you’re, well. Not you anymore.”

“I don’t imagine so, no. Even leaving the supernatural part out, that kind of experience…changes a person.”

It laughed. “Yeah, guess that’s true, too. Anyway, I got out about five months ago. Into the same world I came from, even, and that’s even harder. But I don’t know how to live here anymore. Learning that has hurt.” It shrugged. “Everything’s dangerous down there. I almost died four times

in the first ten minutes, and it didn't get better from there. And you're the first person who's talked to me since I got out. Seems reasonable to me."

I just stared for a few seconds processing that. I could somewhat see what it meant; if it was *that* accustomed to violence and other near-death experiences, a gunfight might not be a big deal to it.

But when I tried to imagine what that had been like—spending god knows how long in a nightmarish world where everything is trying to kill you, as a teenager who was already broken, while having your humanity and identity ablated away by the wind, spending long enough like that for lethal violence to stop having any meaning at all—I had to work not to physically shiver. And when I tried to imagine the kind of person who could do it, the resolve and sacrifices required to *survive* that experience, it didn't get better.

Bottom line, Shadow probably did regard this as a trivial favor. And while it was creepy as fuck, if I followed Nemesis's advice and looked at its actions instead, they were pretty benign. I was not sure I would have survived the most recent attack had it not been there.

And I just did not have enough options to turn down help. Not even from a creepy, achromatic spectre I'd met fifteen minutes ago.

"I would appreciate the help," I said after that pause, and Shadow smiled, and for just a moment it wasn't hard at all to see the scared, lonely boy it used to be.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I still felt a little out of sorts the next day. The sunlight was too bright, the world felt simultaneously overstimulating and undersaturated, and I was an odd mixture of exhausted and restless that had more than a passing resemblance to mania. I'd gotten some sleep, and it hadn't been troubled by nightmares for once, but I was still tired.

But I was, in several ways, out of time. It had to be tonight. So while I was feeling dissociated and strung out, I was still a little bit southeast of Homestead Cemetery.

I didn't have an exact address; Toby had only been able to narrow it down to this neighborhood. I didn't think that was going to be a problem. It would be, if I were planning a surgical strike or something. But for what I had in mind, it was plenty. I just went to the right general area and started wandering around.

Ekaterina's crew was slipshod, but they weren't idiots. I was sure they would find me. Because I wanted them to talk to me when they did rather than jump on me with swords (and because I couldn't have talked them out of it and hadn't tried), I wasn't alone. With Saori on one side and Capinera on the other, I looked a hell of a lot less swordable than I would alone.

Especially today. We looked…well. Capinera's armor was just a form-fitting suit of matte black metal, easy enough to wear without attracting notice. The rapier was less subtle, but she clearly had practice, and she managed to conceal it under a light coat well enough to work, especially here. This was not a neighborhood where people looked too closely at a group of strangers, especially a group that had this kind of attitude. You learn some lessons pretty quickly, living in a high-crime, low-income kind of neighborhood.

Saori's armor was not subtle. But she was graceful enough to move without it being obvious, and she had a long coat thrown over it, so the only parts she couldn't wear without being noticed were the helmet and gauntlets. She still looked dangerous, especially once you saw her eyes. They were dark, and full of fire, and I wasn't sure whether anyone else could see the latter, but enough carried through into real perceptions to make her grin look particularly insane today.

The three of us were obvious. We were obviously ready for a fight, but not moving in a way that said we were looking for one. Raincloud was rather less threatening and had also insisted on coming, which I wasn't as happy about, but this part of the day's activities should be safe enough, and I couldn't realistically protect her forever.

It took longer than I'd expected, almost half an hour. But eventually, they found us. There were at least eight visible, and I'd caught glimpses of another four, minimum, who weren't part of the official greeting party.

Some might be human. If so, it was drowned out in a haze of other signatures, primarily the heavy musk I was pretty sure marked a satyr, and the thicker, wine-blood-amber laughter that I was entirely sure meant maenad.

One of the latter opened her mouth. I cut her off before she could actually say anything. "Hi!" I said brightly, grinning too wide. "I'm here to chat."

She hesitated, clearly not having been ready for the conversation to open quite like this. "You want to talk?" she said after a moment. "Then talk."

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "Not here to chat *with you*. I'm here to talk with Ekaterina, you mind showing us to her?"

She also hadn't been expecting that. She had to know who I was, but this approach was just…odd enough that she wasn't sure how to manage it. "Ekaterina isn't taking visitors."

My grin got a little wider, and it felt feral. "Oh, trust me," I said. "She'll want to talk to me."

It took a few minutes. During that time, we stayed pretty much exactly where we were, surrounded by a ring of dangerous mythical creatures whose body language was uniformly and overtly hostile. None of us exhibited any particular anxiety about this fact.

Saori and Capinera were both accustomed to this kind of thing. I was less so, but honestly, after the week I'd had, it was hard to get worked up about it. Ekaterina herself would be lucky to make the top ten scariest people I'd talked with in that time. Her minions didn't even register, and I was just too strung out to care that they still had a decided advantage in numbers and position if it came to a fight.

Eventually, the maenad who had greeted us came back. "Follow," she said simply, in much the same tone as a woman who just bit into a lemon, or possibly a rotting onion. She turned and started walking without another word. We followed her, and the rest of her gang followed us.

Ekaterina was standing on the sidewalk less than two blocks away. She didn't look thrilled about things, but she at least didn't have the same open hostility as her minions. "Kyoko," she said, watching me approach.

"Hi!" I said. "Truce while we chat? Call it duration of conversation and half an hour after?"

"Why not. I will initiate no violence against you and yours for that duration, nor instruct anyone else to do so, upon my honor."

"Likewise sworn," I said, as did Capinera and Saori, and a great deal of tension ran out of literally everyone present, all at once, which was kind of surreal to watch. We were still nothing like friends, but no one present was going to break that sworn agreement, and we all knew that with a confidence that left us practically tranquil by comparison.

"Come inside, and let's chat," Ekaterina said, and went into one of the abandoned buildings next to us. It looked like it had been a corner store once, but that was a long time ago.

Once we were inside, though, it was obvious that it wasn't abandoned now. Signs of habitation were subtle enough not to be seen from the street, but people had been moving through here, and I could see a little fresh trash here and there. Ekaterina went to a door that looked like it led to a storeroom, and opened it to instead show a staircase leading down to a basement. It looked

like a later addition to the building, perhaps having been installed after the store itself was already abandoned.

I didn't like this. But Saori was already following Ekaterina down, and there was no way out but through. And, realistically speaking, this wasn't a materially greater risk than we were already taking. We were surrounded, outnumbered, and on the maenads' home ground. If they decided to attack us despite the parley agreement, we'd be dead in short order, regardless.

I went down the stairs, and emerged into a furnished basement larger and considerably nicer than the building above had been even when it was in active use. There were several rooms, couches, tables, the works. Hell, I was pretty sure I glimpsed a billiards table in one of the side rooms. Ekaterina went straight to another door, though, and showed us into what looked like some kind of office.

"So what are you doing here?" she asked as we went in. Ekaterina went to a chair on the far side of a wide desk, and two other people came in with her, the maenad who had spoken to us before and a tall, lean man whose magic I couldn't get a clear sense of without a much closer examination than I was going to give it right now. One stood on either side of her, against the wall behind her.

"Well," I said, claiming a simpler chair on our side of the desk. There were only two on this side, a problem Saori solved by sitting on my lap while Capinera closed the door. "I figure I'll make a series of unexpectedly accurate guesses and then we'll make a deal. Sound good?"

Ekaterina was amused. She didn't show it very much; the surface level was still wary, dangerous, and unfriendly. But I could see the amusement in her posture, and the man behind her was actually smiling. "You're welcome to try."

"Cool!" I grinned. "So, point the first: You don't actually care about me much. This mess isn't about you being hostile to me at all. Point the second: Someone else in town has also been trying to kill me lately, and you *do* care about him. Point the third: You might want Thorn, but not half as much as you want Cormac Goldenblade dead. In fact, I'm willing to bet you're only even after my blood right now because you *really* don't want him getting the sword and the easiest way to keep that from happening is to take it yourself. All of which leads to offer the fourth: I will personally show you straight to his door and help you murder the bastard, and you'll call off whatever vendetta you have against me. Sound good?"

Ekaterina looked at me for a few seconds. "You're surprisingly well informed," she said eventually.

I grinned a little wider. "I did tell you they would be unexpectedly accurate guesses," I reminded her.

Ekaterina did smile now, thin and sharp, and inclined her head slightly, a fencer acknowledging a touch. Behind her, the other maenad was grinning, and the man on her other side was visibly restraining laughter. Saori wasn't even trying, and I could feel her giggling on my lap. Raincloud was laughing even harder in my head, though externally she was curled around my feet with no evidence of attention to what was going on.

"Point," Ekaterina said. "It does occur to me to ask why you'd be here, rather than making the same offer to him. Assuming your guesses are accurate, that is."

I considered that for a moment. Eventually, I responded with, "Because you've been pretty honest with me, and pretty honorable in how you've gone about things. Cormac is a coward who doesn't give a shit about killing a bunch of random civilians. And even without factoring in my opinion of that personally, it means I'd never actually trust him to keep his word. He'd follow the letter of the oath, but I'm certain he would find a way to weasel around it." I shrugged. "I don't have the power to confidently take on either one of you myself, never mind both. And if I have to play kingmaker between you two, I'll take the person who's honorable and has no direct stake in my death over the chickenshit asshole who wants power and doesn't care who gets hurt in the process any day."

Ekaterina's smile was wider now, and sharper. Saori's giggling was clearly audible at this point, and while Capinera was too reserved for that, I could tell she was deeply amused as well.

"Valid logic," Ekaterina acknowledged. "And you have a very good understanding of Cormac for having never met the treacherous snake." Her voice was practically dripping venom as she said this last, enough that I had to repress a shiver. Which was good, because that was *absolutely* the voice of someone who would make a point of dancing on Cormac's grave for years after having killed him, and that meant this was probably going to work.

"Thanks. And, I mean, that's admittedly also a factor." I was grinning again. "I get the impression that Cormac Goldenblade is not the kind of guy who makes many friends. I mean, hell, even the name would be enough to make me want to punch him in the face. I have enough of a personal grievance to justify killing him, and I'm pretty sure that you aren't the only person who will be glad I do."

"Also true," Ekaterina agreed. "And you said you know where he is?"

"Yup!" I agreed cheerfully. "Or, I mean, I know where the mansion is that his trigger man went after trying to kill me. And it's wrapped in Sidhe warding spells, has multiple people using it. I'm reasonably confident that he'll be there himself. He's too much of a coward to come on the attack personally, but I'm pretty sure he'll be at their headquarters, if only because he can't trust his followers not to turn on him as soon as he's not looking."

"A *very* good understanding of him," Ekaterina agreed. "And…hm. I think that's a trade I can agree to. You help me kill me Cormac Goldenblade, and I'll stop trying to kill you, and order my people to do the same."

It was a very loosely worded agreement. I wasn't too worried about that, though. I'd meant what I said about the two of them. Ekaterina wasn't the type to weasel her way out of a promise. "Agreed," I said.

"Are you ready to go now?" the maenad asked. The question didn't surprise me. I'd seen enough of how this crew operated that I'd be an idiot to find "sudden, impulsive violence" a surprising decision.

And it wasn't one I disagreed with, in this case. But I wasn't ready. Not quite. "Tonight," I said. "A little past sunset."

My grin was not the widest or the most bloodthirsty in the room. But that spoke mostly to the quality of the competition.

The remainder of the day passed calmly enough. We spent a while with the maenads, who proved to be surprisingly good company now that they weren't trying to kill me. And getting to see the looks on a group of satyrs' faces when Raincloud robbed them blind in a game of liar's dice really was priceless.

Ekaterina spent a while talking about mutual acquaintances with Saori. Capinera, to my surprise, ran the table at billiards as hard as Raincloud was dice, and seemed to enjoy it. I ended up having an animated conversation with a maenad, a human, and some guy I couldn't identify about weapon maintenance, of all things. I wasn't quite sure how that happened, but it was weirdly amusing to sit and swap tips for taking care of knives. I didn't often meet people who were invested enough in that topic for a conversation to count as animated, but here we were.

It wasn't exactly intentional, but it did occur to me at some point that we were doing a startlingly good job of networking here. I'd already been confident that Ekaterina and company weren't going to cause us further problems, but it definitely didn't hurt that all four of us managed to find some friends over the course of the day. And hell, it was fun.

I could tell that Ekaterina was getting more confused over the course of the day, though, as I did absolutely nothing that could be reasonably construed as preparation. I sharpened some knives, but nobody thought I needed them to be sharper, and we didn't even leave their hideout. The maenad was clearly wondering why the hell I'd asked for this delay if I wasn't going to do anything useful with it.

That just made the whole thing even funnier to me. I got to watch Ekaterina growing more and more perplexed as the hours ticked by without me doing anything materially useful at all. I enjoyed screwing with her like this, maybe more than I should. But given she recently managed a decent hit with a sword on me, I felt that a little mindfuckery on my part was fair play.

And then I got a text. I glanced at my phone, and grinned. "Finally," I said. "Let's go. I've got something to do on the way, but it won't take long."

I hadn't really had much sense of time passing, given that we were in a basement. But as expected, it was just a tiny bit after the last traces of sunlight had faded when I got outside.

We were traveling separately, most of the way. This was in part because of trust, but mostly had to do with simple practicality. As funny as it would be to subject them to Saori's driving, the car was cramped enough already. And besides, it was kind of nice. The four of us, enough caffeine to make most people sick, a surprisingly tender song in which the singer declared her willingness to kill for someone. Later Saori would probably put on something much louder and more aggressive, that was usually her routine before fights, but for the moment it was soft. Romantic,

even. Of a dysfunctional kind, probably, but still, it was a nice evening, and my smile was entirely sincere.

I felt vulnerable and exposed walking into the cemetery, and not just because of the locale. Saori and Capinera were waiting a little ways away at the moment. It seemed polite; given that Silas had literally turned Lily in large part so she could act as a security consultant, I was fairly confident that she was on the hypervigilant side. Bringing someone else seemed like it might make her twitchy.

Instead, I got to almost jump out of my skin when the vampire just…appeared, right next to me. I wasn't sure if she'd snuck up on me or was just that quick, but I hadn't noticed her approaching, and looking over and seeing her was one hell of a jump scare.

Lily had the good grace not to comment on my reaction, though I got the distinct impression that she was amused. "Hello," she said. "Bit of a dramatic meeting place, isn't it?"

I shrugged and tried to get my breathing back under control. It was a work in progress. "It was nearby," I said. "And I wanted to chat. 'Cause I'm going after the group I had you tail, a few nights ago. Got a fair number of people, and we're on the way over to assault their headquarters. Given you're the one who was actually there, I was hoping you would be willing to lead us to the building."

Lily shrugged. "Don't see why not. Do you want help with the actual attack?"

"I wasn't planning on it. I did promise Silas I wouldn't put you in any undue risk."

She smiled, just a little. "I think the risk may be less than you think." Her voice and smile both were still completely normal, and I wasn't sure why she suddenly felt so carnivorous.

She was probably right. To some degree, I'd been thinking of her as relatively vulnerable. Maybe it was her age; her apparent age was that of a college student, and while I knew that was useless as a gauge, it might still be tripping me up mentally. And, I mean, from what she'd said she was about the same age I was, and relative to most supernatural figures of any real significance we might as well both be as young as we looked.

But she was still a vampire. And I didn't know exactly what that meant, in terms of her combat capability. But odds were good that Lily was pretty scary when she wanted to be.

"We'll see when we get there," I said, rather than answer. "There are some other people involved who might have thoughts on the matter."

Lily nodded, and followed me into the night.

Chapter Thirty-Four

"You know, this guy really is fantastic at making me hate him without even having to meet him first," I commented to no one in particular. "Like, top tier punchability. Five of five stars, would stab in the kidney again."

"I did tell you it was a mansion," Lily reminded me.

"Yeah, but that can include a lot of things," I pointed out. "Some people, for example, do mansions that are tasteful and understated. Or at least aesthetically tolerable."

Cormac, surprising absolutely nobody, had done none of the above, and wasn't making even the most cursory gesture towards subtlety. That mansion *sprawled*, and I was pretty sure there was actual statuary out front. He had enough lights on that it was easy to tell even at a distance that some of the trim was actually, literally gilded. It was the kind of mansion that even other rich people look at and wonder whether this degree of posturing was necessary.

Hell, maybe *especially* other rich people. Wealth, I thought, had some things in common with other forms of power. People who had enough of it to make them a force to be reckoned with didn't need to flaunt it anymore. You still lived well, sure, but this kind of ostentatious display felt more like someone who very much wanted to convince people and wasn't sure the reality would do so. Someone who was rich enough they could do this, but also confident enough that they didn't need to, might be particularly unimpressed.

It would stand out anywhere. Slapping it down at the edge of a half-abandoned industrial park, just far enough into the trees to not actually hide it from anyone who was really looking, just made it feel even more gauche.

It also felt oddly creepy to me, the more I looked at it. This wasn't a place where things like that belonged. And after dark, Fairywood felt pretty fucking spooky; there were no streetlights, no people. The snow was almost completely pristine, clearly showing just how little traffic this area got. We were far enough away that I had to use binoculars to see the place, and yet somehow the degree to which it felt *wrong* here was still...eerie.

"Oh, hey," Saori said, jolting me out of that line of thought. "They're here."

"Finally," I grumbled, putting the binoculars away and turning to watch the maenads approach. Considering that they'd been the ones in a rush and I was the one who had to make a few stops on the way, it felt kinda ridiculous that we'd gotten here almost twenty minutes before the maenads.

Turning, I saw them coming. Anyone would have seen them coming. Even if this place got traffic, a beat-up old van without any windows attracted notice at the best of times. The fact that whoever was driving obviously had no idea what they were doing just made it more pronounced.

"You've gotta be kidding me," I sighed. "This situation started out ridiculous, and it's somehow still managed to become more so at every turn. Fuck's sake."

"I think they might actually be worse at this than you are," Saori agreed, watching the erratic movements of the van. She considered for a few moments, then added, "Okay, maybe not *that* bad. They haven't actually crashed yet. But definitely worse than Capi."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence. Though I feel I should point out that at least I *know* I can't drive." I stood up and stretched my back. Sitting in the snow for twenty minutes didn't pose any kind of actual risk to me, but it hadn't helped my mood.

Capinera herself drifted towards us from where she'd been keeping watch on the other side of the lot we were using as a rendezvous point. Her movements were interesting to me; she was as graceful as the first time I'd gone into a fight with her, but she was more animated, quicker. She didn't feel as sad to me as she often did, an impression that was reinforced once she was close enough for me to see her expression.

Maybe she'd taken my words to heart when I commented on whether it was wrong to enjoy violence. If so, I wasn't sure whether I should be proud or apologize.

Mostly just a giddy lunatic who gets off on the adrenaline rush, as Gwydion had put it. Mostly. I had a feeling those words were going to haunt me for a long time.

Eventually, they parked the van. They hit the post of a defunct streetlight in the process, in a completely empty lot.

"Okay," Saori acknowledged. "They *might* be worse at driving than you. Which is not something I ever expected to say, but here we are, I guess."

I took a deep breath, and let it out. "I really want to bite someone right now," I muttered, too quietly to hear.

Lily cleared her throat. "Do you want some gum?"

I paused and turned towards her. "Um. What?"

"Gum," she repeated. "It's not as good, but it's better than nothing." Apparently I looked as nonplussed as I felt, because the vampire smiled. "I know this may surprise you," she said. "But you aren't the only one who sometimes wants to bite people."

"Right," I sighed. "Dacnomaniacs all around tonight, I guess. You know, screw it, why not."

And thus I ended up chewing on a piece of gum while walking up to Ekaterina. It was the classic unnatural bubblegum flavor with way too much artificial sweetener, and honestly, it felt appropriate. That added bit of absurdity really completed the moment.

"Kyoko," Ekaterina said, while a few other people were piling out of the van and getting themselves together. She at least seemed to be taking this more seriously than when she ambushed me. She even had armor, and between her, Saori, and Capinera, I was feeling pretty underdressed. Lily wasn't wearing armor, not even armor as basic as my biker's leathers. But she was also already dead, which probably changed some priorities.

"Ekaterina. Glad you could make it." I tried to keep my voice reasonably polite. I was not confident that I succeeded, but I tried.

"This the place?"

"Yup. Massive, idiotic mansion a few lots over, you can't miss it. Just didn't want to be visible from their door. It's partway up the hill over there." Said hill was a big one, enough so that the mansion could perch partway up and have a substantial amount of hill both above and below that patch of level ground. The cul-de-sac parking lot had a road connecting down to the old, abandoned highway, a section of it which was actually usable. Barely. Other than that, there was no street access

"Makes sense. It's his style. You're all going in?"

I glanced at Lily, who shrugged. I looked back at Ekaterina. "Yeah, think so. Probably one other." I hadn't seen Shadow since we got here; it had drifted off into the woods, saying it wanted to scout the area before the assault started. But I was guessing it would turn up again.

Ekaterina nodded. "Five, then. And six of us. Hm."

I paused and stared at her. "You're kidding. Six? There are, like, twenty of you."

It was actually Saori, of all people, who responded to that. "Yes," the kitsune said in a tone of exaggerated patience. "And if Cormac sees thirty people walking up to his door he'll bolt. Not like any of us is going to be locking the area down so he can't get a portal open."

"Exactly," Ekaterina said, not sounding thrilled about it. "And he's too much of a coward to stand and fight. But if he has the advantage of numbers and home ground, his pride won't let him run."

"Oh. Right." I grimaced. "Lily, you said he had a few people with him, right?"

She shrugged. "Haven't been close enough to tell tonight, but when I scouted the area the first time, yes. Not less than eight total, probably more. The building is also warded; I don't know exactly what the spells are designed to do."

"I can get through the wards. I might be able to get you through as well; it will depend on the details." Capinera's voice was almost startling, she'd been so quiet up to that point. There was an assurance in it that was a little unsettling; she might not be sure about the rest of us, but she was utterly certain they wouldn't stop her, personally. She was still speaking softly, but there was no hesitation there.

"I can probably break them if necessary," I added. I wasn't nearly as sure as she sounded; this was all very new to me. But I was guessing that if Cormac was strong enough for his wards to stop Thorn, the sword would already be in his hands and I would be very dead.

"Sounds like a plan," Ekaterina said. The maenad sounded excited, which probably made sense; she'd been nursing this grudge for decades. "Go through the trees, I think. They'll see us if we cross the lot."

Capinera cleared her throat. "There are a number of traps in the forest. I do not know whether you will all be able to reliably avoid them."

"If we walk right up, we'll be easy targets," Saori countered. "Open space, great sight lines in that parking lot. We'll be eating sniper fire the whole way."

"Both good points," Ekaterina admitted. "Hm. You can get through the trees safely, though?"

Capinera shrugged. "It's possible that there are traps I did not notice, but those I did see I can bypass, yes."

"Can you take anyone else? Because I don't think Kyoko will do well in the frontal assault plan."

"Hey," I objected. "Frontal assault is kinda my thing. I can't sneak worth shit, remember?"

"You also don't have a helmet," Saori pointed out, leaving the "dumbass" portion of the sentence implicit. It still came across very clearly. "And you'd be the focus of fire because of course you would. She's right."

"It should be possible," Capinera said, returning the conversation to something resembling a topic. "Not many, but escorting one should be possible."

Ekaterina grinned. "And that's both our ways in. We create a distraction, you go in and break the shell open for the rest of us. Sound good?"

Saori was grinning too. "I'm great at distractions," she said.

"You cause distractions whether you mean to or not," I pointed out dryly. "But yeah, that seems like the best option we've got." It also seemed insane, but at this point, I was pretty sure we weren't getting a plan that didn't. And not *only* because the people doing the planning included Saori and a maenad.

"I'll go with the team out front, if you don't mind," Lily said. "In case there are traps on that approach as well." She wasn't grinning, but from what I could tell, a reserved smile from her carried as much weight as Saori's manic grin. It figured that detail would occur to the security expert.

"Let's go," Ekaterina said, and as simply as that, the attack was on.

At first, it was very mundane for me. Capinera told me to follow her exactly, and not to distract her. So I didn't have to find a path, and there was no conversation. I had enough spare attention to think.

I was grinning, I realized. It was an honest one; I felt excited. Capinera did too, I could tell. Not for the first time, I wondered whether I was a bad influence on her, whether my involvement in her life would be the thing that pulled her away from the path she had chosen. I had been the one who encouraged her to permit herself pleasure in this kind of thing.

Also not for the first time, I wondered whether Gwydion's assessment of my safety with Thorn was accurate. I was looking forward to the adrenaline rush, sure, but there were darker elements in it as well.

I didn't like deep thoughts. I didn't like where my thoughts went lately.

Focusing on the walk again, I noticed something…interesting. I wasn't aware of any traps; I was entirely relying upon Capinera to keep track of those. But following her was easier than I would have expected. Pittsburgh was basically in a temperate rainforest, and the random patches of forest in the city showed that. They were typically dense, with thick undergrowth. They were a chore to navigate. This forest was not an exception.

But it wasn't hard. The undergrowth was present, but it never seemed to present an obstacle to me. Branches didn't get in my way. The grass and bushes didn't tangle my feet. It was surreal; nothing really seemed to be *happening.* I wasn't consciously doing anything, and I didn't see the plants moving, but things just…worked.

Hope's words, too, were etched into my memory. *We look around and realize that the things we are capable of are not the same as they once were. We can do things that would be impossible or even unimaginable for the person we once were.*

It felt like a much longer walk than it actually was. I was so lost in so many thoughts that it was a surprise when we reached the building. Capinera held up her hand, and I pulled up to a stop, blinking as I looked at the wall right in front of us.

"Hold up," she said absently. She was looking at the mansion, and specifically at a window on the second floor. I could feel faint stirrings of magic, blackberry-scented energy just barely powerful enough for me to feel it. I couldn't tell what she was doing, but it seemed to be interacting with the wards somehow.

Those, I could feel just fine. The magic felt very distinctive, a green tone like spring grass mixed with a heavy, musky smell I couldn't place. There were threads of something else in it, something cold and dispassionate that made me think of a surgical theatre. The result felt strange, and it felt strong.

Capinera stood like that for less than fifteen seconds before nodding. "They're not bad, but there's a flaw in the targeting system," she said. "I can get through, but it won't work for you, you're not fae enough for this trick."

"That's fine," I said. "Front door needs opened too. You can hit them from behind then."

"Yes," she said simply, and I could feel more subtle stirrings of power. I didn't spare them any attention, though. With a plan like this, I had to just trust that the people with me knew what they were doing, and focus on my own part.

So I was already slipping around the mansion. I hugged the wall, figuring that would both keep me out of easy view and away from any traps. It seemed unlikely they would place any so close to the area they used themselves.

I was moving quickly now, my heart rate picking up, the world slowing down. The approach to the building had been slow enough that I hadn't really had much adrenaline flowing, but it was definitely hitting now, and hard.

I'd been hearing noise from the front for a while now, but hadn't really tried to parse out details. I'd definitely heard gunshots, and lots of them. That was sufficient on its own to guide me to the distraction team.

Who were, at this point, a short distance out from the house. I saw them when I came around the corner, and it looked like they were all still up. They hadn't gotten close to the building yet, but at a glance, it looked like that was intentional. Nothing was on fire yet, so apparently Saori had been relatively restrained with the distraction this time.

I was grinning. A thought was enough to bring Thorn to hand as I darted forward towards the front door, too close to the wall for a sniper above me to get an effective shot in. Even if they'd been quick enough to track my movement, and right now that would be pretty impressive. It only took a few seconds to reach the door. I could hear gunfire all around, but nobody was targeting me, and I had enough time to work.

It felt natural, when I flicked the restraining catch open and drew the sword. The movement was smooth and fluid. As soon as it slid free of the sheath, its power was no longer confined by that sheath, and the world seemed to pause. The shooting paused, from both sides, and time seemed to stand still for the span of a breath.

I hadn't asked anyone else if they could perceive this momentary pause. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. But I could definitely see the impact. The whole group waiting for me out front shifted their posture slightly, like the arrival of Thorn on the battlefield demanded respect even from those who didn't know why.

I turned towards the mansion, grinning. I wasn't sure what I was looking at, not really. I could feel the nature of the power in these wards, but their purpose was beyond me. Capinera's subtle bypass was out of the question for me. But brute force could work wonders under the right conditions, and I'd been told that the force I was holding was pretty close to unstoppable. So, rather than anything clever, I just stepped up and slashed at the door, a simple overhand strike.

It was…a strange sensation. A little like when I'd cut through the barrier back in Nephele's dungeon, but with noticeable differences. The resistance felt a little more rigid, a little more like hitting a wall rather than trying to push two magnets together.

But that didn't actually make it harder. Thorn hit the spell hard, and I could feel metaphysical cracks spreading through the ward. The second strike carved through the magic with only slight resistance, no more than an ordinary blade might feel from the oak door it was carving through at the same time.

It worked, sort of. I could tell that the sword had damaged the magic severely; the curtain of grass-green power wrapped around the building had a sort of ragged hole in it where Thorn had ripped the spell apart. But the ward was much larger than that hole, and the rest of it was still mostly functioning.

And, more to the point, the process of ripping through the magic had involved significant structural shifts in how the magic was arranged. This, in turn, had a consequence that I probably

should have seen coming. I'd been told that wards usually had landmines built into them, after all, which responded to the spell being forced out of its existing position.

I felt three of them triggering now. The first two were harmless; the triggered spells' structure had also been sliced through too much to function. The third...well. It was not as bad as it could have been, I supposed. It *could* have hit me with the kind of telekinetic force that had broken practically a quarter of Saori's bones a few months ago, for example. That would have been worse.

This was just enough kinetic force to *feel* like I'd been hit by a truck, rather than actually damage me as though I had been. I went flying backwards, literally flying at least a couple feet above the snow. The world spun chaotically around me, and I had no idea which way was up. The fall was predictably nasty.

But there was a good amount of snow to cushion it, and I had a lot of adrenaline to work with right now, even without the giddy bloodlust of holding Thorn. I'd dropped the sword, which was probably good, all things considered; I'd really rather not die from stabbing myself during a fall. That would be embarrassing.

The adrenaline was still enough that the pain was distant, unimportant. As soon as I had my bearings, I was moving again. Saori gave me a hand up, and I thought she was saying something, but my hearing wasn't remotely up to telling what. I just started towards the mansion, at speed, and apparently that was a good enough idea for her to fall in next to me rather than try to stop me.

Admittedly, it was Saori, so that meant essentially nothing. But still.

The rest of the group had clearly been ready, and apparently I'd done enough damage to the ward before I went flying, because they had already broken through into the house. I'd opened the literal door for them, too. Contributing!

Inside, I didn't take the time to look around. I could hear screaming ahead, which meant that was where I needed to be. I got the impression of an ornate house, the product of an interior decorator with more money than taste. The carpet was firm enough to provide good footing, and there didn't appear to be any combatants in the entryway. At present, that was all the detail I needed.

There *had been* combatants here. I stepped over a few bodies; two looked human at a glance, and there were another three that were shaped more like dogs. None were still moving. The maenads had been thorough. The smell of blood was overpowering. I kept moving, and turned a corner, and saw an open hall that had to take up a large portion of the mansion's interior. It was, at present, the site of a chaotic, brutal melee.

I grinned, called Thorn back to me, and ran into the fray.

A throne room. An actual, literal fucking *throne room.* Because of course he had one of those. If I'd learned anything about him, and despite having never met the Sidhe nobleman I felt I had learned far more than I wanted to at this point, it was that Cormac Goldenblade was not prone to subtlety.

I was strangely but deeply glad that my kingmaker position had been better situated to side with Ekaterina. Sure, she was a bitch who took vendettas more seriously than could possibly be healthy, and her followers were violent, impulsive, and somewhat idiotic. I still found myself feeling a sort of kinship with her just on the basis of hating this guy.

There were more than eight of them. A *lot* more. I wasn't sure how many; it was hard to count heads when everyone was trying to remove each others'. At a glance, I estimated not less than twenty who were either humans or fae that looked like humans, and another twenty or so that looked like large dogs or *very* large cats.

It was convenient that we were so outnumbered, in a way. It made it easy to pick targets without worrying about friendly fire. I didn't have to identify anyone. I just stepped up behind someone I didn't recognize and blindsided him.

Thorn could cut through magic or a steel wall with little difficulty. A spine didn't even register to its edge; it was like cutting a thin sheet of paper. I literally decapitated him, and I hadn't even committed fully to the attack.

There was a fountain of blood at that point. I'd just severed both common carotid arteries, and that produces an enormous amount of blood, under more pressure than people often expect. He was effectively dead before he'd even started to fall, much less hit the ground. The maenad who had been fighting him grinned at me across the falling body, and then turned towards the next.

I did the same, moving on instinct now. There was no time to think about what I'd just done, and with adrenaline running high and Thorn's ecstasy pulsing along my spine, I didn't want to anyway. There was work to be done.

A glance around showed me that there were, essentially, four distinct fights happening right now. The initial attack had been decisive enough to take a fair amount of ground, and the fae had mostly been pressed out to the edges of the room; it was large enough that this left a lot of open space between the different groups.

To the right, the maenad whose dance partner I'd just taken care of was turning to help Lily with a clump of fae who were bunched up against the wall. There had to be ten of them, and they'd dragged one of the satyrs down already, but so far the vampire looked to be giving better than she was getting. To the left, Capinera was fighting next to another maenad, trying to keep four of the Sidhe and half a dozen hounds contained, and it wasn't going as well. Further ahead, there was a door on the left side of the room, and a satyr keeping a group of enemies from entering

through it. And finally, past them at the far end of the room, Ekaterina and one of her followers were pushing towards the actual throne, which was where Cormac would be, I was sure.

Capinera's side of this clusterfuck was in worse shape. That wasn't the main reason I was turning that direction, but the fact that it was also a sound tactical decision was a nice bonus. Behind me Saori had started taking shots with her carbine, which was probably smart; we had more frontline fighters than ranged, and these people might not have much practice defending against guns.

I was, in all probability, the single least skilled and experienced combatant in the room. I was faster and stronger than a human, but so was pretty much everyone else here, so that wasn't a very useful scale to measure against. I looked scary in fur, but these people were used to fighting inhuman monsters much more disturbing than I was. With all that in mind, it was pretty understandable that the group of Sidhe I was advancing on didn't prioritize me very highly. One turned in my direction, along with two hounds, but the rest remained focused on Capinera and the maenad.

This was not a good choice.

He was fast, and there was no chance I could hold up in an actual duel; he was obviously a far better swordsman than I was. But I was fast enough to twist aside from the first slash, not by much, but enough. And I didn't have the position to actually counterattack, didn't have the reach.

But when Thorn collided with his sabre, which was a silvery metal very similar to Capinera's rapier, there was really only one way that could go. It was probably an excellent sword. I was guessing Sidhe weaponsmiths were as skilled as their chefs, and it was probably enchanted as well, reinforced with magic of its own.

But this was Thorn. It cut through metal and magic both without even slowing down.

I was off-balance after that, almost as much so as he was. One of the hounds surged forward and bit my ankle, pulling my foot out from under me. It was probably also biting into my leg, but I didn't notice the pain through the adrenaline.

I still fell. I was okay with that. I might not be much of a duelist, but a messy, chaotic brawl? That was an environment I was *much* more comfortable with. I went with the fall freely rather than try to resist, and put the momentum into an elbow strike on the other canid coming after me.

Elbows are nasty. And even without the leverage to put much strength behind it, I had momentum on my side, and enough strength that "not much" was still plenty. I caught it on the back of the head and it went down, dazed or unconscious, I didn't really care which right now. I didn't pay any attention to the dog still biting me, either; it wasn't important right now. Instead I braced my free foot against the floor and pushed, hooking an arm around the knee of the Sidhe I'd just disarmed.

He was still off-balance. Everything was happening so fast, he hadn't had the time to recover yet. His leg was close enough to human for my understanding of anatomy to apply, and I'd caught his knee at an angle that wasn't structurally sound. And I was stronger than I should be.

I thought I might have actually dislocated the knee. I *definitely* took his leg out from under him, and he fell awkwardly, landing half on my back and half on the floor. While he was trying to get his shit together, I lashed out with Thorn, catching another fighter's thigh with the inner curve of the blade. I took *her* leg out from under her in a much more literal way, and I was pretty sure she was done for at that point. Femoral artery bled very nearly as much as the carotid.

I turned my attention back to the hounds at that point. The one that bit me still had its teeth in my calf, but that hadn't worked out so great for it. I had enough lightning dancing across my body that even coming into contact with my fur would be enough to give someone a nasty electrostatic shock.

Extensive surface area like that? And with enough saliva and blood involved to make a lovely conductive medium? It was convulsing like it had been tased. I kicked it loose, grabbed the Sidhe on top of me, and did a fun little judo trick that ended with me on top of him. I'd lost my grip on Thorn at some point, but that was fine. I had a good hold, and he was disarmed, disoriented, and while I didn't know much about Sidhe physiology, I was pretty sure the current wasn't much fun more fun for him than for the hound. He was out of the picture for the moment.

I couldn't see much of what was going on outside my immediate vicinity from this vantage, and I didn't try. One of the hounds next to me was presently biting Capinera's leg, which was a terrible idea in terms of both prioritizing targets and its impact on my mood. I lunged forward and bit it in turn, and in fur, my teeth were every bit as sharp as its own.

But I'd gotten mine in the joint between its forelegs and neck. And that was one hell of a lot better than the outside of someone's thigh. I bit down hard, and pulled, and with the amount of blood I could taste, I couldn't blame it for losing its grip on Capinera. I was pretty sure it was also losing its life, which does tend to reduce someone's bite strength, present company included with the notable exception of Lily.

That bought enough breathing room for me to reach out and grab the nearest sharp object, which turned out to be the Sidhe fighter's fallen blade. I'd cut his sword in half, and that left a nice little shard of sharp metal lying on the ground. I grabbed it, managing not to cut myself in the process, and stabbed it into its former owner's neck.

He hadn't even had time to get his bearings first. It had all happened so fucking *fast*. I was laughing. I could taste the hound's blood, and it tasted wonderful.

The last time we'd been in a fight together, Saori and Capinera had both contributed a fair bit more than I had. I felt that I was making up for it, this time. I'd only been in the melee for about thirty seconds. I'd already killed three of the Sidhe and killed or disabled three hounds.

I pushed myself to my feet. This section of the fight was pretty much taken care of. There was only one Sidhe still fighting, and Capinera had them under control. As I was standing, she parried their sword with her own, and slipped forward, inside their effective reach. She had what looked like a stiletto in her off hand, and she stabbed it up under their jaw, twisted, and pulled it free again, in a single flowing movement. She didn't even break stride.

The half-redcap woman was smiling. In its own way, her smile was every bit as creepy as mine or Saori's. We tended towards wide, feral grins; Saori's generally had more madness visible in it, but I had enough blood on my teeth to make it obvious what I'd just been using them for, so at present it more or less evened out.

Capinera didn't look like that. Her smile was serene, tranquil. She was clearly enjoying this, but her happiness looked calm, almost peaceful. You aren't supposed to be that kind of serene during this kind of bloodbath. The dissonance was…unsettling. The fact that her teeth resembled needles didn't hurt that impression, either.

The maenad who had been over here was now moving up to join Ekaterina. She and her lieutenant appeared to have stalled out; they were still up and fighting, but they weren't making any headway towards the throne. Most of the animal-shaped fae were down now, and Saori was advancing up to join Lily's zone of action. Capinera peeled off that direction, too.

I wanted to go with them. I almost did, but I was still keeping my head enough to recognize that it would be a terrible idea, tactically. Lily seemed to have been keeping that cluster locked down with only minimal assistance. Add in those two, and realistically, that part of the fight was probably well in hand without my participation.

Instead, I moved to the last of the four zones I'd identified within the fight in the first few seconds. Namely, the doorway up ahead. I wasn't sure what was on the other side, but I was pretty damn sure I didn't want to find out when they hit us from behind. The door was tight enough to create a lovely chokepoint, limiting how much the enemy could capitalize on the likely numerical advantage. So far, a single satyr had been enough to hold them at the door as a result.

Much like the guy who had been dumb enough to start a fight at Softened Dreams, he was the size of a very large human, and loosely resembled one. The mask was slipping at the moment, and I could see hooves, but otherwise he looked human. He also looked like he was bleeding heavily, and while he was still up, he could only hold that door for so long.

As I watched, he took another hit from a blade of some kind. He counterattacked with his axe, but there wasn't nearly as much force behind it as when I'd first entered the room.

I was very quick. As a result, I was close enough to watch a heavy knife cut halfway through his arm. He might or might not survive; I had no real way to guess. But he definitely wasn't going to be fighting any more today. He stumbled back, fell bleeding to the floor.

And just like that, holding the line at that door became my problem.

I had Thorn in my hand again. I was bleeding from where the hound had bitten my leg, and I thought I might have cracked a rib either in the melee or when I'd broken through the ward out front. But I couldn't feel the pain, and I was still moving well. I licked the blood off of my teeth and stepped up to meet the creature presently stepping across the threshold.

That was the only word I had for it. I had no idea what it was. It looked like some unholy hybrid of a human, a crocodile, and a gorilla, carrying a simple blade that resembled a machete. It was also huge, enough so that it had to work to squeeze through the door.

And Cormac, predictably, was not the kind of guy who had small doors.

I stared at it for a moment. This creature had to weigh at least three or four times as much as I did, and had a considerable advantage in reach as well. I was suddenly feeling a whole lot less confident about this course of action than I was a few seconds ago.

But there was no one else close enough, so my confidence really didn't matter.

Getting through the door took it long enough for me to meet it there. It had an ugly grin and teeth like a shark's, closer to a sawblade than fangs. It moved closer, but didn't immediately attack. It looked to be taking my measure, watching how I moved.

I didn't like that, not one bit. I'd much rather it attacked me right away. This was cautious enough to suggest intelligence, and that removed one of the few advantages I might otherwise have had. Thorn was probably capable of hurting it, but it had such an advantage in reach that I wasn't sure I'd get the chance. If I was fast enough, it was possible, but this was looking dicey at best.

I thought there was probably something else coming behind it, too, additional reinforcements of some kind. I couldn't afford to spare any thought for that right at the moment, no more than I could spare thought for considering my own chances of backup. Things were too delicate for that.

It only spent a few moments watching me before it made its move, swiping at me with its knife. It was fast, far faster than a creature its size should be; I thought I might be able to beat it in that arena still, but not by enough for comfort.

I slid to the side and brought Thorn up, hoping I could get a strike in on its hand or weapon. But here, my inexperience showed. I didn't realize it was a feint until too late, and I was too far out of position to dodge when it brought its other hand around.

It didn't have a weapon. It didn't need one with how strong it was. I was fast enough to dodge back from it, enough that caught me on the shoulder rather than the head. I was pretty sure that if I hadn't it would have cracked my skull like an eggshell.

As it was, it just hurt like hell and sent me sprawling. I managed to fall well enough that I didn't injure myself, but I was still a little dazed. Thorn bounced out of my hand, leaving me disarmed. And I was lying on my back on the floor.

None of those three things would take long for me to correct. Just a few moments, really. Similarly, with how fast all parties were, I was pretty sure that one or more of Saori, Capinera, and Lily would be here within moments.

But it was here *now,* and it was looming over me with a machete and a vicious smile. I didn't have a few moments, and I didn't have ideas.

I did, however, have an excellent view when Shadow stepped up behind my attacker out of nowhere with a chef's knife and a small, self-contained smile, so it sorta evened out.

Chapter Thirty-Six

It seemed like Shadow had stepped up out of absolutely nowhere. But it hadn't, nothing of the sort. I knew that, because as soon as I saw it, I realized that I'd *been* seeing it. Shadow hadn't been invisible, hadn't even been behind a veil. It was more like I just…hadn't registered it as important. It was like I'd known that it was there, but its presence didn't register as significant enough to even pay attention to.

Which was an impression that didn't change as it moved, and that may have been the strangest thing I'd experienced all month, which was *saying things*. There was a little bit of anxiety as I suddenly realized it was there, and then a little bit of hope as I parsed what I was seeing.

But both emotions felt…muted, washed out. There was no real force behind them; I felt apathetic in a way that was obviously, deeply unnatural, and that fact should itself have been disturbing, but it wasn't. It didn't seem important.

I was literally watching the whole time, observed Shadow step up behind the creature with a knife, knew what it was better than anyone else in the room, and still barely noticed. I was guessing my attacker didn't have a clue it was there until Shadow had already laid its throat open to the bone. Even watching it do that just…didn't feel like it was a big deal.

Blood poured out over its hands. There was some already there; this clearly was not the first person Shadow had killed today, and there was blood on its hands, splashed on its face, staining its shirt. The blood was the only spot of color on it, lending the stereotypically goth look an awful sort of authenticity. I hadn't noticed Shadow being involved in the fighting, but then again, as it had just demonstrated I probably *wouldn't* have.

It reached down and offered me a hand up. I took it, feeling glad that it had used the hand not currently holding a knife, in much the same way I might be glad that the cook at a restaurant got my order right. It had no real weight to it.

I managed not to shiver; I didn't want to make it feel like it had upset the closest thing it had to a friend in this world. Oddly enough, *that* felt important. Shadow's immediate presence and actions didn't register, but how I felt about it as a person still had meaning. On the whole, it was a deeply strange experience.

"Thanks," I said, stretching my shoulder where I'd just gotten hit. Not really injured, I thought, but it was achy, and I didn't need anything making me slower right now.

"No problem," Shadow said, like it genuinely wasn't. I didn't think that impression was the product of that strange, unnatural apathy. It just didn't care about this, felt that saving my ass again was no big deal.

I collected Thorn, looking around. The fight looked…mostly pretty well in hand. The only point of actual conflict was around the throne at this point.

Unfortunately, that part of the fight was kinda important, and it wasn't going well. Ekaterina and two of her people were still up, but all of them were bloodied. They were facing up against a group of four, all of them Sidhe. One was holding off both of her followers with no apparent difficulty, while two others were fighting Ekaterina, and both looked like they'd taken some hits in the process.

The maenad was an interesting fighter, now that I had the chance to observe her clearly. She fought like an angry cat, frenzied aggression at a frenetic pace. So did the other maenad who was still up, but that was as far as the resemblance went. Ekaterina was good enough to do that, and also still manage to look skilled and graceful; she was slipping aside from attacks, parrying occasionally in between cuts. She had a bronze kopis in one hand, and a long steel dagger in the other, and both had spilled their share of blood today.

I was vaguely glad, as I started towards that side of the room, that I hadn't tried to fight her, way back when we first met all of twelve days ago. She'd have taken me down in a few seconds if we hadn't run for it.

Unsurprisingly, the last of the Sidhe was standing back from the fighting, keeping the rest between him and Ekaterina. I'd already known who that was, but it was polite of the jackass to carry a sword which looked like it was literally made out of gold, to remove any ambiguity that might have otherwise remained.

Lily had vanished at some point; I wasn't sure when, or where she'd gone, didn't have time to wonder. Up ahead, the situation was deteriorating rapidly. Ekaterina was still holding her own, but two on one was wearing on her; she was bleeding, and her movements were getting clumsy. And meanwhile, the other Sidhe was handling *his* two-on-one fight seemingly effortlessly. I did not like the implications one bit.

We had done an enormous amount to even the numbers by now. But I was getting the impression that had been more or less expected. Cormac was the kind of guy to put his weakest soldiers on the front line, letting them die for the sake of tiring out the enemy. These four were probably the most dangerous of the bunch by a fair margin.

"God damn," I said, once I was close enough to be heard. "Even now, you sit back and watch other people fight. Are you seriously *that much* of a coward, or did we just catch you in the middle of jacking off and you're into getting cucked?"

I wasn't sure whether that insult would land or not, but apparently he either knew what being cucked meant or could infer from my general tone, because Cormac jerked like I'd hit him. I couldn't see his face behind the helmet (gilded, naturally), but I was pretty sure he didn't look happy.

"You dare speak to me so?" he snarled, somehow managing to be clearly audible despite the distance and the helmet.

"Why do people keep asking me that?" I wondered aloud, continuing to move closer. "Like, obviously the answer is yes, given that I just did." I was grinning, and I was guessing that would piss him off even more.

Capinera and Saori were on either side of me, both limping but still up and fighting. Shadow was still around somewhere, too, though I didn't bother trying to keep close track of it. This actually wasn't the product of that supernatural apathy; I just didn't think paying attention to it through that barrier was worth the distraction right now.

Cormac's attention was fixed on me, though. Or, well, sort of. I couldn't see *exactly* where he was looking. But I was pretty sure he was looking at Thorn, and I could feel a spike of avarice in the emotional resonance of the room, strong enough to feel it through the rage-terror-pain-triumph miasma of a large-scale fight.

Ekaterina wanted the sword, I was sure of that; not enough to outweigh her desire for vengeance, and I was confident she'd keep that promise if we both survived this, but she wanted Thorn. Cormac, though, was lusting after it with an intensity that surprised me. I wasn't sure how metaphorical that was, either; it was hard to tell, but it felt stark enough and personal enough that I thought it might really have a sexual element. It wouldn't really surprise me if this guy got off thinking about wealth, at this point, and Thorn represented one hell of a prize.

The other three fae, though, were continuing to fight, and now that I was closer I could see details. And I didn't like them.

The two currently fighting Ekaterina were winning. The maenad was quick enough to dodge the worst of it, and crazy enough not to care about the rest. But she had lost the dagger now, and that arm was hanging useless at her side, broken or otherwise disabled. She took a hand off in return, but simple arithmetic suggested that they could afford a one-to-one trade of arms better than she could. They knew it, too, and they both had nasty grins as they pressed that advantage, forcing her back.

Despite this, it was the other guy that I was far more troubled by. He looked...different. Superficially, there was nothing special about him; he was barely my height, making him smaller than average for a human male, and wearing simple leather. He didn't even have a helmet on, and as a result I could see his face. He looked...bored.

He was presently holding off Ekaterina's two closest and most dangerous followers at once, and he looked *bored.* And it looked like he could back that up, too. He had a short, simple sword in hand, something like a Roman gladius, and that suited the rest of his style; he moved *exactly* as much as necessary, with no excess, no flourishes. He let strikes pass within half an inch of him, or deflected them by just a few degrees. He wasn't even using his other hand.

He also had what looked like a heavy rifle on his back, and he burned with a tightly contained sort of power, something cold, silvery, and dispassionate as a scalpel's blade. I was pretty fucking sure I was looking at the guy who'd almost shot me all these times, and I didn't like that one little bit.

As I watched, the man who had been accompanying Ekaterina back in her hideout and seemed to be in her inner circle advanced. He was clearly trying to close distance with the Sidhe assassin and get inside his reach. It backfired instantly. The Sidhe swept the man's foot out from under him, which was harder than people generally thought, and he started to fall.

As he was falling, tumbling forward out of control, the Sidhe assassin's blade flicked down and slit his throat. As the target was falling, in the middle of that chaotic motion, he was still capable of a strike that precise, slitting a throat from just under the ear to the center of the neck. It reinforced the impression I'd gotten of a surgical theatre, really, because generally only surgeons made incisions *that* precise.

He didn't press the advantage, didn't move his feet beyond the slight movements required to continue fighting. But the message was clear; if we tried to move past him, it would go badly for us.

I couldn't do anything there, and I knew it. I had no illusions about that reality. It didn't matter that Thorn could probably hurt him; I'd never land a hit to begin with, not even a glancing one. I was just too completely outmatched in skill. I stepped towards the other side instead, where Ekaterina was giving ground fast.

They should have known better, really, should have followed the other guy's example. Breaking formation like that was a terrible idea. They were too aggressive, too eager for a decisive victory. And while Ekaterina was definitely giving ground because she was unable to hold it, that didn't mean it was the *only* reason she was giving ground.

Saori landed a shot on one of them. It wasn't much; the bullet just grazed her, really. The silver armor didn't even look to have been pierced. But it was a jarring impact, unexpected and probably painful just from the blunt impact. It was enough to make her flinch.

In the moment she did, Ekaterina reversed her movement, lashing out with her good arm towards the woman's face on the same side.

The Sidhe dodged it, of course. Ekaterina just did not have the position and force to land a solid hit, even with that distraction.

She could, however, force the fae woman to put herself even further off-balance to dodge. Capinera was keeping the other one occupied, and these two had advanced a few critical steps out of position. Their more skilled colleague wasn't in position to cover her flank. And so, there wasn't really much stopping me from stepping in on that flank instead.

I was not a skilled swordswoman. But I knew the basics, was pretty familiar with smaller blades, and honestly, this was a pretty basic maneuver with how far out of position the Sidhe warrior had put herself. I just had to step up and strike, a simple overhand thrust with Thorn.

She was quick enough to dodge away from that too, but only to a limited degree. I didn't stab her through center of mass like I'd wanted, and her armor was of high enough quality to actually put up a little resistance to Thorn's edge, which further reduced the damage. But I got a solid hit on her left flank, and when she pulled back she was losing a lot of blood. She was moving awkwardly, too, her left arm jerking spastically.

After a moment, I realized she must have taken a decent shock through the blade. There was vivid emerald-green lightning flickering over Thorn's whole length, though it was bright enough in this room that it wasn't terribly obvious. Apparently the Sidhe were susceptible to it, which I hadn't been sure of and still wasn't sure would always be the case.

Definitely worked on this one, though, and while she was still alive, she was in full retreat. Capinera was still keeping the other busy, and Saori had dropped the rifle in favor of her wakizashi as she joined in on that. It was pretty obvious they would be able to handle that faerie now that they had a numerical advantage.

We were, to some degree, winning. But in reality, it was probably closer to a stalemate. The Sidhe assassin who smelled like silver was definitely the most dangerous of the whole group, and he was untouched. As I was recovering my balance, I watched him take out the last maenad still in the fight aside from Ekaterina, removing her leg just below the knee. As she was falling, he was already moving, taking a single half-step to the side and bringing his sword around to catch Shadow as it tried to slip past while he was distracted. It didn't look like he'd cut it badly if at all, but he definitely sent it sprawling on the floor. It also confirmed he wasn't going to be fooled by that supernatural apathy, which wasn't surprising but was definitely a problem.

So, we'd taken out almost all of them, which was pretty impressive considering we'd been outnumbered by over two-to-one at the start of this bloodbath. But we were in rough shape after having done so; it was pretty much down to me, my personal friends, and Ekaterina still up and fighting, and all of us had significant injuries. Cormac hadn't even gotten involved himself, and I could feel him gathering up power now, working some kind of magic that smelled like grass in the sunlight and sounded like a screaming cat.

His…assassin? Bodyguard? I honestly had no idea what to call this guy at this point, and wasn't at all sure what his stake in all this was. But he hadn't taken a hit yet, and I was pretty sure that if he didn't let us past we were not going to be reaching the fae nobleman behind him. Said nobleman's armor was definitely too heavy for Saori to be able to realistically get a bullet through it, too, which negated our main option at range.

To my side, the others were wrapping up the rest of the fight. I ignored that completely; they had it well in hand, and it wasn't important anyway. It was hard to focus, hard to think clearly. In addition to being dissociated as hell and emotions running high from the fighting, I still had adrenaline going hard. But there was another element to it, one I didn't fully understand, a sort of *need* to keep going. It reminded me a bit of my occasional bouts of clinical mania, the restless need to be moving I experienced then. And much like those, I could push it down, but it was a struggle.

Abruptly, I realized I still had Thorn in hand. I could feel the euphoria, the gleeful urge to keep going, to keep fighting. I hadn't noticed it much while actually doing so, but now that I was trying to stop and think, it felt overwhelming. So did the magic pouring out of it; the smell of blood was lost in the very real bloodbath, but there was also a heavy scent of flowers that wasn't real, and I could feel shivers up my spine as strongly as any tactile synesthesia I'd ever had.

How long had I been holding it, now? I had no way of guessing, with how strangely time was dilated at the moment, how slow everything felt. But it had been a while, and this feeling had been building the whole time, getting stronger. I couldn't even feel the pain of my injuries, which weren't *terribly* extensive but should at least have been noticeable.

I needed to think right now more than we needed another blade. I moved to sheathe the sword, and then saw the emerald lightning dancing over its surface. The blade caught the light like a mirror, and it was a captivating display. And then, abruptly, I had a thought.

Epiphanic thought patterns are notoriously unreliable, but sometimes the thinking had already happened, and the ideas just needed to be clicked into place together. And the dissociated, manic state I was in was fantastic for that. Flight of ideas, as the clinical term went, flowing through ideas following loose connections at breakneck speed.

Hope had commented on the development of personal ability, and it seemed insightful. I could see fur on my hand, and I'd already put together that there was a common thread in the moments where that had happened recently and those where it had not. As I'd told Saori, it wasn't really conscious; but I was starting to suspect it was more volitional than it used to be, because it seemed like it hadn't been happening when humans might see and make my life awkward, and that was too convenient for it to be chance. I thought about how it felt to call Thorn, a sort of focused intention. I remembered a passage of text about how gods were lies, highlighted by a goddess.

I remembered that. I remembered Alice talking about how Thorn's magic was too intricate for her to understand, saying that the sixth spell on it might be making it harmful just to be around. I remembered talking to Saori, before my first trip to another world, about all the ways it might go wrong. I thought about Melissa's blank smile as she peeled someone's skin off, and how the snow had glittered in the streetlights during the first night of this mess. I'd almost gotten killed then, had possibly been closer to dying than in any of the subsequent attempts, and that had just been an ordinary girl with a sword. She couldn't have lasted five seconds in a fight with any of the people I'd killed tonight. I remembered Raincloud asking me about love and a dream where it tasted like blood. I thought about how uncomfortable I felt watching werewolves changing, thought about how they reacted to silver, something so much worse than simple pain. Remembered Audgrim telling me that my abilities were unusual, and watching his body falling to the grass.

I couldn't have explained the connections between all these ideas, not really. I couldn't put it into words. But it felt like I flowed through all of them, and it only took a few seconds for me to assemble them into a single, complex thoughtform. The focal point was an action, one that was terrifying and would have felt impossible just days ago, but it was simple, and was really just an extension of things I had done before. I might never be able to put the whole thought into words, but in that moment, I could *understand* it, and it only took seconds for me to go from the first observation to implementation.

Dropping my filters right now was such a profoundly foolish idea that normally I wouldn't have even considered it, but right now I needed the precision. I tried to keep them partially in place, to attenuate the flood enough that I didn't just start seizing. But there was a factor I hadn't accounted for.

I'd never done this while holding Thorn before. I wasn't ready for it. The vivid, overpowering sensations always made me feel high, and when that collided with the existing manic euphoria, the two seemed to feed into each other, and catapulted me further into that oversaturated world than I was ready for, much further. The fact that its own magic was overpowering even with my filters in place didn't help at all, either.

I wasn't unconscious. I wasn't even falling down seizing, though I wasn't sure how; I'd never been this far gone and still conscious before. But I couldn't perceive reality at all. It was wholly obscured by my sense of the magic in that room. Thorn's power pulsed through me so strongly it felt like how other people described being electrocuted. Everything was beautiful. There were dark flames painted over everything, with the scents of wolf and fox and spice and flowers mingling in it. I could feel silver-scalpel light spreading in fractal patterns like fractured glass on every side, and taste blackberry wine mixed with ashes and claws and steel resolve. The room was so bright, so colorful, seven kinds of green and seventeen shades of scarlet. I could hear the storm all around, howling wind through singing leaves and the constant, rolling sound of thunder, and my skin was full of silver claws with more lightning on it than fur, it was everywhere, arcing from me like a Tesla coil made of emeralds.

Everything was so fucking beautiful I could barely hold myself together, barely remember who I was through the joy of the moment. Every breath I took painted the world with a a bloody crimson mist. And strangely enough, it was exactly the overpowering euphoria that provided enough of an anchor to maintain consciousness. There was no fear, no agitation or anger, not that I could tell. Just a simple, raw sort of joy so deep it verged on madness.

And because of that, I could focus. It was such a strong anchor, and such a clearly directed one, and that direction was pointed straight towards the reason I'd made this mistake. Because through the chaos, through the noise, I could also feel the keystone I was trying to focus on. Cormac was assembling his spell; I could feel it, could feel how the grass-fire-gold magic was flowing into patterns. It was strong, and it couldn't have been a tenth as long as it felt, because he hadn't quite finished yet. The patterns were incomplete.

I focused on them, waiting, not even breathing so that it didn't distract me. I waited for the patterns of the spell to be almost complete, the last possible moment before the spell went from abstract energy to concrete effect, and then I concentrated, focusing intention through the storm. It was the same kind of thought that called Thorn to me, just focused outward instead, *pushing.*

I could just barely see a bolt of emerald-green lightning, starting at the tip of my sword and arcing out towards the Sidhe nobleman. I could see the golden magic he was holding collapse into noise.

That was exactly how long I could withstand the flood. The instant that the magic I'd been concentrating on was falling into chaos, I barely felt myself doing the same before the world went away.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Waking up was slow, difficult, and deeply unpleasant. I normally woke up quickly, but this hadn't been sleep. It hadn't even been *like* sleep, just a window of unconsciousness while I was seizing. And coming back from that usually felt a lot like this; there was a feeling like I was trying to push my way back while swimming in honey, the resistance and drag making every cognitive movement a struggle. I dragged myself out of it, but it took a while, and I was still dazed.

But I hadn't been out long. Not long at all, in fact, which was convenient. That part was hard to predict; longer periods of unconsciousness usually indicated a more severe seizure, but it wasn't consistent. I tended to be out for anywhere from five minutes to an hour; this seemed to have been on the short end of that range, under ten minutes.

I felt surprisingly calm about the groggy, dazed feeling. I would have expected the helplessness to be a huge anxiety trigger right now, but there was very little. I was almost sure before I was even fully conscious that we had won, simply because I had survived long enough *to* wake up again.

Reality did not deliver a horrible gut punch just when I thought I was safe, which was unwontedly kind of it, really. I opened my eyes and tried to sit up, and instantly regretted both, but there was no active harm, just an absolutely miserable headache, a bone-deep ache in my shoulder and one in my calf that was at least a quarter of the depth of bone, which got an honorable mention. My whole body had a generalized ache, and I'd definitely cracked a rib because it hurt to breathe, but not enough for the bone to be fully fractured. I'd sprained my right ankle falling, and had a long cut on that calf that I didn't remember, shallow but bloody.

In short, I felt like shit, but I wasn't dead. And rather than any of a number of hostile knives, it was Saori's hand on my forehead pushing me back down to her lap. I didn't have a problem with that.

"Shh, take it easy," she told me. The kitsune had a loose, lazy sort of grin, nothing like the wide and feral grin she'd worn in battle. I could feel the fire in it, even while holding my filters in place as firmly as I knew how. "You hit your head pretty good on the way down."

And that explained the headache, which wasn't getting any lighter. Having been thus reassured, I closed my eyes and just rested back on her.

"What happened?" I asked. "I kinda. Lost track towards the end."

"Yeah, that uh. Was pretty apparent. How far back do you have?"

I considered that for a moment. "I think right up until I went at Cormac," I said eventually. "But everything past the door is really strange. I think it was strange while it was happening, too."

"That tracks," she agreed. "Pretty simple at the end, you just fell down and went into convulsions. Cut yourself with your own sword while you were falling, incidentally, which is embarrassing but not deep enough to be dangerous. But up to that point you were...definitely

pretty high. There was a lot of manic giggling, and you didn't seem to be getting language very much. Did a hell of a nice job for being high as a kite, though," she told me, and the slight hesitance that had been in her tone a moment ago was gone now. Saori was grinning, I could hear it in her voice, and now it was her trademark slightly mad, wholly madcap grin.

"How many did I get?" I asked, feeling morbidly curious. I wasn't sure whether I was proudly counting trophies or poking at fresh guilt, though I thought it was mostly the former. It was hard to feel guilt when I could say with almost total confidence that anyone I'd killed tonight had made the conscious decision to be here. If they worked with a guy who tried to assassinate people with car bombs and casually killed a bunch of civilians in the process, I didn't think they had much grounds to complain when one of those people came and took their gang out with extreme prejudice.

"Lessee. One Sidhe at the door, three hounds in the brawl just after."

"And one of the cat sìth as well," Capinera chimed in. "It went down while she was getting up."

Huh. I hadn't remembered any cats, but then, I might not have. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen where Capinera was, but I assumed that the status report would get there eventually.

"And one cat," Saori agreed. "Two more Court Sidhe there, then another up front, and Cormac. Who is, incidentally, very fucking dead. You got him with a bolt of lightning, and he was wrapped in way too much metal for that to be a good thing."

"Gold is also very conductive," I added helpfully. "Not as good as silver, of course. Or copper. But short of that, good as metal gets."

"Lesson learned, I guess. You electrocuted him pretty good, and then his spell blew up in his face. By which I mean, it blew the front half of his skull off when it exploded."

I blinked, which right now meant reminding myself of why I had my eyes nicely closed against the glare of a dimly lit room. "I was not expecting for it to be that literal."

"I know, right?" Saori was grinning again, and I could not only hear it in her voice, but feel it in her hand on my head, where she was gently stroking my hair. "Priceless. So at that point it was pretty much done. There were more of them in both wings, but Shadow went south, Lily went north, and that was about it."

"I was expecting more loose ends than this," I commented.

"Yeah, about that. Ekaterina had a couple people who were only mostly dead, so she left posthaste at that point. Said to tell you that she's pissed you took more people down than she did, and she wants a rematch at some point with both of you drunk. Not sure who she's planning on being sober enough to count."

I laughed. "Wow. Just. Wow."

"She's fantastic," Saori agreed. "And that all brings us to the one notable loose end who's still here. That fae jackass who is, incidentally, friends with Capinera. Hasn't said a word, but he's still standing right there."

"Friends is an overstatement," Capinera said. "Acquaintances, maybe. We were...in similar lines of work. He wants to talk to you." From the wariness in her tone, I was guessing I knew why she wasn't sitting next to Saori. Someone had to watch said acquaintance. I doubted she could keep him at bay if he wanted past, but she would feel obligated to at least pretend.

"Great," I sighed. "Knew it was coming. Let's go." I opened my eyes and stood up, assisted by Saori, since my balance wasn't fully recovered. My leg hurt, too, and wasn't healing very quickly for such a shallow cut. It was still bleeding, in fact, though a simple dressing was enough to keep that to a sort of sluggish trickle.

It turned out that when Saori said that the man was standing right where he was, she meant it literally. If he'd moved his feet an inch since I fell, he could have fooled me. He was watching me with his sword out and the same bored grey eyes that had watched me through a rifle's scope on several occasions.

I wondered why he'd missed. If he was as good a shot as he was a swordsman, it seemed unlikely that he'd miss that many times, for all that they had been difficult shots. More malicious compliance, maybe.

"What's up?" I said, limping closer.

He bowed towards me, barely moving at all, just tilting his head forward a few degrees. I bowed back, feeling a little silly—I'd grown up with the gesture being commonplace, but I had been away from Japan for a long time now.

Capinera and Shadow were both watching him, and they were both just as still as he was. From all three, I got an impression of coiled tension rather than relaxation, a viper ready to strike. I felt much the same, though not nearly as static about it.

"Simeon. This is my friend Kyoko." I noted that Capinera had freely called me a friend, while declining Simeon the same status, right in front of him. I wasn't sure what that implied. "Kyoko, this is Simeon Flint." She also didn't provide him with a description at all, but I felt like that was probably a courtesy rather than a slight. It suggested that he didn't need further introduction because people would already *know* who Simeon Flint was. Which I didn't, but the point stood.

"A pleasure," Simeon said, not sounding pleased. He didn't sound angry, either, or anything in particular. His tone was as blank and disinterested as his eyes.

"An honor." I didn't sound especially honored either, though I picked that word instead for a reason. Lying, or even half-lying with an implicit sentiment, to the highly regarded, demonstrably highly lethal Sidhe sounded like a death wish. This might not be a pleasure, but I had to admit I did feel at least slightly honored that said Sidhe had wanted to talk to me specifically.

"Is your conflict with Cormac Goldenblade complete?" He sounded so blank it was a little eerie, lacking any emotional investment at all. He had not sheathed his weapon.

I looked over to where I could see said fae nobleman lying on the floor behind Simeon. He was lying over a considerable portion of that floor; Saori had not been exaggerating that part either. The mess was spectacular, and would be an enormous headache for whoever inherited the flooring.

"I would say so, and he doesn't seem to be in a state to argue," I said. "So, yes."

The reaction was instant and sort of gratifying. Simeon took one step back and sheathed his sword. "Finally," he said, and while the emotion in his tone was faint, there was real spite in his cold grey eyes. "I believe our business is concluded alongside my erstwhile employer, then."

I blinked. "You're just going to leave?"

He tilted his head to the side very slightly, the gesture reminding me of a cat. "Do you propose to stop me?" he asked, and the curiosity was similarly faint, but it was there.

"No, not at all," I said. "It just seems odd that you'd walk out on your employer like that."

This response wasn't subtle at all. The ice in Simeon's voice was so sharp I thought it might be literally able to freeze water. "I do not renege on my contracts."

I held up my hands, shook my head. "No, and I didn't mean to imply that you did; my apologies for having misspoken. If anything, it's more that even the momentary thought that you might have was so unbelievable that it startled me, and I spoke clumsily." Again, entirely honest. Simeon was Sidhe to the core, and they did not break their word, the end. And people in his line of work, if I understood what he did at all, were deeply reliant on their good reputation. The notion was laughable.

"He deployed my skills with all the finesse of a bull in a china shop," Simeon said calmly. "While repeatedly overruling my criticism of his plans, despite lacking expertise regarding you, your world, or the type of work to be done. Had he not done so I expect I could have killed you within the first three days. As it stands, he was an arrogant fool, and a rank coward; even at the end, he was so concerned with saving his own skin that he ordered me to focus on maintaining a defensive line rather than risk exposing himself to any hazard. I did so. I agreed to follow his orders in this matter until his conflict with you was over. I have done so. You can feed him to the vultures now for all I care."

I blinked. That flood of vitriol was just…impressive, in several ways. First, that he had said the whole thing in a tone so lacking in overt malice that it felt like a blank sheet of paper. Second, that he *had* said it, because I got the impression that it took a truly impressive amount of contempt for Simeon Flint to say that; he seemed the type who rarely spent that many words on anyone at all.

It was exactly what I'd told Lily, not so long ago, when she said Silas had wanted a security consultant who considered it a gift. You don't survive to be an ancient, powerful being without figuring out that pissing off the praetorian guard is a quick way to come down with a bad case of death. I had no idea how Cormac had done so, or how he'd survived in general when he pissed off *everyone* around him so much. Presumably he was under the aegis of someone who actually had a brain, but why *they* had been sheltering him was beyond me, since it seemed unlikely he was much of an asset. Made a promise to his father or something, maybe.

When I opened my eyes again, Simeon was gone. Though at least it wasn't the eerie, instantaneous disappearance that Kali had shown me. I could feel a faint shimmer of cold, surgical-blade magic, and was guessing Simeon had simply drawn a veil around himself and walked away.

"That guy creeps me right the fuck out," Saori said simply.

"You don't know the half of it," Capinera said darkly, finally sheathing her rapier. That reminded me that I hadn't done the same to Thorn, so I looked around, found the sword on the floor, and corrected that.

I hadn't been consciously feeling its power until I touched it again, but it hadn't been fully gone, just muted. I knew that because when I slid it into the sheath and fastened the restraining strap around it, the sudden drop in tension was palpable in the air. I immediately felt better, too, not by a lot, but it was noticeable; my headache dropped a few notches in severity, and my balance felt a little steadier, my leg still oozing blood but with a little less burning pain involved in stepping on it.

Thorn didn't try to stop me this time. It felt satisfied, almost smug. I looked at the sword, blade and sheath alike pristine and untouched by the blood they had spilled, and shivered. Optimistically, I decided to write the feeling off as me projecting, because I wasn't ready to have a sword with emotions, even if it did instill them in me when I wielded it.

"We good in here?" Lily said, walking in the front door. The vampire was also satisfied, but there was no ambiguity there, nor in why; there was enough blood on her face to make that feel pretty obvious. I wasn't sure whether she could drink from the fae, but apparently the answer was yes, in some measure; who knows, maybe she just liked the taste.

"Yeah, think so," I said. "You heading out? Because you've definitely paid that debt off."

"I had fun," she said, and sounded like she meant it, though the satisfaction was still somewhat reserved; Lily, I thought, was probably just like that. "But yes. Time I'd best get going. Feel free to stay in touch."

The vampire was gone, too, very nearly as instantly as Kali. I could feel her moving away into the night, but Lily was so damn fast that she was out of range of any sense I had in moments, leaving just a business card on the floor. Another for my...special set of those, though I was guessing I'd end up in at least sporadic contact with her. I had enjoyed her company. I wasn't thinking too hard about what that implied right at the moment.

A thought did occur to me, though. I glanced around for Shadow, and realized that the achromatic spectre had also vanished. I hadn't seen it go either, but in that case I was pretty sure I just hadn't noticed. I wouldn't have.

"Not going to lie," Saori said, clearly realizing the same thing at much the same time. "Not bad company but wow does it give me the creeps with this shit."

"It'll be around," I said, feeling quite confident in that. I was, after all, apparently the first person it had found even remotely close to a friend in quite some time.

"Yes. So, what are you going to do with the place?" Capinera sounded curious.

I blinked. “With what place?”

“This one,” Capinera said, sounding somewhat amused now. “You did a large portion of the fighting, and struck the final blow. It’s yours by right of conquest, as are the fallen lord’s armaments.”

I sighed. “Of course they are,” I said, sounding nearly as tired as I felt. “Because clearly I needed a sword made of gold. Who the fuck even thinks that’s a good idea? Gold isn’t even good material for swords, he must have sunk so much into just getting it workable. Such a pointless affectation.”

“What the hell are you complaining about?” Saori asked me. “You should be thrilled.”

I blinked at the kitsune. “What?”

Capinera laughed softly, a sound like silver and shadows. “It does seem to be to your advantage, on the whole,” she agreed.

I blinked at the half-redcap. “What are you two talking about? Keeping in mind that I recently hit my head while seizing.”

Saori sighed. “Fae law says they’re yours by right of conquest,” she said slowly, sounding exasperated. “It doesn’t say you have to *keep* them. And that’s a fuck of a lot of gold.”

“Oh.” I blinked again, but now it was for an entirely different reason. That was…a *lot* of gold. “Wow,” I said, and then looked at the spectacular mess on the floor which was now an enormous headache for the person who had inherited it.

As instant karmic comeuppance went, it was pretty tame. And that, finally, was the last absurdity I could stand, literally. I broke out in hysterical laughter, so hard that I had to sit down on that floor and look at the disaster we’d made of the place in the assault and laugh until I cried.

Epilogue

I stood on the staircase and looked at the manor. This was, I had learned, what it was; it wasn't just the mansion itself that I now owned, but also a sizable chunk of land around it, which was apparently the distinction.

I had not been expecting to live here. I had been fully expecting to pawn it off along with the rest of Cormac's belongings. But it wouldn't actually have brought much, with how far out into the ass end of nowhere it was. And it was, I had to admit, pretty much ideal for my needs in some ways. Out so far into a post-industrial wasteland that it was all the way into the forest, plenty of room to work with, a landed estate sufficiently large that neighbors were a complete nonissue even without it being all the way out in fucking Fairywood. The trip into town would be a pain in the ass, but not an unreasonable one.

I had still been resistant to the idea of living in anything that could be called a landed estate, or the manor house therein. But Saori liked the idea, surprising no one, and she'd decided to fight dirty and rope Raincloud in on the pleading. I could hold up under a vixen applying bedroom eyes or a puppy applying, well, puppy eyes. I did not think I could reasonably be blamed for caving under the pressure of both.

I could, however, insist upon remodeling, a task that had taken several months. I might be moving into a mansion, but I had flatly refused to live in one as tacky as Cormac's, and even Saori couldn't argue in favor of that crime against anything resembling good taste. I'd also had quite a bit of landscaping done. Cormac had left three sides of the building facing out into forest, and the fourth onto a parking lot. I had decided to correct that. The parking lot was gone now, and access to the building was by a stairway up the hill from the highway; I expected that soon the building would be completely surrounded by trees. The stair continued up the hill, too, where it eventually met a cul de sac even more out of the way than the highway was, and that was saying things.

"Look good?" Kadir asked me, his voice a bass so deep it made me want to taste it.

I examined the wards critically for a few more moments, and then nodded. "Yeah. Looks good."

He grinned at me, teeth startlingly white against the darkest skin I'd ever seen. "Great." He tossed me a set of keys.

"Pleasure doing business," I told him. "Money will be in your account within three days." I'd paid him half up front this time around, with the rest held in escrow; Kadir might like me, and he might trust me to be good for it, but it was enough cash that I had volunteered this arrangement as a show of good faith. It kept him from having to ask for it, which would have made things awkward. By such unspoken understandings did business in the semi-licit world work.

He nodded to me, nodded to Raincloud, and walked off down the stairs. I watched him out of sight, lost in thought, and then went to the door. A water balloon flew at me out of the trees on

the way; I ducked under it, and watched it splash against a willow instead. Whatever had been in it, it sure wasn't water. I could tell because it was corrosive enough to eat through the bark of the tree in seconds.

I didn't react beyond that, nor did Raincloud. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened. It wasn't even the hundredth time. Ekaterina and Cormac might both be out of the picture, but whoever had almost dropped an anvil on me *wasn't,* and they hadn't gotten less absurdist, either. We'd seen so many insane booby traps and ridiculous assassination plots at this point that a water balloon full of concentrated acid barely registered.

The wards were already active. But it only took me a few moments to take them down; they had only been partially in place, and I'd been getting a lot of practice with this. It was just a sort of concentrated intention, the same kind of thinking that brought Thorn to my hand, much the same that I used to hold filters in place against the flood of sensory input that would otherwise swamp me. I was still very new to extending that intention outwards, but I had been practicing, and this was a sequence of actions I'd been practicing extensively.

It wasn't a hard one, either, much easier than I'd expected. Somehow I'd assumed that raising and lowering wards must be hard, since otherwise people would just walk right through them. This turned out not to be the case; it was actually quite simple, something like manipulating a combination lock, more than trying to pick a tumbler lock. All you really had to do was manipulate certain key structural elements into specific positions in sequence, more or less. Knowing the pattern was the hard part, with the added spice that if you got the sequence wrong enough, you'd start triggering landmines.

And I could afford some nasty landmines now.

I had been *very* incentivized to make sure this was something I could do smoothly, consistently, and without needing to have too much cognitive power dedicated to it.

"C'mon," I told Raincloud, opening the door. I kicked my shoes off, and we wandered around, looking at our new home. It was nothing we hadn't seen before, of course; the wards had been pretty much the last step of the renovation process, for obvious reasons, after even interior decorating was done.

But this was different. Those had been tours, working, practicing with the wards and watching Kadir work as he designed them. This was coming home. The mood was completely different.

The basic layout was the same. But I'd pulled out the ridiculously tacky throne room and changed that open space into a sort of atrium, because apparently I was the kind of rich that could have an atrium in my house now. Between selling Cormac's gear, selling various tacky-but-expensive art, and VNC successfully committing insurance fraud on my behalf, I had been able to afford extensive rush-job renovations, landscaping projects, defenses, high-quality furnishings, and still have some left.

I really hadn't been ready for just how much money that much gold was worth. Presumably it had to be refined out, but I'd gladly let VNC handle that whole process; I knew that I didn't know what I was doing there, and their cut would still leave more than if I tried to do it myself.

"What do you think?" I asked, wandering idly around.

It's nice. But it feels weird.

I sighed. "Little bit, yeah." The south wing was mostly dedicated to various kinds of functional space; workshops, kitchen, special spaces for the kinds of houseplant that I wasn't about to be growing in an atrium. Not one that anyone else might want to use without getting sick, being seriously intoxicated, and/or dying. I ignored that whole side of the building, turning north instead, into the living spaces.

It felt nice. The furnishings were all of styles I liked. But it felt like it was just...so much. I'd already been rattling around the old house barely using half of it. Granted I was a lot more likely to have guests now, and while none of Saori, Capinera, or Shadow was actually moving in, I fully expected they'd be spending a lot of time here.

But for the moment it was just me and Raincloud, and both of us were feeling wistful for a smaller, less luxurious space, one that felt like somewhere we belonged. I'd been independently wealthy for my whole adult life, at least enough to have stability, but I'd lived relatively simply. Comfortable, not luxurious. My present surroundings felt fake somehow, like at any moment someone would burst in to tell me to get off the truly rich person's carpet.

But no one would. This was ours now. And once that started to feel real, I thought I might like the place.

It is *nice, though,* Raincloud said, echoing my own thoughts. *A little much, but nice.*

"Yeah," I agreed. "Plus, you know, it has a certain style to it. Some guy tries to kill us, so we kill him and take over his house. That's a statement."

I think that's called "war", or maybe "repossession by insurance agents".

I laughed and started up the stairs. I still had things arranged in very roughly the same ways as in my old house, and for many of the same reasons. The armory was still in the basement, because I didn't expect to use the space for anything else, so setting a particularly secure area of the house aside for that made sense. The poisonous plants were still in a special room that had no other purpose, and placed as far away from both living areas and kitchens as I could get it; in this case, that meant that the kitchen was on the ground floor of the south wing, while the poisons were on the third and highest floor.

And similarly, I had my own suite on the top floor of the residential wing. It was definitely large enough to merit calling it a suite; I actually had a few suites of rooms over there, either set aside for specific friends or just available for guests. But mine was the largest, taking up the whole of the top floor, and it was up there for the same reasons.

So Raincloud and I climbed the stairs of our new home, and went to the bedroom. We had a full window seat now rather than just the window, and I had to admit that it felt better. The luxury

felt alien, but I was guessing it wouldn't take long for it to also feel good. She hopped up next to me, and I brushed her fur quietly while the sun set.

It wasn't anything too impressive. This building was built on the east slope of the hill, and the sunset was really only going to be impressive if you went to the top of that hill. Up there you could look out to the west over Robinson Township, Moon Township, and the forest that surrounded and extended past the airport. Here, it was nice, but nothing special.

But we were high enough to look over the trees here. And so, as the dusk faded out towards night, we could watch the lights of the city against the backdrop of that night. The manor was built out at the far west side of the city, in a neighborhood that barely merited the name. But it looked out at the same downtown skyline we'd seen before, just from a different angle.

It was harder to see details from here, between the greater distance and less direct angle. But in a way, that had its own beauty. From further back, the lights were sort of a blur, but we could see more of it, a wider lens taking in a broader view of Pittsburgh. It was easier to see, from here, just how huge a city really was, how much it sprawled across the landscape. The loss of detail created a softer image.

The view from here wasn't the same, and we wouldn't be getting the old one back. And this one wasn't better. But it wasn't exactly worse, either, just…different. That felt like there was a lesson in it.

Raincloud had been continuing to build her cognitive skills over the past few months. She mostly thought in words now, in verbal structures that had continued to feel clearer as time went on, until now my connection to her was clearer than that I shared with the spirit who shared her mind. I still got emotional overtones from her, still got a whirl of sensory information and emotion and base-level understanding when even mental words would struggle to capture something, or would take too long. I still got the occasional surge of raw emotion, and while she was already starting to feel less innocent and clean, more stained like the rest of us, she still felt things deeply, keenly, and with a sort of purity I didn't know quite how to describe. When I felt her love directly, it was enough to bring tears to my eyes. I thought it probably always would.

But mostly she thought in words, in clearly phrased language. This was an exception, a momentary flicker of that more formless thought pattern. I felt something from her now that was wordless like she'd been as a young puppy, a sort of gestalt impression of thoughts and feelings. There was an impression of this moment—me, her, us, home—and a broader, formless impression as well, one that encompassed friends and enemies, the bloodshed that had bought us this home, the fear and joy and pain that had happened in the process.

And under all of that was a sense of inquiry. The question was formless enough that I had to put words to it myself, fundamental enough that I had an easy time doing so. *Is it worth it?*

I sat and brushed her fur for a long moment, *I don't know,* I replied eventually. *I'm hopeful. But I don't really know. Ask me again when we know what we paid and what it bought, and maybe I'll have an answer then.*

There was a feeling of quiet contemplation then, and understanding. And then there was a love that brought tears to my eyes, settling out towards fatigue.

"Yeah," I said, yawning. "Me too. Let's get some sleep. Probably get to meet more new and exciting people soon enough, better be rested for it."

What, because they'll want to kill you? Why would anyone possibly *intend violence towards you?*

"Ordinarily, I would say 'because of my warm and friendly personality'. But this time, probably because Saori wants to crash that wedding this weekend, and given that he's a cop, she's a soldier, and they're both bringing their friends, I give it pretty high odds someone tries to shoot her." My voice was dry as I stood and started wandering over towards the bed.

Oh, right, that's this weekend. Yeah, probably better get some sleep then.