

KATER CHEEK



Dryad's Blade

By Kater Cheek

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DRYAD'S BLADE
by Kater Cheek
originally published as TREEMAKER in 2011

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Chapter One

“Mandatory fun,” Palmer had called this party. Mandatory, as in, “I’m in deep shit with a bunch of vampires if we don’t show up and play nice.” I stared over my shoulder at the double French doors leading into the Pepperwood Country Club. My feet had grown completely numb inside the cheap yellow pumps, and my jean jacket wasn’t keeping the cold away either. Fifteen minutes outside in what was shaping up to be Seabingen’s coldest winter on record was plenty long enough.

I’d already given Fenwick twenty minutes and two phone calls from the pay phone by the side entrance. No answer. Maybe it was his change night? Not that he’d be able to use that as an excuse for not being here, unless he wanted to tell them what he did once a month. Inside, the warm chatter in the ballroom beckoned. I climbed the stairs. Twenty minutes in this kind of cold was long enough to wait for anyone, even my boyfriend.

“May I see your invitation, miss?” The doorman intercepted me, gaze running from my yellow acetate dress, to my paint and glue stained jean jacket, to my very human face. He crossed his arms and frowned.

“What?” I put my hand on my hip and wavered between whether to flirt or go for indignant. “Do you really think anyone would be dumb enough crash a Guild soirée?”

The Vampire Guild was an elite club, to say the least. All the vampires knew each other, and had known each other for years.

“May I see your invitation?” He gave me a bouncer stare.

A skinny young man with brown hair, freckles, and an out-of-date light blue tuxedo climbed the red-carpeted steps. To my bindi-granted second sight, he appeared to have a black cloud around him, like a smudged charcoal aura. There were other signs to recognize vampires; fangs of course (though they were careful not to show them), pale skin, unusual strength, and that inhuman stillness that some of them never learned to hide. The shadow around his body faded after a slow count of seven, which meant that he’d been made a vampire back when his retro-zoot-suit tuxedo had been the height of fashion.

The vampire could have waved me in along with him, but he didn't. He could have smiled a greeting, but he didn't. The only non-vampire Guild member was like the only black person in a small Midwestern town. Everyone knew who I was, and no one would talk to me. I tried a smile at the doorman instead, but he was as flirtatious as a prison guard.

The doorman must have been an initiate, because he gave Mr. Zoot-Suit the vampire an ass-kissing bow, right before blocking my path again. "Invitation, miss?"

My vampire sponsor appeared suddenly behind him, in that sneaky too-fast-too-quiet way they're so good at. Finally.

"Evening, Melbourne." Theodore Roosevelt Palmer never went anywhere without a gun or three, though tonight his well-fitting tuxedo hid them all. His skin was a couple shades darker than most black people on television, but still not as dark as the smudged aura which clung to him for a slow count of ten. "Are you having some trouble?"

The doorman stood up straighter. "She's trying to enter without an invitation, sir."

"I am her sponsor. She is invited, Initiate..." Palmer paused, then reached out and touched the doorman's name lapel. "Initiate Bryce. As is her friend Alan Fenwick. Please do not detain our guests."

The doorman started to stammer an apology, but Palmer had already taken my arm and was escorting me towards the entrance. The double bay of French doors were flanked by miniature orange trees, and I couldn't help touching a leaf as we passed them to see if they were silk or real. They were real. Memo to self: Solicit the resort to see if they wanted to commission fake ones.

Palmer helped me out of my jacket. "Where is Fenwick?"

"Maybe he got stuck in traffic?" What if the bus he was riding got in an accident? What if he were in the emergency room right now?

Palmer draped my jean jacket from the tips of his fingers, extending his arm towards the coatroom, where another human initiate took it from him. "You have a purse?"

"I keep everything in my jacket pockets." Another reason not to leave the thing at home.

Palmer took the coatroom token from the initiate without looking at her, then pressed it into my hand, having already gone and come back. He took

my arm again, as though afraid I might wander off, and led me towards the ballroom.

The room held several hundred people, most of whom were dancing to the sounds of the band at the far end. Polished wood reflected swaying skirts and smart tuxedo pants. Tall French doors surrounding two sides of the ballroom were curtained against the chill, although with the huge crush of people it felt warm and almost claustrophobic.

Most of the guests were vampires, initiates (some pathetically Goth) or dates of Guild members. I recognized two humans, but one was the local newscaster, and the other was the mayor. The latter probably had no idea he was among vampires. Most saw the Guild's public face, that of an exclusive social club. Some would know better. They'd look at the Guild and see the payer of bribes, the puller of strings, the owner of real estate. Not many learned the truth. Most people have a hard time believing in vampires.

Palmer led me across the ballroom and introduced his wife. He had mentioned her once or twice, but mostly shielded her from Guild affairs. She was a beautiful, fifty-something black woman with cat-eye glasses and an emerald green gown. She gave her first name, something unpronounceably French, and offered me a wink of human-woman solidarity and a diamond covered hand.

"Kit, I've heard so much about you."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Palmer."

"Oh, please," she said, "Call me 'Ell-of-a-lot-of-vowels.'" That's what it sounded like, anyway.

Palmer saved me from having to mangle his wife's name. "Melbourne, are you going to be alone?" Palmer infused this question with a lot of meaning, meaning completely lost on me.

"Until Fenwick gets here. Why? Was there someone you wanted me to meet?"

'Ell-of-a-lot-of-vowels' clung to his arm and looked pointedly away from our conversation. Yeah, that was how they wanted us humans to act: polite, demure, non-threatening. None of those traits came easy to me. Well, I could be polite, at least.

Palmer pursed his lips as though deciding how much he could say. "The Guild Leader wants to see you."

"He wants to talk to me?" My heart started beating faster. The Guild Leader was a seriously creepy guy.

Palmer shook his head. “No, just let him see that you’re here. Fenwick is going to come, isn’t he? Did you two fight?”

“No. Maybe he had car trouble.” Like if he borrowed a car and it burst into flames right after it was carjacked. I craned around, but Fenwick’s blond ponytail would have stood out above the heads of the rest of the party. He better have a damn good reason for not being here.

“I’m glad you came, at least. It would have made me look bad if you didn’t come. Politics, you know.” Palmer gave me a tense smile, which eased into his more usual phlegmatic expression as he allowed his wife to tug his arm towards the dance floor. “Don’t leave until you are seen by the Guild Leader.”

One side of the ballroom had a buffet table with a punch bowl, beautiful centerpieces, and canapés. These made me brighten considerably. I walked over to the refreshments table and made friends with some salmon pate and expensive wine poured by a young woman who probably made more money than I did. An ice carving of a castle melted slowly into a tray. Still no Fenwick, but at least the Guild Leader hadn’t yet arrived. I wasn’t ready to face him alone.

“That color looks fabulous on you,” a vampire said behind me.

I spun, startled, not having heard him approach, and then got another shock when the vampire actually smiled at me. A civil vampire? That was new.

Fain was one of the vampires in Palmer’s squad, so Palmer might have put him up to it, but even fake smiles are nicer than none. He put his hands in his pockets in what was probably a deliberate attempt to copy human gestures.

Fain looked, well, he looked like me. Average height, with a more muscular than average frame. We had the same small nose, the same narrow chin, and the same shade of brown hair. Anyone who saw us would assume we were siblings. He looked more like me than my brother James, which was ironic, because Fain and I weren’t related at all.

“I heard the news of your induction into the Guild. Congratulations.”

“Uh, thank you.”

“And since you are alone, perhaps you will dance with me?” Fain was already grabbing my hands, taking my wine glass and setting it down on the linen tablecloth.

“Dance? Ballroom dancing?” My smile froze.

Fain brushed aside all complaints before I could even voice them and pulled me out to the floor just as the band started another song, this one accompanied by a soprano in a sequined dress. The vampires and some of the older humans were mouthing the words.

"I really don't know how to dance." One two three and, crap, how did this go? I'd learned fourteen katas, and done them well. Put me in the ring and I could fight just about anyone. Dancing made me feel like a drunken donkey. Maybe it was the dress and heels.

"You're doing fine. Just try to relax." Fain seemed to know what he was doing.

"Right." He moved to one side, and my hand slid down to feel the strap under his tux. Was that...yep. Definitely a shoulder holster. Leave it to a Guild member to wear a gun to a ball.

"I get the feeling that you're nervous. Why?" Fain lifted his arm for the third time and I finally figured out he wanted me to turn.

Well, let's see. Dateless, in a secondhand dress, at a party where almost everyone wanted to pretend I didn't exist and hoped I wouldn't embarrass them, dancing poorly with a gun-toting vampire. "This isn't my kind of party. I don't know many Guild members."

"And where is your tall friend? I was under the impression you two were together."

"He'll be along later." He'd better. Damn it, Fenwick, where are you? I craned my neck to look for him, but Fenwick was nowhere to be seen. How hard was it to spot a six-and-a-half-foot tall man?

"Oh, I see." Fain was signaling for a turn or something. He lifted his arm, leading me into a gentle stumble and scramble to get back into place in time with the music.

The song finally ended. About time. I gave him a little smile of thanks and backed off. "I hope you'll excuse me. I want to look around for Fenwick."

The double doors in the back of the ballroom led to a garden, with sheet-covered rose bushes and a thick layer of iced mulch. Only a few brave smokers hung around out there. I came back in, found a ladies' room to freshen up, and then found a smaller, dimly lit lounge area with a jazz quintet playing on a small stage. Fenwick wasn't there either, but at least I didn't look so conspicuously dateless sitting on one of the red upholstered couches. He better have a damn good reason for standing me up.

“Still not here?” Fain walked in carrying two wine glasses, and handed me one as he sat down on the couch next to me. “Perhaps I can keep you company while we wait.”

He had followed me here. Why? What was he after? I perched on the edge of the seat and sipped, while Fain lounged out against the back.

“You can sit back, you know. I’m not going to bite you.” Fain smiled and swirled the wine in his glass. “Unless you allow it, that is. I must admit you look quite tasty.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, but no. No offense or anything, but the whole blood drinking thing freaks me out.” I stood to leave. “Sorry you had the wrong impression.”

He reached out and took my wrist, gently pulling me back down. “You think I just want to drink blood from you?”

“I can’t think of any other reason why you’re going out of your way to be civil to me.”

“I did have my hopes.” Fain smiled and leaned back, taking a sip of the wine. “But I really wanted to chat with you. We so rarely get new Guild members. We’ve been gossiping about nothing else since your induction.”

“I’m flattered. And this is very good wine. Thank you, Mr. Fain.”

“No Mister. Just ‘Fain,’ although you can call me Leonard—Leo, if you feel the need to shorten it. I don’t much like to be called Lenny.”

“Understandable. You don’t seem like a Lenny. Any other questions?”

“Why did Holzhausen invite you to join the Guild?”

I joined because Holzhausen said the Guild could keep people from killing me for the magic jewel glued to my brow, the one that gave me second sight. So far, the Guild hadn’t been a warm and fuzzy support group. They didn’t trust me, and I didn’t trust them, which is why Fain got a vague answer. “I joined because Holzhausen invited me to join, and it was too much of an honor to refuse.”

“Too much of an honor to refuse. How diplomatic.” Fain swirled wine in his glass. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Holzhausen’s motivations are his alone. I’m not going to pretend to know his mind.”

“I see.” Fain’s smile said he expected to get the truth out of me eventually, but that he was too much of a gentleman to press.

“Can I ask you a question about vampires?”

Fain tilted his free hand out, as though he had been expecting this question. “We have a disease which makes us require blood, but enables us to live without aging. No, we can’t fly or turn into bats, but we heal very quickly. Yes, sunlight hurts us, no, we don’t sleep in coffins.”

“Actually, I wanted to ask you something personal.” And was this too rude? Palmer said not to pester any other Guild members, but Palmer wasn’t too keen on giving me the information I wanted either.

“Mmmm.” He chuckled. “A beautiful woman wants to ask me personal questions. This evening is looking up.”

Was he flirting with me? “Palmer says that rank in the Guild is mostly by age. How come he’s in charge of your squad then, since you’re much older than him?”

He held stock still and stared at me.

Jesus. This is exactly what Palmer warned me about. That’s what I get for not listening to my sponsor. I set down the glass and stood, backing up with my hands out. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. Forget I asked anything. I didn’t know it was that personal.”

“How did you know how old I was?”

“A good guess?” From the bindi on my forehead, which he could plainly see under my bangs, but who believes in magic jewels?

“Now I understand why the Guild Leader wanted you.” He began moving again, as though an unseen director had held up an “act human” cue card. “And to answer your question, Palmer is the leader of the squad because there are political reasons why the Guild Leader does not want to favor me, and so Palmer was appointed in my stead. Palmer repaid him by offering to sponsor a human Guild member—a task no other vampire wanted. One presumes that he is more sympathetic to humans because of his taste.”

“Taste?”

“Palmer and his wife are a mixed-race couple. You met her, didn’t you?”

“But they’re both black.” I frowned, not quite getting it.

“Yes, but she’s human.”

Oh yeah. Duh.

“I can’t say I don’t have that taste myself. I enjoy the company of humans, especially beautiful young women such as yourself.” Fain

chuckled and took my hand as he stood. “And now that I have answered your question, would you be so kind as to dance with me again?”

And there was no polite way to refuse that. Fain let me go after one dance, into the arms of another vampire, and then another, and then a drunk human initiate. By three a.m., my dancing had become almost competent, and my dress had grown snug from all the hors d’oeuvres. It had almost begun to feel like a normal party, until the Guild Leader arrived.

The murmur of the crowd paused, and shifted, as people made note of his presence. The Guild Leader wore a nice tuxedo, though no nicer than the others. He wasn’t handsome, though that observation was mostly from memory because from where I camped near the buffet table, the only visible sign of him was his bodyguard, Chen. She was a whippet-thin Asian vampire standing close enough to the Guild Leader that they could have shared an umbrella. She was dressed in a black leather suit, and carried more guns than a mafia yard sale.

The Guild Leader walked towards my side of the ballroom, a people-free oval pushing across the dance floor. Along the way, vampires and notable humans stopped him to exchange greetings. All this time he still hadn’t lost his smudgy black aura. How old was he? Two centuries? Three? Vampires were tough, but you had to be awfully canny to survive three centuries of wars, bombings, car accidents, sunlight, and all the other things which could destroy a vampire. The Guild Leader wasn’t one to take chances. If you believed the rumors, more than one person had gone to an unmarked grave by crossing this man. He was a mage too.

As if to underscore this, his smudgy aura flared as he cast a spell. (No one else saw this, of course. Chalk one up to the magic bindi on my brow.) Then the Leader of the Vampire Guild of Seabingen caught my eye. I swallowed the canapé and tried to pull myself invisible. The flare died, his spell complete. He gave me the merest of nods, then walked on.

This is what mice feel like when the owl has passed them by.

Three-thirty a.m. was time to call it a night, even though the party was still in full swing. Outside, snowflakes fell thickly, as though a giant hand dusted the city with dandruff. The streets were empty, and ovals of yellow streetlight reflected off the new-fallen snow.

Fenwick’s apartment wasn’t too far from my place, close enough to drive by on the way home. I got out of my van and walked towards the stairs leading to Fenwick’s apartment. My damp tennis shoes (I changed out

of the dress shoes as soon as I go to my van) plowed a path through the parking lot, then joined the muddy path along the sidewalks. Even this late at night people had come and gone, returning from the bars.

Except that the stairs leading to Fenwick's apartment were covered by perfectly smooth snow. He either hadn't left at all, or he hadn't come back yet. Lights shone through the closed curtains, meaning he was probably home. No police cars or crime scene tape, so that was good news. I kicked off the snow as I climbed his steps. Knock, or use my key? I turned the key, afraid of what might be behind the door.

The door swung open. No blood. The place wasn't ransacked. He wasn't lying unconscious on the floor. The television was on, and the silhouette of his head showed above the couch.

"Fenwick?" I crossed the room to confront him. "What are you doing here?"

"TV," he said, and changed the channel.

"Why didn't you come to the party?"

It was my "starting a fight" tone of voice, but Fenwick didn't rise to it. He just flicked through the channels, eyes locked on the screen. After five minutes, I turned and stormed out, slamming the door behind me. I wanted him to follow me, and walked slowly down the stairs to give him time to catch up with me, but he didn't.

Chapter Two

When Elaina came down the steps into our basement apartment, she caught me kneeling on the floor in my grungy karate gi, rummaging through her bookshelf. I dumped another book into the growing pile next to me.

“What are you looking for?” She set her bag of groceries on the kitchen counter and pushed her glasses up her nose. Usually she wore her hair in a long braid, but this morning she had curled it into a shoulder-length frizz. She was wearing makeup again too.

“Fenwick won’t talk to me.” Hmm...*cleansing your aura, finding your totem animal, notes on chakra meditation*. It was amazing Elaina had learned anything about witchcraft if she had to wade through all this.

“Oh, and you want to find a love spell to bring him back?” She kicked off her tennis shoes, which she wore with no socks, and the smell of her feet wafted towards me.

“Whew, can you put those things outside?”

Elaina reached up and opened the casement window, which looked onto a mossy cement light well. She set her shoes outside, where the downdraft of cold air could more easily draw the odor into our basement apartment. “Or, let me guess, you think he’s been cursed?”

“He’s acting weird.” *Feng-shui, astrology, aromatherapy, tarot readings*. Nothing about curses. I began sliding the books back into the shelf. “He was supposed to go to this party with me, only he didn’t show up. So, I went over there to find out what was going on, and he was just sitting on the couch watching television.”

“And?” Elaina began unpacking her groceries. She had whole wheat bread, tofu, protein powder, and an entire bag full of nothing but vegetables. She actually ate that crap too. It was amazing she wasn’t any thinner. “That’s it? He’s watching television?”

“Well, he wouldn’t talk to me. He just stared right through me.” Watching TV, ignoring me. I’d seen my stepdads act like that thousands of times, but not him. Not my boyfriend.

Elaina snorted and pulled my beers out of the vegetable drawer. She stuffed her lettuce in, and then put the beers on the top shelf. “You’ve been

going out what, a year now?”

“About that.” Since the books hadn’t revealed anything, I grabbed her stack of folders. They were filled with photocopies, some loosely bound with staples, others in three ring binders. I flipped one open at random. *Drawing love into your life*. Already more interesting.

“News flash, Kit, honeymoon’s over.” She brought out a bunch of pussy willows from the bag. After she snipped the floral plastic off, she began stripping the branches with her hands. “Guys get like that when they’re bored with the relationship.”

“He’s not like that. He’s my best friend, Elaina. We’ve been through everything together. He wouldn’t just stop talking to me.” I hoped, anyway. But what if she was right? What if he just didn’t care anymore? *Drawing down the moon*. Wonder what that was? Oops, it was alphabetical. Curses. Better flip to the Cs. “On Thanksgiving he was perfectly fine. We didn’t fight or anything. Then Saturday, he didn’t show up to this party we were supposed to go to.”

“So, he didn’t want to go.” Elaina was still stripping pussy willows. When a small gray pile grew on the counter, she swept up the fuzzy pips into a cereal bowl.

“Don’t try and Scully me, Elaina. He’s not like that. There’s something weird going on.”

“I hate passive-aggressive guys. Ulrich was like that too.” Elaina took a clear plastic egg carton out of her paper bag. It had tiny speckled eggs in it, each no larger than a grape. She wasn’t going to eat those, was she? “Was it a fancy party? Ulrich hates dressing up. We were supposed to go to a wedding once, and he showed up wearing—I’m not kidding—sweat pants and a tank top. To a wedding.”

“Fenwick bought a tuxedo just for the party. It was hanging up in his closet. Besides, he said he’d be there. It was an important party.” *Casting a cloud. Charming animals*. “Whoa. Charming animals? Does that really work?”

“Yes, of course it does.” Elaina put the eggs into the pussy willow bowl, then started rummaging in her herb cabinet. “You know what your problem is, Kit? You’re a new witch—”

“I’m not a witch.”

“I see this happen all the time. My mom and I get these girls who want to join our coven because they finally started believing in witchcraft, and

now everything is magic this, and power that, and Goddess bless.” She brought out a plastic bag of corn husks and her tiny bamboo steamer. (Was she going to eat corn husks? That was gross, even for her.) “Not everything’s magic, Kit. I mean really, what’s more likely, that your boyfriend got cold feet because the holidays are coming up and he decided he didn’t want the whole Christmas family thing, or that one of his oh-so-many enemies cast a mysterious curse on him for some unknown reason?”

It sounded plausible. It seemed plausible. Occam’s Razor right? She was probably right. And really, what could be wrong with him?

She began to layer the corn husks in her steamer. When the water was bubbling away, she placed the steamer on the pot and took the tiny speckled eggs to the sink.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. He’s probably just mad at me.” I used my finger to bookmark the charming animals page. “What are you doing, anyway?”

“I’m getting spell components out.” She started rooting around in the junk drawer. When she found a safety pin, she used it to poke a hole in one end of a speckled egg. “I want to have everything completely ready before the moon begins waxing.”

“What kind of spell?”

Elaina’s cheeks puffed out as she blew into the egg. The other end vomited yolk into the sink. “A familiar-summoning spell,” she panted, before blowing again.

“I thought that didn’t work last time.”

Elaina’s face turned red as she blew the last of the egg gook out. “This time it will.”

“What kind of animal will come?”

She shrugged, and poked another hole in a small egg.

“So, it could be anything? Like a really big cockroach?”

She winced and took a breath, wiping egg off her face. “Ewww. Goddess forbid.”

“What if it’s something dangerous, like a snake or a dog?” I flipped open her book and pointed to the spell. “It might be convenient to know how to charm animals.”

Elaina frowned at a spot of yolk in her hair and washed it out. “I already know how to charm animals.”

“I don’t. You could teach me.”

“That spell is way beyond you.” She poked a hole in another egg and started blowing again.

“Yeah, that’s what Ulrich said too,” I lied, hoping that would convince her. “He said I wasn’t talented enough.”

“What would Ulrich know?” She set her egg down on the edge of the sink. “I’ll teach you, but you have to help me with this.”

Ten minutes later, after the two of us had blown out the rest of the quail eggs, Elaina set up one of the couch cushions to be our “animal.”

“Here’s what you do. You let your energy flow forward,” Elaina demonstrated pushing her hand forward slowly. A tiny wave of more-in-focus flared out from her hand. This wasn’t very spectacular. Everyone had an aura, and they flickered constantly, like sun spots.

“Move your ki, got it.” This wasn’t much different from what we did in the dojo, except I wasn’t trying to break a brick with it. Moving ki had become easy. Being able to see the energy made learning mage-craft a hundred times easier.

“Wrap your energy around the animal.” Elaina’s ki flowed around the couch cushion. I did the same with my own.

“What now?”

“Try to make your energy and the animal’s energy the same.” Hers flickered.

“The same what, color?”

She dropped her energy flow and put her fist on her hip. “Let your inner vibe mesh with the animal’s soul essence, and meld them together.”

“Whoa, you lost me.”

“I told you you weren’t enough of a mage to learn it.” Elaina put the cushion back on the couch and straightened the pillows. “I had been studying witchcraft for years before I even tried this. You should just concentrate on something simpler. Besides, we don’t even have a real animal.”

She had a point. Trying to learn to charm animals by practicing on a couch cushion was probably like trying to learn to drive by playing Super Mario Kart.

“You owe me for the lesson, you know.”

“For what, for that?”

“You pay Ulrich.”

“Ulrich gives me a full hour.”

“Well, take out the garbage and the recycling this week.” She dumped a couple *Vogue* into the recycling bin.

“Fair enough.” I took Elaina’s hint and picked up some of my mess. “So what kind of animal do you want as a familiar?”

“I’m sure it will be a cat or an owl.” Elaina walked to the bathroom and picked at invisible blemishes on her face.

“How come you don’t get to say what kind of animal you want?” I followed her to the bathroom and leaned against the door frame.

“The familiar chooses.” Elaina opened the cabinet and took out some tweezers to pluck her eyebrows. “It will be whatever animal hears the call.”

“How about a toad? That’s traditional, isn’t it?”

“A smarter than average animal, not a toad.” She winced and dropped another eyebrow hair into the sink.

“So, what’s his name?”

“What?” She set the tweezers back into the cabinet and retrieved an eyebrow pencil to draw in the hairs she had removed.

“The guy you’re primping for. Your date.”

“His name is Dael.”

“He’s one of the Goodly Folk, isn’t he?”

“What makes you say that?”

“I know what kind of guy you like.” God knows how she found them all. Even in this town, less than one in a thousand was something other than human. Course, I was one to talk. These days I had more otherfolk friends than human ones.

“Yes, he is. He’s a faerie.” Elaina scowled. “What’s that look for? He’s a nice guy.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“I thought you were pretty tolerant. You didn’t mind Ulrich.”

“I know Ulrich. I like Ulrich. It’s a shame you two broke up.”

“Don’t start that up again, Kit.” Elaina alternated between frowning at me and making an O with her mouth so she could apply her mascara.

“It’s your life.” I stuck my hands in my pockets and slouched against the door frame.

“And you know there were perfectly good reasons why we broke up.”

“There always are.”

“Don’t judge Dael until you get to know him. Be nice when he comes over.”

“I’ll be the soul of courtesy. Should I turn my coat inside out so he can’t see me?”

“Ha, ha.”

“What time is it, four-thirty? Well, tell him I’m looking forward to meeting him. I gotta change for work.”

“I thought James hired someone to replace you.”

I’d been working at my brother’s café on and off whenever my tree-making and floral-arranging didn’t pay the bills—which was rather often. Elaina sometimes came to see me at Café Ishmael, even though she risked running into Ulrich there.

“No, I got a line on a commission. Supposed to pay well. Full time work, even.”

She gave me a look then, as if the idea of my hobby actually paying decent money was something completely bizarre. Maybe it was, but if Fenwick could suddenly turn into an asshole boyfriend, nothing in this world was secure anymore.

The house on Linden Street was on a slight hill overlooking the river. Most of the houses on this street were tidy Victorian manors, renovated by the kind of people who flocked to the outrageously expensive shops in the old town full of antique doorknobs and reproduction wallpaper. This house looked as though it had once been a traditional Victorian, but all the architectural details had been removed except for the widow’s walk.

Ms. Yseult wanted to hire me. Since my part time (and maybe full time, one of these days) job was making silk trees and floral arrangements, I couldn’t afford to lose any commission which came my way, which is why I had dredged out my presentable clothes, and even taken the trouble to stuff the contents of my jean jacket pockets into a borrowed handbag.

The house was painted a muted grey instead of white with bright trim, which gave the illusion that it was further back from the street than its neighbors. The elms in front arched protectively over everything, shading me as I walked up the path to the wooden porch. It had a lawn of sorts, but the high grass looked like a chunk of meadow transplanted from someplace wilder. Heh. Bet the neighbors fretted behind their blinds about that.

I knocked on the door and shivered in my unlined blazer. If this commission paid well, part of the money would go towards a new coat.

The door swung inward between the third and fourth knock, and Ms. Yseult stared down at me. She stood about six two, and had long black hair and copper colored skin. She looked like a Native American, with an intense aristocratic expression like you see in those old photographs. No, more so, because she didn't seem sad, she just seemed proud. Frankly, I'd never seen anyone with that much hauteur. Her pantsuit was made of nearly white homespun fabric, and her only ornamentation was a necklace made out of gold-dipped leaves which wound around her neck like a sun-dappled snake. She didn't shift her weight or move her hands, but tilted her head down towards me slowly, with little expression in her dark eyes.

That ageless gaze fixed on me. Those eyes weren't human. That made me very, very nervous. My bindi, the Indian jewel glued to my forehead, let me see energy flowing, whether one of James' protection spells or ki exploding from Kishimoto-sensei's kick at the dojo. I could see through just about every glamour out there, from the simple "almost invisible" ones like Ulrich had been teaching me to the glammers to disguise the Goodly Folk from normal people's view. I could spot lycanthropes like Fenwick too, and tell how old a vampire was with a glance, which as far as I knew no one else on the planet could do. If she weren't human, I should have been able to see something.

And yet there was nothing. That meant either there wasn't anything to see, or she could brush off the power of the bindi without a second thought. Maybe it was just paranoia. Most likely, she was a normal, albeit intimidating, woman.

"Ma'am, I'm Kit Melbourne." I bowed, like we do to Kishimoto-sensei. Instinct told me she expected no less.

"Yes, you are. Enter."

The lower floor of the house had been completely gutted, except for the bathroom and kitchen. The floor was hardwood, slightly dusty, and the ceiling and what walls remained were a smooth white plaster. A vast sweep of wooden stairway led to the second floor.

"Would you like to see my portfolio?" I offered, pulling the three-ring binder of photos out from under my arm.

"No."

"Oh." I shut my mouth and lowered the binder.

She gestured to the lower floor. "This will be a forest. Birch trees, and undergrowth."

A forest? A whole forest? I considered it. The ceilings were twelve feet if they were an inch. That could work with the perspective. Walking around, my footsteps echoed in the cavernous space. Up above, a jumble of wires here and there dangled from the ceiling, plastic caps awaiting an electrician. That would be the first thing to do, install good lighting. If the ceilings had recessed lights I could disguise them with branches and make it look like sunlight filtering from above. "You want just the living room?"

"The whole lower floor."

At the floor a white line of quarter-round trim (where after-the-fact electrical wires had been installed) snaked around the circumference just above the baseboards. Except for that and the crown molding, the walls were a smooth blank slate, ready for anything. Photos of birch trees? Enlarge them and paste them along the walls like wallpaper?

What about the trunks? It would be easiest to use birch trees, obviously, though they'd be hard to find and expensive. If they were properly dried and the bark hadn't peeled off they'd work splendidly, and even help with the structural difficulties that removing most of the walls had caused. Otherwise I'd have to use two-by-fours bolted together, with plaster and faux painting to make them look like bark. The room would need one every two or three feet, which meant plenty of lumber, or cords and cords of kiln-dried tree trunks. That would cost a fortune, but hey, it wasn't my nickel.

"You accept?"

Who would want to have their house a forest inside? She'd never be able to sell this place. On the other hand, why should I question it? This was the commission of a lifetime. "We need to work out some of the details first. I'd like to subcontract someone to do the lights and wallpaper, and I'll need an advance for the materials, and of course, I'll need to know what you're offering me for it."

She named a price, higher than I had anticipated.

"That sounds fair, ma'am." I held the portfolio in front of my face, to hide my surprised grin.

Ms. Yseult didn't smile. She didn't seem like the kind of person who could smile. "If your work pleases me, you will have even more."

"Ma'am, I always do the best job I can."

"This will be a forest, not a room full of trees."

“Sure,” I replied, though I didn’t understand. It would take months to figure out how deeply I misunderstood. “Do you have a schedule in mind?”

“Before Imbolc.”

Groundhog Day. Funny, she used the Pagan name. “It’s going to be hard to get it all done by then. I was going to do most of it myself.”

“You will make each tree yourself, and you will complete it before Imbolc. I expect you to work from moonrise to moonset. Do you accept?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I agreed, thinking that moonrise to moonset was an easy shift, like dawn to dusk or something.

“Drink. Seal our contract.”

She handed me a cup made of stoneware with a glaze the color of soil. I hadn’t seen her holding it. Where did she get it from? Slight of hand? The amber liquid tasted like wine with a honey aftertaste. Mead. You’re making a mistake, Kit. She’s a spirit, Queen of the Goodly Folk, a monster, a goddess. Don’t mess with immortals.

I drank. Stupid. It was a commission, nothing more. You can’t be seeing magic in everything, Kit. So what if she was strange? You’d have to be kooky to want to ruin a house this expensive, but everyone knows rich people are crazy.

Ms. Yseult drank, and the cup disappeared.

I blinked. “Okay, I’ll just make a list of what supplies I’m going to need, then.”

She watched me, her stare as disconcerting as a loaded gun, as I made notes on a legal pad, murmuring to myself just so there’d be sound other than footsteps and the rattle of the tape measure echoing around the empty lower floor of the house. Two-by-fours, two-by-sixes, hardware cloth, plaster, cloth strips. Nails, pneumatic nailer rental, screws, metal brackets, shims, hot glue, box after box of silk leaves and branches, white paint, black paint ... there was certain to be more later, but that would do for now.

She took the pad from me, and stared at the paper.

“Uh, here you are, ma’am. I think that’s what I need to start. I have my own glue gun and drill and I’ll borrow a miter saw. Now, I’ve got an account with a wholesaler, so if you want I can—”

“I will provide materials, and you will use my tools.”

I scratched the back of my head. “That’s kind of you, ma’am, but I have my own tools.”

“You will use my tools. For this task, the blades must not be steel or iron.”

Which left what, copper? Brass? Who the hell did she think she was? Yeah, so she had offered me a ton of money, that didn’t mean she could boss me around and make my job harder. “Ma’am, that’s not a good idea, this job is going to be hard enough without—”

Her look shut me up. “Come back tomorrow before moonrise. The materials will be here.”

No, they wouldn’t. You couldn’t get all those branches from the supplier by that time, and even the lumber would take all morning to unload. It was going to take weeks to get the silk stuff too, maybe longer, since it was almost Christmas.

“I expect you here every day this week and the next, except next Thursday, when you may attend to the bear.”

“When I what?”

But she didn’t repeat herself, just turned and walked up the stairs.

I let myself out, and the front door clicked shut behind me.

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Chapter Three

New lumber had been delivered during the night, just as Ms. Yseult promised. My original plan called for two-by fours, chicken wire, and spackling paste, but to my delight, she brought in a waist-high stack of perfectly seasoned birch trunks. The bark wasn't even peeling on them. All I had to do was saw them to length and prop them up against the ceiling. The tools were there too, waiting on the bare floor like clothes laid out on a bed: hand saw, utility knife, electric drill, brackets, hammer.

I picked up the handsaw and angled the blade to let the light reflect off it. It was a strange colored metal, silvery like chrome but with watery oxidation marks in bluish-purple. The utility knife had the same kind of metal, both in the handle and the blade. At least the drill was electric, though the drill bits were the same fey metal. What was it made of? Titanium? Tungsten carbide? Rich people were weird.

For hours, the cavernous lower story was empty except for me, the birch trunks, and the sound of sawing and hammering. The first place the birch trunks went was under the support beams. It just didn't seem right to have the second floor unsupported. Wooden shims jammed in there made for a tight fit, but just to be sure, I screwed in metal brackets as well. The screws and brackets came in normal cardboard boxes, but they were the same strange metal as the tools were. Where was she finding this stuff?

Eight hours later, I was tired and ready to call it a night, but the moon still hadn't set. I kept working, peering out the windows, but the damn thing stayed in the sky for another hour. Moonrise to moonset was supposed to be eight hours, wasn't it? Hour after hour, with my hands and arms and back aching from the unaccustomed labor, the moon had not yet set. Finally, when everyone else had come home from work and parked their cars and had dinner and was catching up on their Netflix queue, the moon let me go home.

My almanac showed me how Ms. Yseult had duped me. Unlike the sun, the moon's period in the sky waxes and wanes over the month, not over the year. Why hadn't they told us this in school? Or had I just forgotten? Eight hours, nine hours, ten hours, eleven hours, twelve hours, up to sixteen and

then down to eight hours again. Was she really going to make me work from moonrise to moonset? Maybe I could just walk out one day, after a reasonable shift.

No. We had agreed on this schedule, inhuman as it was.

The next few days, I blurred my way through too much work and not enough sleep, eyes aching, muscles aching, palms blistered, scalp caked with sweat and sawdust. Was it Tuesday? Was it Sunday? Only the almanac and the clock and the moon seemed to matter anymore. Days slipped one into the other, and when I finally managed to escape long enough to go to the dojo, I heard that no one had seen Fenwick there for over a week. Was he still mad at me? Better go see him and apologize for whatever it was I'd done to piss him off.

A small pile of fliers had formed a drift against Fenwick's door. I gathered the papers and let myself in without knocking.

"Fenwick? I went to the dojo this afternoon. Rob asked where you were." I dumped the papers in the recycling bin next to his desk. His computer was off, and had a thin layer of dust on the keyboard. His cell phone lay on the table next to his keys. "He asked where I'd been too. My schedule's been all kinds of messed up lately."

And what was with this mess? Fenwick's mother and grandmother were fanatic about cleanliness, and it had rubbed off on him. He ironed his shirts every day, did the dishes every night, and made sure the floor, if not clean enough to eat off of, at least didn't make people think of bus stations and methadone clinics. I must be a bad influence on him, because his place looked like, well, it looked like my bedroom.

He sat on the couch, watching television. His hair was greasy and unkempt, sticking out of his ponytail in uneven clumps. He didn't turn to look at me, not even when I sat on the couch next to him. A half empty bag of potato chips had spilled on top of a pile of comics.

"Jesus, Fenwick, are these your original *Usagi Yojimbo* comics? You got oil stains on them." The covers were bent too. I slipped them back into their cases, straightening the paper as best I could. "What's up with you?"

He didn't answer, just kept staring at the television. He was still wearing the tee shirt and boxers that he slept in, and smelled like he hadn't showered

in days.

The battery had died on Fenwick's phone, so I strode to the kitchen to get the charger, stepping over a pile of junk food packaging. As soon as it turned on, I called my brother.

"James, I need you. Come over here, okay? I'm at Fenwick's."

"What is it, Kit?"

"It's Fenwick. Something's wrong with him. I need your opinion."

James promised to be there soon, but it wouldn't be soon enough to keep me from worrying. Fenwick hadn't moved, and was still staring at the television. A line of empty ravioli cans stood on the counter. Ravioli. Fenwick's mom bought him cases of the stuff at Costco. She was the kind of person who equated food with love, and she loved her son very much. Since he also loved me, he gave me most of it and never told his mom that he couldn't stand the stuff. He'd eaten half a case.

"Are you mad that I'm working so many hours?" I asked, picking up cans to toss them into the garbage. The garbage can was full, so I pulled out the sack and put a new one in. "It's not like I can do anything about it, Fenwick. She's really creepy. I hate working these shifts, but what if she fires me? You know I have to take work when it comes. I can't believe you'd begrudge me a good commission. And what was with all this garbage, anyway? Your mom would kill you if she saw all this crap."

Recycling went out on Wednesday mornings. He must have missed this week, and the week before. He stared at the television, ignoring me as I picked up his mess. His hair shone with grease, and he had half an inch of beard on his face. A thick layer of crud gathered around his hips, like beach sand around a boulder.

I walked over and stood between him and the television. He leaned to one side.

"Move." Fenwick stared at the television as though 0% A.P.R. and 0% financing were the answer to the question of life. He didn't twitch when James knocked at the door.

"Kit? Fenwick?" My big brother came in and hugged me.

James was in his late twenties, but already working on the girth of a much older man. He had dark hair and an open, friendly face. He was wearing a beige sweater with an apron-shaped clean spot, and he smelled, as usual, like coffee. He peered over my shoulder towards the figure on the

couch, then lowered his voice. “I heard you two got in a fight. What’s going on?”

I whispered, even though Fenwick’s lycanthropic hearing could pick out our words. “I don’t know. Elaina says he must just be bored with the relationship, but this is, this is weird, James.”

“Maybe I can talk to him? I’m a good mediator.”

I folded my arms and nodded towards the couch potato. “Go ahead and try. This is the second time I’ve been by, and he still won’t talk to me.”

“Hey, Fenwick. What’s up?” he asked cheerfully. When Fenwick didn’t respond, James sat down on the couch and started a quiet conversation. Thirty seconds later, he came back with worry creasing his brow. “Kit, we have to get him to the hospital.”

Hospital? That was serious. It couldn’t be that serious. “No, he’ll be okay. He’s going to be okay. He’s just mad at me, that’s all. Elaina said—”

James pulled Fenwick to his feet. “Elaina hasn’t seen him, has she?”

“No, but ...” But he couldn’t be sick. He couldn’t really be that sick. What would I do if he stayed like this?

“Have you called his parents?”

“They’re on a cruise. Anniversary celebration. They won’t be home until January. Should I call them? I should have called them.”

“Kit, it’s going to be okay.” James tugged one of Fenwick’s arms to lead him to the door. Once the television was off, he became tractable “We’ll take him to the emergency room, and they’ll find out what’s wrong with him. It’s going to be okay.”

“I didn’t think. I should have ...”

“Kit, it’s not your fault. Let’s go, okay?”

James helped me lead Fenwick into the van, and stayed with me at the emergency room.

Hospitals suck. They won’t let you leave if they think there’s something wrong with you, but if you’re not bleeding, they don’t hurry about it either. Head traumas and broken limbs came and went while they performed test after test on my husk of a boyfriend. Stroke? Nope. Seizure? Nope. Brain damage? Nope. Poisoning? Nope. Drug overdose? Nope. MRIs, chest x-rays, machines that go ping, blood work, more labs, and on and on and on while James made trip after trip to the hospital cafeteria for bad coffee and overpriced food, and I pretended to listen while an old woman in the waiting room obligingly told me about her numerous operations. Fourteen

hours later, they announced that they had done everything they could think of, and had found nothing.

The doctor, an Indian guy who barely looked old enough to shave despite the gray at his temples, handed Fenwick his chart. Fenwick closed his hand around it, but didn't read it.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, except that all our tests came out negative, so it's probably depression."

"Depression?"

The doctor fished out a couple of business cards and handed them to Fenwick. "Here are some psychiatrists you can see. If this is affecting your life, you might want to think about medication."

Fenwick stuffed the cards in his pocket and began to shuffle towards the door. Sixteen hours with no food, thirty hours with no sleep, and over a week without the man I loved more than anyone else in the world made me unable to do much except follow after him. James, who had complained bitterly about the hospital coffee but drank a gallon of it anyway, was the only one awake enough to drive us back to Fenwick's apartment. It was fully morning by now, and most of Fenwick's neighbors were getting ready for work. Lucky them. James led Fenwick up the stairs, and I opened the door.

"I told Elaina I thought it was a spell. All this time it was depression." I set the cards and paperwork on Fenwick's computer desk. "So, that's that, I guess."

Fenwick shuffled forward of his own accord and sat back down on the couch in front of the TV. He even turned it on, appearing for a moment like a normal person.

"I don't think it's depression." James stared at Fenwick and pulled his fingers down his chin. The shelf above Fenwick's desk was piled thick with books, and in front of the books were some small tumbled stones. James reached up and snatched a lump of tiger's eye, tucked it in his pocket, then tugged a stray thread off my jacket. "I want to try an experiment. I'm going to cast a spell on you."

"Me? Why?"

"Hush, I need to concentrate." He ran his fingers through my hair until he caught a loose one. When he tied the thread and the hair together, James closed his eyes and began mouthing something.

Yeah, this was going to take a while. I sat down on the chair and half-dozed. Pagans like James cast spells all the time, as a form of prayer. Usually he just asked for blessings on his home and business, and maybe a little bit of help with his love life. Witchcraft—like taking vitamins or buying the more expensive gasoline—was one of those things whose effects were so subtle that the whole matter had to be taken on faith.

James finished his spell by touching me in the midsection.

“What’d you do?”

“An energy tap. I didn’t have time or preparations for the whole thing, so this is a simplified form of it, but I’ve taken some of your energy into me.” He reached into his pocket for the tiger’s eye. “Do you feel anything?”

“No. Is this what you think happened to Fenwick?”

“He’s acting like he’s got his energy drained.”

Fenwick hadn’t moved from his butt-groove on the couch. Energy draining was a good word for it. “You sure this is the same spell? I don’t feel anything, and I’m certainly not zombified like he is.”

“If someone’s being tapped for energy, it will activate her third chakra. Watch.” He held the stone in front of my navel. It flickered slightly, like a flashlight with dying batteries. “Did it glow?”

“Yeah. So your spell worked. I’m giving you energy. I’m still not convinced.”

“Okay, watch closely, see if this flickers.” He brought the stone closer to Fenwick.

The tiger’s eye became a thousand watt second-sight beacon. It felt like a lighthouse beam had been shone directly into my retina. “Jesus! Turn it off! Turn it off!”

“It glowed?”

“Put it away!” Searing after-pain still blasted away in my head. It wasn’t until he stuffed the stone in his pocket that I uncovered my hands from my third eye.

James sat down, stroking his stubble with two fingers. The lump in his pocket glowed faintly through the material of his pants. “Wow, I can’t believe that. It never works like this. It’s supposed to draw a tiny bit of energy from a group of volunteers—usually your coven members. It’s never done this.”

“How long does it last?”

“Until the original spell is complete. If the mage who casts it needs the energy for a month, you’ll give it for a month. Never this much though. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“But why would he react differently?”

“I don’t know.” James drew his hand down his face again, then steepled his fingers in front of his nose. “The only way it could have drawn this much energy is if he were working a major spell at the time. If someone cast the spell while he were casting a spell of his own ... no, Fenwick doesn’t even believe in mage-craft, so it can’t be that.”

“James, what would the phase of the moon be to cast a spell like this?” It wasn’t true what they said about lycanthropes only changing around the full moon. He changed every month, usually every twenty-eight days, but sometimes it got postponed or came early because of stress or willpower.

“A waxing crescent. That’s when I’d do it, anyway. Why?”

Fenwick’s calendar, hanging next to his Chinese painting of two carp, had a blue-haired, big-eyed anime girl posing with a gun. He hadn’t flipped to December yet. I pulled the pin out and flipped back through the calendar. September (a giant robot fighting another one in a cartoon city) had a small mark on the fifth day of the month. We had planned our camping trip around it, and counted ourselves lucky that it fell on Labor Day weekend.

The page for November had a picture of anime bunny girls with bazookas, but no writing in the dates. I flipped back to October and started counting days. October he changed on the 3rd, and again on Halloween, which was kind of cool because we went as a gypsy woman and a dancing bear and won a hundred bucks in a costume contest.

Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. His next change should have been the day before the soirée. A waxing crescent. When I came by to see what was wrong with him, he had been human-shaped. The blinds had been closed though, which meant that he had made his normal bear-changing preparations. And yet he usually opened them again when he changed back into a human.

If he had been casting a spell of his own.

James peered at the calendar. “Kit, you know something, don’t you? There’s something about Fenwick you haven’t told me.”

I flipped the month to December and pinned the calendar back up to the wall. “Who would know how to cast something like this?”

“Mages.” James put the tiger’s eye in my jean jacket pocket and buttoned it closed. “The mage would still need something personal from Fenwick—hair, skin, scraps of clothing—and for a spell this strong, I’d guess all three. You can take the tiger’s eye. It should glow near the casting mage as well.”

“So, now what do I do?” I yawned, and rubbed my face with my hands.

“Go home, Kit.” James stood and took my elbow, leading me to the door. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk about it later.”

James had to drive me home. I managed to stay awake just long enough to kick off my shoes and collapse into bed. My eyes didn’t open again until Friday morning. Four hours before work. Jesus, and I had missed all of Thursday. Ms. Yseult was going to fire me for sure, because she ... no she wouldn’t.

She had told me earlier that I could have Thursday off to take care of “the bear.”

I shivered, crossed myself, and went to take a shower.

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Chapter Four

I wanted to spend every waking hour trying to figure out how to fix Fenwick, but I still didn't have any idea. And life went on. Ms. Yseult still expected me to make trees, Kishimoto-sensei still expected me at the dojo, and Ulrich called to remind me that I'd skipped the past two lessons and did I want to learn to become invisible or not? So, I went.

Rose Guitars was a small shop not too far from Café Ishmael. Instruments in various stages of disrepair lined the walls, and curved wood in a block frame showed where John Rose had glued a guitar body together during the day. Shelves under the tables held jugs of varnish and turpentine. The tools used to be locked up in a cabinet along the wall before John left for the evening, but since Ulrich and I had made our bargain, he and John had become lazy about putting things away.

Ulrich gestured expansively as he paced around the workshop, four-fingered hands alternately tugging his red hair into an unruly mess, and combing it straight again. "She knows not how my heart aches. Thrice I have called her, and thrice she has severed the line—"

"Hung up," I corrected him, sweeping another pile of sawdust into the metal dustpan. My eyes blurred from lack of sleep. It was way too early to be cleaning, but this was the only time we could both squeeze in.

Ulrich flung the carved wooden shutters open, admitting chilly air and the pearl gray of pre-dawn.

"Thrice she has hung up with me, and I only sought to speak with her as friends are wont." Normally, his blue faerie-tattoos would be swirling, as they usually did when he was upset, but since Elaina dumped him, Ulrich had let his personal hygiene lapse. Now he had bushy red sideburns and a four-inch beard. If he didn't start shaving, he'd start to look like the grogoch he once was instead of the mortal he had become. "Kit, you must sway her to my heart again, ere it breaks."

"You can do better than her, Ulrich, really." Now that the sawdust was swept up, I could get to work on stain and varnish spills. The pungent tang of turpentine filled the chilly workspace as the rag rubbed stains off the wooden tables. "I think you and John are deliberately not cleaning up after yourself since you've got me as a maid now."

"You bicker like a wortwig, human girl," he said. "I cleaned these selfsame tables nigh on a thousand-fold ere John sought to thank me."

"Why?" I asked, grateful that the conversation had turned from Elaina.

Ulrich lifted himself onto the counter I had cleaned, legs swinging freely above the ground. “And how long might I have lived as a mortal, wanting a trade of mine own? ‘T’were not for John’s partnership, I’d be naught but a rubbish sweeper, or a picker of rags.”

“It’s good you learned to make guitars then, because obviously you’d suck at street sweeping. Oops, missed a varnish brush. Is this a keeper?”

“Nay.” Ulrich took the brush from me and tossed it into the trash bin.

Ironically, Ulrich had originally agreed to teach me the invisibility spell in exchange for time alone with Elaina. Since they broke up, I had to switch to cleaning as payment. Elaina didn’t think Ulrich (a now-mortal faerie whose mage-craft was so bad he couldn’t charm himself out of his lilting accent) would have any success teaching me to be invisible. After almost a year of these lessons, I still hadn’t had any success, but was not yet willing to admit Elaina was right.

“Kit, tell me she has not yet cast eyes upon another,” Ulrich said.

If he was going to find out about Dael, it wasn’t going to be from me. I pointedly looked at my watch. “Hey, Ulrich, I gotta go to work in an hour, so could we start now?”

“Aye.” He took the broom from me and set it back in the corner next to the garbage can. Then he faced the wall and folded his arms in front of himself. “Stealthy toes, from you to me. I shall not turn.”

Warm-ups involved me walking around the workshop silently for twenty minutes. The hardest part about walking silently was not keeping the joints of my ankle from cracking, though that was tricky. It was not keeping my sneakers from squeaking on the freshly swept linoleum floor either, though that was tricky too. The hardest part was biting down the sardonic comments about how if I had wanted to learn this “walk like an Indian” crap I would have joined the Girl Scouts.

“Too much emotion,” Ulrich said, without turning around. “Humble mice may hide while the fury of a fox makes the hunter aware.”

“English, please,” I asked, though I understood what he was talking about. Invisibility was 90% common sense. Mostly, as Ulrich had taught during my three hour-a-week lessons, being invisible meant walking quietly, pretending you had a right to be where you were, not looking at anything too long, and learning to hold still without discomfort. It was the other 10% that eluded me.

“Your stride has grown smooth and silent this past twelvemonth,” Ulrich said. “And yet your thoughts are too full. A wry and cunning face draws eyes to it. Your brother mastered this, but this alone, for his oxen legs know no stealth. And shall you take his path?”

“You don’t have to be bitchy, Ulrich.”

“‘Tis you who are cross with me,” he said. “Know you the same travails that ache my heart?”

“Yeah. Stuff is going on with me and Fenwick.” And I still hadn’t been able to go to the dojo to investigate. Damn Ms. Yseult and her inhuman schedule. “And work’s been insane too. I won’t be able to come in next week, by the way.”

“Then let us strive twice as hard with the time we have.” He hopped off the counter and clapped his hands. “Again.”

By the time our hour-long lesson finished, we were both tired and frustrated. I promised to practice, and left before Ulrich and I frayed our friendship any more.

Two weeks had passed since Ms. Yseult hired me. Two weeks, and what had it gotten me? Blisters, muscle aches, three missed lessons with Ulrich, and four missed karate classes. Today was the day to demand a more reasonable schedule.

The elm trees loomed leaflessly behind me as I knocked on Ms. Yseult’s front door. I stamped my feet on the wooden porch, trying to get some feeling into them. Tennis shoes weren’t warm enough for this kind of weather.

“Look, I need to have more time off. I have a life outside this assignment. I’ll come in on the weekends and evenings, but I need to have some time in the mornings or afternoons for karate.” Would that speech work? Nah, too wimpy.

“I’ll be in here tomorrow, and Wednesday, but I’ll be gone this weekend.” My breath plumed out in front of me. Hmm. Still not forceful enough.

“You’re not my boss. I work my own hours. Take it or leave it.” That’s the attitude. That’s what I’d tell her. After all, it wasn’t like she could hire anyone else to make her a forest now, could she? Yeah, that’s what I’d tell her. “Let’s get something straight between us. You don’t have the right to boss me around.”

The door opened. Ms. Yseult towered in front of me, in her partially-forested house, like a cedar among birches. She wore the same pale suit and gold necklace, as if this were the “meeting the treemaker” outfit the wardrobe girl had laid out for her.

“You have something to say to me?” Her glacial voice ground down with the weight of centuries, making me feel very small, and very mortal.

“No, ma’am.” Cold fear chased the rehearsed speech from my lips. Okay, bad idea, Kit. When you were just a human girl trying to live through another day, you didn’t mess with the otherfolk. An employee standing up for my rights? I was a peasant girl, lost in the dark feral wood where the wild spirits roam. People who didn’t act polite might find themselves cursed. I didn’t want frogs to fall from my lips whenever I spoke. It wasn’t that I lost my courage; it’s just that I gained a bit of sense. Ms. Yseult wasn’t the kind of person to tolerate sass. I kept my eyes trained on the ground. Had she heard what I was thinking? She knew about Fenwick being a bear, what else did she know?

Ms. Yseult stood there silently for so long I glanced up to make sure she hadn’t left. “You agreed to work from moonrise to moonset, Treemaker.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s just that, I haven’t been getting enough sleep, and I need time for my other duties.”

“Sleep?” she asked, as though it were something she read about a long time before, but hadn’t had any experience with herself. “Ah, sleep. Very well. I shall alter our arrangement. You will begin at moonrise every day, and work for seven times seven hours each week. Schedule them as you like.”

“Seven time seven hours a week, start before moonrise every day. Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” Never did I think I’d be grateful to have my workweek reduced to forty-nine hours.

“Enter then.” She closed the door behind me, then ascended the stairs as though removing herself from the taint of mortals. I threaded my way between the tree trunks, and dragged a new birch log from the top of the pile to the sawhorse. My hands shook so much as they measured the lumber that the pencil fell out of my fingers. Yeah, so Elaina said I didn’t have “the gift.” Ulrich said my mage-craft talent was nil. You didn’t have to be a witch to know that there was something strange about Ms. Yseult.

With the moon rising so late, it was three days until I was able to make it to the last evening class at the dojo. Kishimoto-sensei greeted me with a slightly peeved expression.

“Hello, Miss Kit.” Kishimoto-sensei was a wiry Japanese man who had lost most of his hair during his many decades as a karate instructor, but none of his strength or agility. “You’ve been absent.”

“Work,” I said, and left it at that. Fortunately, Kishimoto-sensei didn’t pry, because I didn’t know how to explain why Ms. Yseult was able to bully me so easily. Truth was, working on the forest had exhausted me so much that the only thing that got me here was needing to know if Fenwick’s attacker was a karate student. The only way to do that was to search the changing room and to use the tiger’s eye on my fellow students. If James’ theory was right, the stone would glow in the presence of whoever was draining Fenwick’s energy. The tiger’s eye, wrapped in a thin piece of muslin and dangling from my neck by a piece of twine, touched against my gi top as I bowed to the practice area. No glow.

I started studying karate in high school, originally just for a way to defend myself against stepfathers. Later, I found different reasons to continue. The dojo back in my home town had been smaller, more commercial, with lots of kids on Saturdays and occasional tournaments in an enormous converted basketball gym. I had found the Kishimotos’ dojo by accident (while looking for an apartment) and signed up on the spot. That was four years earlier. Now it felt like my second home.

The dojo had a cheap strip-mall interior, with industrial-grade carpet and unadorned walls. The punching bag dangling from one corner had more than its share of duct tape, matching the few mats we used for floor work. The familiar gym-odor made me feel normal again. Katas. Push-ups. Sparring with a few friends. This was the healthy way to work out stress. Maybe I wouldn’t need those cigarettes after all.

Theo and Rob were talking to one another, and nodded a greeting at me. I sat down next to them to stretch and catch up with their conversation. Rob was as adorable as a Ken doll, and had the brains to match. It had taken half a year for me to fall out of love with his face, but he didn’t hold it against me. We’d been friends for too long. Both Theo and Rob were friends of Fenwick too, so it was a great relief to see the stone still dark.

“So, then Julie’s all, ‘We need to register for china.’ And I’m like, ‘China?’ I thought we were going to Hawaii on our honeymoon.’ She got all

mad at me then, said I wasn't helping," Rob said.

"Did she drag you out to department stores?" Theo, a scruffy grad student with a Beatles-era haircut, had the smug look of a confirmed bachelor. He was more Rob's friend than mine, though everyone at the dojo enjoyed his sardonic humor.

"Yeah. It sucks. If I say, okay, I like that one, she's all no, that one's ugly, but if I tell her I don't care, she gets pissed about that too."

Theo laughed at this.

"Don't laugh, dude. It might happen to you too." Rob told him. "So, Kit. Where's Fenwick?"

"I don't know." And this was awkward, making excuses for him. I felt like my mom, and her 'oh, daddy's just sleeping', or 'I fell down the stairs,' except that it wasn't shame that kept me from telling people about what was going on with Fenwick, but the knowledge that people wouldn't believe me. Even with all the weird stuff I'd seen and been through, I didn't believe in magic half the time. It was just easier not to.

Kishimoto-sensei started class then, so we didn't talk for the next couple hours. We worked on a throw, and a couple punch-kick combinations. I kept staring towards the door, expecting Fenwick to come bounding in, out of breath because he overslept or something, but he never showed.

Damn, but it was lonely without him. And who would do this to him, anyway? Everyone liked him. He must have been an innocent bystander, mugged for his energy. But who could have had access to his hair and skin and clothes? Someone at the dojo, maybe? Was there a closet mage hiding among my fellow karate students? One way to find out, I decided, as we bowed out of class.

"Hey, Kit, you wanna come have a beer with us?" Rob replaced his gi top with his battered high school letterman jacket, which he wore faithfully, despite being a sixth-year undergrad.

"Not today, but thanks." Now get out of the way, guys, so I can search the dressing room, then go home and get five hours' sleep before work.

"Oh, come on, Kit, just because you broke up doesn't mean you have to diss everyone. Fenwick's loss is our gain." Theo slung an arm around my shoulder. "Let me buy you a beer."

"We didn't break up. He just needs some space." I ducked out from under Theo's arm and backed into the door. "Thanks for the invitation. Some other time, maybe."

Two other women were checking make-up on a locker-sized mirror tacked to the wall. The room wasn't much larger than a closet, and most of the space was taken up with particle-board cubbyholes. I reached into one of them to extract my bag. The cubby was spotless. No lint at all. His attacker hadn't come from here, then. Not surprising. Everyone at the dojo liked him.

One of the college girls, wearing a snow-white karate belt and too much perfume, interrupted my reverie. "So, is it true that you and Alan Fenwick broke up?"

"No," I spat, and left, still dressed in my gi.

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Chapter Five

Elaina bustled around me, vacuuming under my outstretched legs. “What time did you go to bed last night? I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I didn’t.” Fourteen hours of work, two hours cleaning for Ulrich, and then an hour at Fenwick’s house, trying to get him to talk to me. He just watched TV the whole time. I cleaned up a little, and made him some food, and tried to get him to eat it before getting discouraged and leaving. The only good thing about being exhausted was that I was too tired to go to the convenience store and buy cigarettes.

“Does that mean you made up with your boyfriend?”

“We didn’t get in a fight.” I unwound the towel from my head and finger combed my damp hair. Nine months without a cigarette. Six months without a single craving. I tapped my fingers, staring at the television without really watching it. You don’t need a cigarette, Kit. Cigarettes are bad for you.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s right. He was cursed. Of course.”

“Elaina, what’s involved in cursing someone?” I pulled my legs up onto the couch so she could vacuum under the coffee table.

“Forget it, Kit. Let it go. Get a new boyfriend.” She vacuumed the spot, then turned the vacuum cleaner off and wound up the cord, sparing a glance for her watch.

“James said that you need the hair and clothing of the target. Do you have to know whose hair it is?”

“No. That’s how the hedge mages can charge money to curse strangers.” She stuffed the vacuum cleaner in the closet. “You just give them a sock and a lock of hair, and let them go.”

“What if the hair and the sock were from different people? Would it still work?”

“I don’t know the details.” She shut the closet door and came out, bearing a white sheet. “And what is this all about, anyway? Ulrich’s not going to teach you curses, is he?”

“No. He said he’s through. He can’t teach me anymore, and anyway, it’s too hard to schedule lessons with my work schedule.”

Elaina had cleared the magazines off the couch and was shaking the sheet in the air as though she wanted to use it to hide both me and the ugly couch. “You know, your problem is that you’re trying to run before you can walk. If you really want to learn witchcraft, you could come to some of my coven meetings.”

“The bible frowns on that sort of thing.” I picked up half the sheet and helped Elaina cover the couch with it, then sat down again.

“Oh, so you’re a Christian now?” Elaina tucked in the other half of the couch with elaborate precision.

“I’ve always been Catholic; a bad Catholic, a lapsed Catholic, true, but not enough to switch camps.”

“What do you call the invisibility spell, then?”

“A neat trick.”

“That’s why you can’t do it. You don’t even know what mage-craft is.” She made a snorting sound and fetched her dust rag. “Are you going to help me clean this place, or what? You’re so lazy.”

Lazy? Try exhausted. “It’s clean enough for me.”

She dusted off the grooves and shelves; all those spaces that no one touched and hardly anyone even looked at. “I can’t believe what a slob you are sometimes. You have to pick up the spilled cans out front, you know. You put the recycling out too early last night, and they got knocked all over everything. Make sure they’re picked up before I get home from work. I’m leaving in five minutes.”

“Fine.” I picked up one of her magazines to leaf through. Eighty pages with photos of skinny, airbrushed supermodels, then an article on how to improve your self-esteem. Great. I needed a cigarette.

Elaina worked her way to the casement window, where her familiar-summoning spell bundle still lay, half flickering with energy. She picked it up, dusted under it, stared at it, set it down, and turned to glare at me. “You didn’t touch it, did you?”

“No.” Wait ten minutes, and the craving would go away. Jesus, nine months without a cigarette, and now I wanted one in the worst way.

“Something’s wrong with it.”

“Maybe I’m not the only one without any mage-talent.”

Elaina gave me a dirty look, and before she could start a fight, I picked up my jean jacket and left. Only five blocks to the convenience store. If nothing else, she’d have left for work by the time I got back.

On the way back from the convenience store, I grudgingly admitted she was right about the recycling. The bins had to be put on the street side of the easement, which wasn’t as easy as it sounds. Too close to the ditch and the bins might fall in, too close to the street and someone would knock them over. More often than not, one of the neighborhood kids would ride by on

his bike and play “recycling bin baseball” and then we’d have to pick up all the cans off the street before the truck came or risk getting fined. The sooner you put them out, the greater the risk, but since I hate to get up early in the morning, I had decided to take a chance and put them out the night before.

Our house backed onto a hill, and in front of the house there was a drainage ditch spanned by cement slabs. The dark water under the tiny bridge once had a kappa, a dangerous frog-man who defended our apartment. It hadn’t been there for months. They’d had to reroute the drainage on account of some road repairs they were making, and when the water dried up, the kappa just vanished. Elaina was furious, and wanted to get out of our lease because we no longer had a supernatural guardian, but of course she couldn’t. Most people didn’t believe in magic or magic creatures, and you’d look like a kook if you said something. Elaina took this magic stuff for granted, but me, I hadn’t even known I lived in a fantasy world until about a year ago when I inherited Uncle Fred’s bindi, which gave me the second sight. Now I was making up for lost time, plunging headlong into the supernatural. Did I even have any normal friends anymore?

A dog nosed around the bins across the street, sniffing at a can. It looked part bull mastiff, part sneaky neighbor’s mutt. It didn’t notice me. Great. A perfect opportunity to practice Elaina’s animal charm spell.

Untalented at mage-craft? And how many people could see energy moving besides me? I’d show her. First, extend your ki around the dog. So far, so good. This felt like extending a translucent hand, and looked almost the same with my second sight. The dog peed against the curb and started licking the bottom of the neighbor’s bin. Now what? Make our auras align with one another? Color change, maybe? Turn my own aura ... red, perhaps? I thought about the color red, and the ephemeral hand grew pinkish. The mastiff lifted its muzzle. I gently let the energy flow closer to the dog, willing it to meld. The dog turned around and snarled at me, lifting its lips to show white teeth in black gums. Not working. Maybe not colorful enough? More red?

The dog started barking and leapt for me.

I dropped the ki flow, turned and sprinted for the door. The cans flew out of my hands, bouncing off the cracked pavement. The dog was barking furiously now, and its paws scattered the cans further as it dashed towards

me. Almost there. Quick get it open. Hurry. The door slammed shut just as a flash of tawny canine darted into my peripheral vision. The dog hit the door with a thud, then barked even louder.

I locked the door, pushing back against it irrationally, as though the dog might learn to turn a knob if it tried hard enough. My heart raced. The dog couldn't get in with the door shut, but there it was, snuffling around the windows. It lifted its leg against one pane of glass, and then wandered around to the front where I couldn't see. Was it under the porch? Would it attack Elaina when she came home? She was going to go out with that new guy after work, wasn't she? Maybe if she stayed at his place, the dog would be gone by morning. She needed a warning. Jesus, this is what I got for being the only one on the planet without a cell phone.

The neighbor's lights showed the silhouette of a four-legged shape near the window. It was still there, and must have been plenty pissed off. Why did the spell go so wrong? Why was it so angry? Ignore it, Kit. Just go to sleep, and don't look at the windows. Yeah, right.

I managed to nap anyway; exhaustion overrode fear.

In the darkness, my alarm said eight thirty, and it took a minute to remember that it was eight thirty p.m., not a.m. That meant the moon would rise soon. Elaina was still out, which was just as well, because she'd make some comment about the fact that I was sleeping in the middle of the day. You'd think the girl never had a swing shift before. At least the dog hadn't attacked her. I went to brush my teeth, breathing a prayer of thanks to the patron saint of one night stands that Elaina had gotten lucky.

And then furious barking outside jolted me back into fear. Elaina! Three steps took me up the stairs and another two brought me out the door, ready to attack the dog. Elaina and a tall man stood on the walk with the mastiff jumping all over them.

I froze. It wasn't attacking them. The mastiff licked the man's hands and face.

"Kit, this is Dael." Elaina waved one hand towards her faerie beau like Vanna showing off a new vowel.

Standing in the cold air in a tee shirt and a bathrobe with a toothbrush sticking out of my mouth would have been embarrassing enough, but then I

got a good look at Dael. He was totally hot. Dael wouldn't have been amiss as the model for a Final Fantasy game hero, if he just had a giant sword. He had light hair (hard to tell if it was blond or blue in the light) and flawless features which matched his stylish blazer and sweater. Dael stroked the dog's head with a long thin hand.

"Mraogh," I said to Elaina.

"What?"

I took the toothbrush out of my mouth. "The dog. It tried to attack me. I came out to get it off you."

"It seems friendly enough," Dael said. He smiled at me, the way that guys always act nice to their date's ugly friend.

Half-naked outside with fluoride foam dripping down my chin in front of a totally hot guy was the perfect time to be invisible. Pull myself inward. Let awareness slip over me. That was it. The mouse-under-shadows hiding. The step-dad's-drunk-again-so-don't-be-here feeling.

Dael and Elaina smirked, then blinked, and their eyes slid over the place where I stood. Almost as if I were invisible.

I was invisible.

It worked! I had finally figured out how to do the "pulling myself invisible" that Ulrich had been trying to teach me. No wonder James got that part. He had known all along, and so had I. We had both learned to hide in plain sight, learned it through the necessity of avoiding Dad and our drunken stepdads. It wasn't magic at all. It was a dysfunctional kid's survival technique.

What a horrible epiphany.

Dael spent the night, and the next day Elaina and I managed to avoid one another until she left for work. Lucky me, it was a new moon, which meant a mere eight hours of work and enough time to go to the dojo. I had just come back from the dojo and was stripping off my grayish-brownish karate belt when the sound of tapping made me look up towards the window.

It wasn't a mastiff, it was a paper bag with black feet. Then it flapped its wings and backed out of the bag. A crow had hopped down into one of the light wells. It tapped again on the glass, like it was asking to come in. The window in front of the crow was one of the few that still worked, though it

took seven or eight rusty rotations of the crank to open it enough to let the bird in. The crow flapped a few feet back.

“Well, are you going to come in?” I tossed my gi top into the laundry basket, and started to strip off the white cotton pants.

The crow cawed at me.

The pants landed on a pile of dirty clothes just this side of the laundry basket. “You’re welcome to come in, but I can’t leave the window open. It’s cold outside.” I reached under my tee shirt and pulled my bra off, tossing it to the pile of laundry. Was there anything clean to wear?

The crow hopped closer to the window.

I turned away from it to let it gain confidence, and rooted through my dresser. Top drawer, empty. Middle drawer, paint stained cutoffs. Bottom drawer, one of Fenwick’s flannel shirts. It still smelled like him. I held it to my nose and inhaled the scent. God, I missed him so much.

He had been wearing that shirt the night he brought me the dreamcatcher.

“Here,” he had told me, handing me the leather wrapped ring. It was spiderwebbed with sinew and had turkey feathers decorating the outside. “I made this in Boy Scout camp. It’s supposed to take away nightmares.”

“Does it work?”

“Hey, don’t knock the placebo effect.” He took a thumbtack out of his pocket and hung the dreamcatcher above my bed, then took off his flannel shirt and wrapped it around me. “And if that doesn’t work, you can use this as a security blanket.”

“I’d rather sleep with my teddy bear,” I told him, and slid my hands under his shirt.

The flannel shirt hadn’t stayed on very long. That had been a nice night, him and me, snuggling under the blanket. We hadn’t gotten much sleep. My nipples grew hard, remembering his kisses, his caresses.

“Kaa!”

The crow flew in and perched on the top of the dresser.

The draft had made the room cold. I shut the window, wrapping my arms around my shoulders. “I’m Kit. I’m not the one who summoned you, but maybe we can be friends. What shall I call you?”

“Kaa!” The crow tilted his head and peered at me out of one black eye.

“Well, Kaa, it’s nice to meet you.” I gave it a little bow, and it bobbed back.

Maybe I was nuts treating the crow like it was something special. Then again, it had come in when I opened the window. And why not treat it like it was a real person? People did that with their cats, didn't they? I stepped into the cutoffs and picked up the laundry basket. "Would you like some food? Elaina's mom baked banana bread."

"Kaa!"

The foil-wrapped loaf had only the heels left. I set one on the counter for the crow, and stuffed the other in my mouth. Kaa obligingly flew over and ate his share, then dipped his beak in the cup of water I filled for him.

"Tap on the window when you want to go out and I'll open it for you."

The crow nodded. That freaked me out a little. It was one thing to pretend an animal was sentient, but quite another to have it act like it.

A clump of hair had gotten caught in one of the frayed ends of my cutoffs. I ripped the whole bit off, tossing it towards the garbage can. It missed. That's why I study karate instead of basketball. "So, I presume you're smarter than the average crow?"

"Kaa!" Kaa agreed.

"That must make you pretty clever. We'll have to arrange something so you can come and go on your own. If you need to take a dump, do it in the sink."

"Kaa!" Kaa hopped across the counter to play with the spoons in the sink. Bright shiny objects. The spoons became boring, because a moment later it flapped down to the ball of thread and hair and picked it up in his beak. Was it nesting season? There wasn't any other reason to want a ball of hair and clothing shreds, not unless the bird wanted to curse someone.

The laundry basket.

Laundry.

They say you're supposed to clean out the lint traps in the dryer so that it doesn't catch fire, but no one mentions that you should also do it so that mages don't steal your lint. Lint. Simple lint. Fibers of clothing you've worn, stray hairs from your head, and dead cells from your skin. All it would take is for a mage to scoop it out, say a few incantations, and presto, he's got your energy.

Now I had a place to start looking.

I staked out the laundry room at Fenwick's apartment complex for several days with no luck. My laundry got clean, and I got better at the invisibility glamour, but the mage didn't show. By the fourth day I wasn't even sure what I was looking for. The steady hum of fluorescent lights and the low rumble of dryers had dulled my senses so much that my mind almost shut off. But hey, it was great for practicing invisibility.

Hold still. Don't look at anything for too long. Move silently. After a year of Ulrich's lessons, this was easy enough. Of course, the washing machines and dryers made so much noise that a limping clogger could have snuck up on someone. There was really no way of knowing if the people who came in saw me or not, but some of them whistled. People don't whistle when others are around, do they?

A man came in, wearing a loose hockey jersey with the Boars' logo on it, carrying empty laundry baskets. He had two-inch-long dreadlocks like the Youtubers wear. I might have chatted with him, commiserating the Boars' latest defeat to the Canadians, but instead I held still, silent, and pulled my thoughts inward. Couldn't trust anyone.

The man filled two laundry baskets from the dryers, then took out a handful of plastic baggies from his pocket. Calmly, as though he did this every day, he proceeded to clean out the lint trap, stuffing the gray bundle in a plastic bag. He cleared out the next one, and the next, until all of the dryers were empty. Then he filled his baskets and sauntered out the door.

All this time, my tiger's eye had been glowing.

Adrenaline flooded through my limbs, but I had to quench it. Getting excited is not how you stay invisible. Pull yourself inward, Ulrich said. Let your psyche tell the world only that no one is there, that the room is empty. I rose silently and began to creep towards the door leading from the laundry to the covered walkway of the apartment building.

The man didn't look over his shoulder, not even when he used his feet to push open the glass door. His laundry baskets, piled up on top of each other, tilted precariously, and a small yellow sock fell off the top. I had an irrational urge to help him with the door, or at the very least, pick up the sock. Stupid really, considering I might attack him before the day was out.

He shuffled carefully down the corridor towards his apartment, leaning to the left to keep the baskets from overbalancing any further. Broad daylight, and I was tracking this man with little more than a few years'

karate and a few weeks of righteous fury to back me up. Jesus, what was I getting myself into?

The man had reached his apartment and fumbled to open the door, baskets pressed up against the wall with his hips. He snatched the laundry before it fell and kicked the door open wide. I followed close enough to catch it before it shut and slip in his apartment behind him. According to the address on the letters dumped on the table next to the door, his name was Marius Blanc.

Marius' apartment was nicely decorated with bright prints and movie posters. A modest stereo and television were along one wall, and the extensive collection of DVDs (mostly Disney, with nary a porn title among them) and the toys and shoes scattered on the floor stood as mute testament that Marius Blanc spoiled his kid. The sofa had a cheerful collection of handmade throw pillows and a rumpled sheet and blanket on one end as if someone slept there frequently.

"Violet! Papa's home!" Marius called out, with the falsetto people use when speaking to children. He set the laundry baskets down by the sofa and walked into one of the back rooms of the house.

I heard Marius and Violet speaking in the back room. Violet giggled. Marius went to the kitchen and got a glass of juice for her before coming back to the living room to fold the laundry. He sat on the couch right in front of me without looking up, which meant that the invisibility glamour had worked. Have to tell Ulrich about this.

Releasing the invisibility glamour felt like letting my stomach relax after a day at the beach. "We need to talk, Marius."

"Jesus! What, who are you?" Marius stood up suddenly, knocking his socks off his lap.

"You have to stop this."

"Who are you? You must go now." Marius just barely avoided shouting.

"Who is it, Papa?" Violet's voice called from the back room.

"Just someone who needs to talk to your papa about business, dear. I won't be long," I called back, before Marius could respond. I didn't move away from the door, partly to reassure him I didn't mean to rob him, and partly so I could leave if he got more violent than I could deal with. "You cast a spell on my friend. You have to undo it."

"Spell? What are you talking about?"

“We can play this game, or you can stop bullshitting me and tell me why you cursed my boyfriend.”

Marius stared at me for an uncomfortably long time, as though having a discussion with himself. “I have a good reason. My daughter is sick. I did it for her. I know the voodoo is wrong, but she needs it.”

So, he admitted it. Yeah, Elaina, way to Scully me. “Why. Why him?” Why not someone I didn’t love?

“Granny Shakes said it was safe. The spell was supposed to take just a little.”

“Let him go.”

“She’ll die without the energy.” He didn’t ask for sympathy, or pity, or even forgiveness, but because his eyes were puffy, tired from too many tears, I gave him all three.

This would have been so much easier if Marius had been evil.

“Tell me why your daughter needs all his energy.”

“She’s cursed.”

“Who cursed her? You get Fenwick’s energy back, maybe we can work something out.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I want my friend back. Explain to me why it’s not simple.”

Marius stared at me, dark brown fingers worrying the hem of a pink tee shirt.

“Please?” I asked, voice cracking, tough-girl image slipping, letting out the fear and grief I tried so desperately to keep inside. And maybe he understood what it was like to feel helpless when someone you love needed you, because he sat down. After a few long, silent minutes of sorting the clothes, he began. “Violet’s mother, she is, well, crazy.”

“Go on.” I tried not to have any expression.

“Not the funny crazy, but mental hospital crazy.” Now that the seal was broken, the tale spilled out of him. “I didn’t know this when I first met her. Lisette was so beautiful. I called her ‘my orchid.’ That’s how she looked, like an orchid. She loved Violet, when Violet was born we were so happy. Violet was our jewel, and Lisette gave her everything. She was a perfect mother.”

Marius lowered his head as if telling the story to the clothes. “When Violet got a few years old, the craziness slipped out. It got to be too much. She, Lisette tried to kill Violet. I came in to the bedroom and she was

holding Violet out the window. Violet was screaming at Lisette and crying, but it was like a demon got a hold of her mama. I managed to pull Violet back in. Lisette cried at what she had almost done. We wondered when the next time would be.”

Must be why he lived on the ground floor now.

“There were other times when she lost control. She would scream things, wave a knife around. I couldn’t watch her all the time. I was afraid to sleep with her. We put Lisette into a hospital. Things were better, a little bit, but then the insurance wouldn’t pay anymore so she came home. They gave her pills and said she was cured, but there was no cure. Lisette tried to kill me. I couldn’t take it anymore. We separated.

“Lisette kept calling us, and sometimes I would let her talk to Violet, but mostly she was so crazy she didn’t make sense anymore. She threatened us sometimes. It broke my heart. Inside that mad woman was my wife, the woman who still loved us.

“One day she sent a package in the mail. Violet opened it. It was a doll. Violet picked it up. When I came home, it was too late, Violet was cursed. She just lay in bed, every day she got sicker and sicker. I flew home again, flew back to Haiti to find help, find Granny. Granny Shakes, she knows the voodoo. She said that only Lisette could remove the curse. I found Lisette.”

I sensed a ‘but’ coming along, and kept quiet.

“Lisette had killed herself. She knew what she had done during her madness and she killed herself when she became sane again.”

“So, there’s no cure?”

Marius shook his head while he folded a purple pair of girls’ overalls. The butterflies sewn on it had a cheerfulness which seemed incongruous to our conversation. The purple cloth had no grass or mud stains, no tears or rips.

“If there’s no cure, why did you steal the energy?”

“Granny Shakes said it could help her. With the energy, she can last a bit longer. She’s not well, but she can talk and sit up sometimes. If I let the energy go, she’ll die for sure. With it, maybe she can fight the curse for a few more months. Maybe until Easter?”

“But you’ve drained him of everything. He’s like a zombie. Why can’t you just let his energy go and keep the others?”

“I can’t.”

“Well, then give me the spell bundle you made out of his lint and I’ll try to unravel it.”

“I can’t do that either.”

“Why not?”

“Come see.” Marius set the folded clothes to one side, stood, and beckoned with a hand. He led me through the green tiled kitchen into a breakfast nook. It had a pair of spool-back chairs, a card table, and several tackle boxes emanating a strange herbal-musky smell.

“What?”

“Turn around.”

I pivoted slowly, and my jaw dropped open with shock. “Jesus.”

The wall behind me was covered from floor to ceiling in pigeon hole nooks, like the kind that people used to hold CDs in. Each one contained several doll-shaped bundles of lint, wrapped with waxy thread. They all glowed, not with true light, but with second sight.

“Many people live in this apartment. I took the lint and made the dolls. Granny Shakes said it doesn’t hurt them.”

“Which one is his?”

“I don’t know which one belongs to which person. I don’t see the people. I just took their lint.”

In a perfect world, Fenwick’s lint-doll would have glowed brighter than its neighbors. It didn’t. They all looked the same. Even if I could find someone to unravel the energy tap, there was no way of telling which one was his. Unravel too many, and Violet would die. Fenwick would never ever let a little girl’s death be on his conscience. Damn him. Damn them both. Why couldn’t this be easy?

“What happens if she dies while all these dolls are still draining energy?”

Marius looked to one side, showing the whites of his eyes. “They get sick. Little bit of energy, little bit sick. Lot of energy...”

Fenwick had a lot of energy taken. “He’ll die, won’t he?”

Marius looked at the ground. “She’s all I have.”

“Do you still have the doll she was cursed with?”

Marius nodded.

“Give it to me.”

He didn’t make any move to fetch anything.

“I said give it to me!”

Marius stood up and walked to the stereo in the living room, bringing down an open cardboard box with a small rag doll inside. It surprised me at first that he had kept it in the living room, but behind the box was a shrine of photos, all of a beautiful woman with curly black hair.

“If you touch it, you might be cursed too,” Marius warned me, holding the cardboard box by the edges.

“I’m not going to touch it. I’m going to find a cure.”

He shook his head sadly. “There is no cure.”

“If there’s a cure. I’ll find it.” Just to get the last word, I pulled myself invisible and slunk out the door.

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Chapter Six

Café Ishmael, James's pride and joy, was located near enough to the Old Town to make it popular with shoppers who wanted a little coffee break, and close enough to the University to gather one-cup loitering students like a pier gathers barnacles. The street side was all windows, and the back side had a hearth and a nook for the phone and bathroom. The small tables were mismatched, some with reclaimed butcherblock and some with tiled chessboards. The chairs varied from heavy upholstered easy chairs big enough to set a saucer on the arm, to dainty iron bistro stools. It felt cozier than any home I'd ever lived in. Even if it weren't my brother's café, I'd still come here.

That afternoon, a fire crackled in the hearth. James had added hot mulled cider to his menu and it was selling briskly, the apple cinnamon scent filling the air. Usually I helped out when I stopped by, even if I wasn't officially working for my brother, but these days Barnabus and James had everything down. I practiced my invisibility glamour and watched them. They managed to make the simple routines of serving coffee seem like a complicated tango. They never got in each other's way, and never used an unnecessary movement. Good thing James hired Barnabus. Competent people are hard to find. He'd better pay Barnabus more than he had paid me.

"You'll be wanting to talk to him too, won't you?" Ulrich sat down at one of the few free chairs, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"You can see me? I was trying to practice my glamour."

"Tis no easy feat even for an experienced sorceress, Kit. It pains me to bear ill news but you have little skill."

His patronizing tone irked me. "I did it the other day."

"Invisible to a human? Tis a fair start."

"Not just a human, Elaina's new—" Uh oh. Shouldn't have said that. "I mean, there was someone else there who wasn't human, and he couldn't see me either."

"Say it is a lie!" Ulrich reached out to grasp my lapel, spilling his drink. "Elaina has given her heart to another?"

Jesus. Not this again. “Say, did you notice those nice Yule decorations?” I pointed to where James had replaced the oak leaf boughs and orange gourds with boughs of pine and holly. “James can be a real Martha Stewart sometimes. They look nice. I’m glad he had the decency to wait until after Thanksgiving. Don’t you hate it when people decorate too early?”

“Tell me of Elaina. Tell me!” Ulrich set his cup down and tried to pull me to face him. Shit, he was really strong. And hairy too. He looked like a russet chia pet.

“Those shiny gold apples above the fire are nice too.” I tried to peel his hands off my jacket. “Remember last year he put candles on the mantle there above the fireplace?”

“Kit, I implore you!”

“Let her go, Ulrich.” He still had a grip on me. “And let me go too.”

“I will make you tell me.” Ulrich flickered poison green in my peripheral second sight. Bastard was casting a spell on me? Just before he managed to meet my gaze, I swept my leg behind him and threw him over my hip. I’d never done that with someone that short, but he went down like a white belt, sprawled legs kicking a bar stool and scattering the contents of a woman’s purse.

“Kit! What are you doing?” James spilled a cup of coffee over the counter, no doubt startled by the sight of his sister judo-throwing his best friend.

“Just helping him up.” I offered my hand, and pulled him close when we clasped wrists. I whispered to him fiercely. “Do that to me again and I’ll kick the shit out of you.”

“Aye.” Ulrich swallowed. “Aye. Forgive me. I didn’t think. My broken heart has twisted all reason from me.”

“Love makes us do desperate things.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to rub the headache away.

“It gladdens me that you have learned the glamour.” Ulrich handed the woman her purse with a smile of apology, then took his coffee to the hearth. “Come, chat with me of your troubles, that I might lose my own.”

“Troubles?”

“Your cares and worries are painted on your face.” Ulrich managed to snag two of the much-coveted hearth spots. He patted the cushion next to him in invitation. “My friend your brother has told me of this fell deed. Have you yet unraveled the mystery behind it?”

Ulrich listened patiently while I explained about Marius and his daughter. His eyebrows rose at the description of the voodoo doll collection, but his face had grown too hairy to reveal any other emotional response.

“So, I came here to ask James if he knew someone who could undo Violet’s curse.”

Ulrich shook his head, peering into his paper cup of coffee. “Many may light flames, but who can extinguish a forest’s blaze? Few indeed are the mages with skill enough to untie such a fell knot of sorcery.”

“How about you? Could you do it?” My back had grown too hot, so I turned so that my shoulder faced the fire instead.

“Nay. My fey skill faded when I chose to wear a mortal’s fleshy robe. I have little but the glamour which hides my true self from those who know not the knack to peer beneath it.” He glanced around the café, but no one stared at him. And why should they? No one was listening to our conversation, and to everyone else he looked like a short, hairy guy. Even with his weird lilting talk, most people never figured out he wasn’t human. It had taken me the better part of three years, broad hints from James, and the unfailing second sight of my bindi.

“James will know someone. He knows everyone, right?”

“James and I share most all friends. He knows but three witches, and one is Elaina.” Ulrich’s voice twinged when saying her name. “The others have sworn to the All Mother that they shall never tread such dark paths, and strive to halt those who would cast curses upon the innocent.”

“I’m not trying to curse someone, I’m trying to undo a curse.”

“Only one has knowledge of such things will have ken enough to undo it.”

“Elaina said something about hedge mages who curse people. Are there any in town?”

Ulrich drained his coffee cup and crumpled the paper in his hands. “Most are but charlatans. I know none with any true skill.”

“Good to know. Well, see you later.” All this talk of Elaina and spells had reminded me of an errand I wanted to run. I stopped at the mini mart for a box of dog biscuits (and another pack of cigarettes, unfortunately).

Two hours later, I unlocked the door to our apartment and descended the steps to find Kaa shutting the window with his foot. He pushed the casement handle over the top of its arc with a foot, then hopped back and

pulled the knob with his beak. Then he grabbed it again with his foot and pushed it over the top of the arc.

“So, you figured out how to shut the window? I guess that means you can open it again too.” That was one smart bird.

Kaa turned and nodded, as if he had understood, then flew to my shoulder. He dug his black claws into the denim of my jacket, and that razor-sharp black beak was only inches away from my face.

“I don’t mind you sitting there, but remember that you’re not to peck my eyes or anything.”

“Kaa,” the crow agreed.

“You want a dog biscuit?” And was that a good idea? My fingers were tender too. How tame was this bird?

Too late now. He had already seen the dog biscuit. Kaa took half a broken biscuit from my hand in a quick jab. He made a low trilling sound, like a question.

“Why do I have dog biscuits? I went to the pound to practice the animal charming spell. The dogs didn’t like me.” I walked to the kitchen slowly, afraid of dislodging the bird, but he clung to my jean jacket without falling.

“Kaa!” Kaa reached for the other half of the dog biscuit.

“What? Oh, here. Doesn’t Elaina feed you?” The crow didn’t fall off my shoulder even when I leaned down to inspect the contents of the refrigerator. Elaina was on a crazy raw food diet, so my normal option of stealing leftovers was out. Ramen and apples it was, then. “I must be doing something wrong. The dogs barked so much that the people kicked me out for teasing them. Have another piece of biscuit.”

Kaa took another biscuit and made a raspy chuckle. No wonder people liked pets. They listened to whatever you said, and never criticized.

“Kaa!”

“What? Oh sure, here.” I gave Kaa the other piece of dog biscuit. The box was half empty, so I discarded the cardboard and rolled up the plastic liner to stuff it into one of my deep jacket pockets. “The dogs don’t like me, so you can have the rest of them.”

“Kaa!” He pecked at the pocket.

“No, one at a time. If you get too fat, you won’t be able to fly, and then you might get eaten by a mastiff. I wouldn’t want that to happen. I know we just met and all, but I like you.”

“Kaa.” He rubbed his beak against me. It made me grin. What an awesome pet. Friendly, smart, soft, affectionate. Elaina was so lucky.

“Has Elaina met you yet?”

I got to see a crow shake its head.

“How come? I’ve met you twice.”

Crows can only respond to yes-no questions, apparently.

“She was hoping for a cat or an owl, but I’m glad you’re a crow. It would suck to have to change a litter box or pick up mouse pellets. Tell you what, if she doesn’t like you, why don’t you be my familiar? I’m not much of a mage, but I promise to take care of you. I’ve never had a pet before, and didn’t realize how nice it was to have someone to talk to all the time.”

Kaa nodded.

“I’m mostly kidding, you know. Elaina will like you too.” The crow let me touch its silky black feathers. “I have to go to work now. You want to come with?”

Kaa shook his head.

“Suit yourself,” I said, grabbing my jacket to walk out the door. I couldn’t help feeling disappointed. Ms. Yseult’s house was creepy alone. Even a half-tame bird would be better company than no one.

The birch forest grew, tree by tree. I cut dozens of tree trunks to length and fastened them to the ceiling above Ms. Yseult’s lower floor. If only I could use an electric saw instead of the handsaw, my shoulders wouldn’t ache so much. Both my hands had blisters now. I was gingerly trying to find another grip to hold the saw with, when the teeth got caught on something.

Stupid saw. Must have broken the teeth. Couldn’t get it through the log. I jiggled the blade loose, then tried sawing again. It got stuck a second time. Gritting my teeth and bracing my knees, I used my weight to force it through the knot.

With a wrenching jerk that opened the blister on my hand, the saw cut through the wood. The end of the trunk fell off, revealing half a pebble that had grown into the wood.

The saw cut right through. I fingered the teeth. It wasn’t even dull. What kind of metal was this? The odd utility knife was still as sharp as the first day too.

I looked around the cavernous half-forested room. The lighting contractor installed ceiling lights sometime during my absence, but the woman I'd found to do the wallpaper didn't come back after her first consultation. She was probably frightened away when she saw Ms. Yseult. Smart woman, that decorator. Smarter than me.

Ms. Yseult came in that evening as I propped up another birch trunk among its dead fellows. She didn't speak to me, so I just started cutting another log without looking up. A normal client might have commented on how long it was taking (or not) or on how much it looked (or didn't) like a real forest. Ms. Yseult began to pace. My head spun, so I sat down to rest, watching her. She walked counterclockwise around the lower floor of her house, pulling everything distorted in her wake like a magnet near a television screen.

There was a party back in high school, and some drugs my boyfriend passed around (never did find out what they were) that made the world turn like this. The log rolled out from under me and I fell, smelling earth and dew. Of course I didn't smell earth and dew. It must be a rotten patch in one of the logs. Birds sang overhead, and the wind blew through the branches still unfastened to the trunks.

Ms. Yseult glided up the stairs, and the illusion vanished.

Okay. It was time to call it a night. Too much work makes you hallucinate.

The vampire standing near the door of my apartment certainly wasn't a hallucination. Damn it, it had been almost a month since I'd seen any vampires. I'd hoped they had forgotten about me.

And what did Fain want from me? A mission? Something only a human could do? Something dangerous and illegal to test my loyalty? This was just what I needed. Maybe if he didn't know I was here? Time for the invisibility glamour. If the slamming of my van door hadn't alerted him to my presence, I could slip past him.

"Hello, Melbourne. I've been waiting for you." He looked up. "I would have called first, but they say you don't have a phone."

"What do you want?"

Fain came forward then, looking very human in the light of the window. He wore a brown turtleneck sweater under a dark red blazer. It suited him better than the tuxedo.

"I actually wanted to talk to you about Fenwick, but since you don't want guests right now, I'll leave." He started to walk past me to the street.

I blocked his path. This was not the way to treat people offering help, especially Guild members who were sure to talk to my sponsor. "Sorry. I'm being rude. How about we start over? I meant to say, hello, Fain, nice of you to stop by. Pleasant evening, isn't it?"

Maybe he heard the apology in my voice, because he nodded. "Nice to see you too, Melbourne. Yes, it is a pleasant evening, but it's getting cold. Perhaps we should go inside?"

And that sounded like a "let's talk privately" hint. Great. Now he'd tell me why he was really here. "Fain, I invite you into my home."

I shut the door behind him and walked down to the kitchen with my arms folded. My stomach growled. Ramen and apples were getting old, but it had been a long time since lunch. How long was this chat going to take? I needed food.

"Melbourne, you're not in trouble."

"Good, because I haven't done anything." Nonchalantly, trying to ignore the gun he was wearing, I got out the sauce pan and filled it with water.

"You nervous around vampires?"

"I'm fine with vampires," I lied.

"You don't believe all those rumors about the Guild, do you?"

Rumors? Did they still call it rumor when the newspaper printed it? Money laundering, shady deals, hands in the politicians' pockets—everyone knew not to mess with the Guild. Just because I was stupid enough to be involved with them didn't mean I didn't know how dangerous they were. Watched water doesn't boil, but it gives you something to look at when you're too nervous to face someone.

"Palmer sent me to see what you're up to," Fain said.

"Well, isn't that peachy," I muttered.

"What was that?" Fain replied, in a tone that assured me he had heard it completely and was waiting for me to try and back out.

"Jolene won't talk to me anymore. Vampire girl, you know her? She's worked for my brother for years, and now she's acting like I've got some

kind of disease. I know you guys hate me, even though I've done nothing to deserve it. All that is bad enough, but having my sponsor, Palmer, the guy who is supposed to be on my side, send a parole officer over just because Fenwick got too sick to go to the soiree is a little rich!"

Fain raised his eyebrows.

I turned my back to him and stared at the water. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you like that. Please don't tell Palmer. I've just been under a lot of stress lately."

"Melbourne, he sent me to check on you because he's out of town. He was worried about you ever since Fenwick got attacked."

"Attacked?" I spun to face him. How did he know about Marius?

"Your water's boiling." Fain picked up the ramen packet by the corner. "What is this, noodle soup?"

"It's my dinner."

"You eat this?" He wrinkled his nose.

"It's cheap."

"That's not very healthy. You need more variety. Malnutrition causes illness." Fain turned off the stove and poured the water out. "Go get dressed up. I'm taking you out to dinner."

I scowled.

"No buts. I know just the place. You mind if I drive?"

Fain drove as if fleeing the cops after a robbery. He seemed to pay attention to the road, at least, which was a good thing because midsize sedans don't come with roll bars and five-point harnesses. Out of politeness, I clenched my hands in my lap instead of grasping the "Oh my God!" handle over the door, but my right foot couldn't help pressing the passenger's floor boards. We made it in one piece. Next time, I'd offer to drive.

He took me to a restaurant in north Pepperwood called simply "Trattoria." It was classy enough that they never would have let me in dressed in my normal work clothes, and may not even have let me in that night if I weren't with Fain. The women in the waiting room had time-consuming hairstyles, and quite a few of the men wore suits. Good thing Fain had warned me to change into my "temp job" clothes.

Fain led me past the crowd waiting for tables, directly to the host, who practically saluted when he saw my vampire companion.

“Mr. Fain! Good evening, sir. It’s such an honor to see you.” The host leaned forward in half a bow, smiling graciously as though Fain was the person he wanted to see most in the world. His expression of joy was only spoiled by the line of sweat beading on his brow.

“Do you have a table for us?” Fain asked him.

I doubted that. The place looked packed, and the waiting room had about ten parties ahead of us. The restaurant was good sized, but each table was surrounded by high walls which took up a lot of area.

“For you, certainly, sir.”

“You made a reservation?” I asked Fain as we followed the host back to a private table in the corner. He was pretty cocky to assume I’d come with him, since I almost hadn’t let him in the door. The host seated us and handed us menus with a flourish, as though he couldn’t trust such an important task to a mere waiter.

I ignored the menu and glanced around. Everything looked quiet, tasteful, and subdued, from the burgundy colored carpet which muffled footsteps to the original cubist oil paintings in their recessed lighting niches.

The waiter appeared suddenly. He scooped up the army of silver forks on either side of Fain’s plate and replaced them with flatware. His fingers shook as he placed each fork. “We are so honored to have you here tonight. Would you like your usual, sir?”

Fain didn’t look up. “Yes, but I don’t believe my friend has had a chance to look at the menu yet.”

The waiter cringed, so I gave him a break. “I’d like whatever the chef is most proud of, and a glass of whichever wine suits it best.”

The waiter gave me a look promising that if he had the authority, he would have canonized me right then and there. “Excellent, mademoiselle. You won’t be disappointed.”

The waiter scurried off, leaving me alone with Fain again.

“Does he know you’re a vampire?”

Fain smiled briefly. “He may have private suspicions, but officially he doesn’t believe in our kind. I told him silver turns my skin green, which is true, by the way.”

“Then why is he afraid of you? Does he think you’re a food critic?”

“The owner of this establishment has angered my sire, and knows he must atone. It is a private business, nothing you need trouble yourself over.” Fain stopped speaking abruptly. Another waiter arrived with a breadbasket.

Thirty seconds after the waiter left, Fain began speaking again. “What has your sponsor told you of me and my sire?”

“Palmer hasn’t told me anything.”

“Please don’t speak so loudly here.” Fain’s eyes flickered, as though he were an American spy in 1960s Moscow. The next table over had two drunk and distracted businessmen, and everyone else was too far away to hear, but it seemed prudent not to roll eyes at a paranoid, armed vampire.

This was going to be a long dinner.

“My sponsor hasn’t told me much except to tithe and keep my head down. He said I shouldn’t talk to any other Guild members. Actually, the word he used was ‘pester.’ Am I pestering you?”

Fain granted me a tiny smile. “Far from it. You intrigue me.”

“Are you sure you’re a vampire? You haven’t even given me that condescending look yet. Oh, nevermind, there it is. My theory is that you are lowering yourself to speak to me because you think that I’m the Guild Leader’s pet, and you want to get on Holzhausen’s good side. Hate to tell you this, but the Guild Leader doesn’t have that much use for me either. He just doesn’t want me working for his enemies, because of my little ability.”

“You are a terribly cynical woman. And I happen to know it’s not true. Holzhausen is interested in you. He knows things sometimes. He has suspicions about you.”

Suspicions. Oh, great.

Fain steepled his fingers together, and gave a patient smile. The waiter approached, opened a bottle of wine and poured it for us. Fain didn’t speak while the waiter was at our table. When the silence became too uncomfortable, I cleared my throat and tried to think of a non-offensive question. None came to mind. At least there was bread to pick at.

Fain spoke again after the waiter left. “I read Fenwick’s charts at the hospital.”

“How could you do that?”

“You might recall that I work there. On the night shift, of course. Anyway, all the tests came out negative, and yet he is not himself. Very strange. Do you have any idea what’s wrong with him?”

“I know what’s wrong with him.” I was still a beer person, but this was incredible wine; it was like sunlight poured into a glass.

“Oh, do you? I have my own theories, but I’d like to hear yours first.”

“I don’t know how open minded you are.” What did wine like this cost? You could practically taste the grapes, and feel your toes in the vineyard soil. Twice in a row now Fain had given me extra-classy booze. Fenwick had used expensive red wine to seduce me. Was Fain trying to get into my pants? Fat chance, buddy.

“Melbourne, I have asked to hear your opinion.”

Yeah, like he was really going to believe the curse theory. Or maybe he would? He was over a century old, he must have seen some things he couldn’t explain. Maybe he’d believe in mage-craft too. “A man in Fenwick’s apartment building cast a spell on him to drain his energy.”

Fain sat totally still and stared, holding the wineglass motionless above the table.

After a very long uncomfortable moment passed, I cleared my throat. “The mage needs the energy to help his daughter, who’s been cursed.”

“Go on.” He took a sip of the ruby-colored wine and swallowed it, somehow making even that simple act look creepy.

“If I free his daughter from the curse, he can let Fenwick’s energy go.”

He didn’t actually spit the wine out, but he did set the goblet down hard enough to break the stem, his eyes widening slightly.

“Fain, you’re scaring me.”

“You have kept secrets from us all, Melbourne.” He fell silent again as the waiter approached. The waiter took Fain’s broken wine glass without comment and delivered our food; marinated raw meat for Fain, and for me, some kind of sausage casserole. I was starving, but didn’t touch the food right away.

I shrugged. “I know it sounds crazy. It sounds crazy to me too, but it’s the best theory I have.”

He shook his head, slicing the raw meat. “Holzhausen said you would surprise me.”

“Oh. I uh, hope that’s a good thing.” Was it Holzhausen who sent Fain, instead of Palmer? Useless to try to understand vampire politics. I didn’t even understand human politics.

He pointed a stainless-steel fork at my entrée. “The cassoulet is the house specialty. Try it, I think you’ll like it.”

We ate in silence. Excellent food, excellent wine, place settings worth more than what I spent on rent in a month. It was a cultural experience eating in a place where the salad came later than the entree and no one

offered you free soda refills. Good food though, almost good enough to make up for the fact that a creepy vampire was staring at me. I'd have to remember to come here again. Heh. If I ever won the lottery.

"What do you plan to do to the mage who attacked Fenwick? You need someone to lean on him?" he asked flatly, like it was a simple offer, no big deal. Kind of flattering, that he would be willing to do that for me, and kind of unnerving, that he would be willing to do that for me.

"Fenwick wouldn't thank me for letting an innocent girl die."

"Do you have another plan?" He speared the last piece of raw meat, half-closing his eyes as he swallowed.

"I have the doll."

"What?"

"The doll Violet was cursed with. I need the name of a hedge mage, someone who knows about curses. I asked the witches I know, but they said I'd need underworld contacts. I don't know who to talk to."

"Leave that to me. I'm always willing to help out a damsel in distress." He took my wrist and kissed it gently.

Was it going to be that easy? My eyes narrowed. It couldn't be that easy. "What's your price?"

"You'll have to agree to go out with me again, get to know me." He kept kissing up my arm, on the underside, where the skin is tender.

"No, seriously." I pulled my arm away. "What's your price?"

He took my hand again and touched it to his lips. "I am serious. You intrigue me, Melbourne. I want you to date me."

Extremely fair, extremely difficult. Then again, what did it matter? Fenwick was gone, I needed him back. It wasn't like Fain was asking me to sleep with him, and he was hardly likely to seduce me. Fain was good looking, but not that good looking. On the other hand, neither was I. What did he really want? "You flatter me."

"That wasn't a yes or a no." Fain gave me a seductive half smile and poured the rest of the wine into my glass. This was the second bottle too. Where had the first one gone?

"Okay, fine. We'll play this game. You want to pretend to date, I can do that. Just remember that I love Fenwick, and I intend to be loyal to him."

"My intentions are purely honorable." Fain slowly licked the rim of his wine glass and then touched the tip of his tongue to one fang. "Now, what would you like for dessert?"

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Chapter Seven

A stack of takeout menus, business cards, and fliers clogged the front door of Fenwick's apartment. Better come by and clean this off more often. Otherwise he might get robbed. He probably had a full mailbox too, though he had never told me where the key was.

Fenwick still sat on the couch watching television. His stubble had become a beard, and his greasy hair touched the tops of his shoulders. I leaned down and kissed him. He had grown so pale, and thinner too.

"Hey, sweetie. How are you doing? Moonrise was early this morning. I've been working ten hours, but I still have some time to kill before class at the dojo." Standing between him and the television distracted him long enough to get a grunt, at least. Greeting enough.

"You have enough food here?" Better check out his supplies. All the ravioli was gone. A case of empty cans sat on the counter. Pulling open the fridge door revealed that it, too, had been emptied, except the mustard. What about the cupboards? Empty. He had eaten the instant oatmeal, the pasta-roni, the disgusting breakfast shakes, and even his entire supply of honey. Ten empty jars of honey. He had chewed on some of them too, like animal. Had he done that while he was a bear, or was this out of desperation?

"I'm going to see if I can get you something else to eat. I'll bring over a case of my ramen, okay?"

Fenwick grunted.

"Or how about some of that wonton soup from the Chinese place? Remember when I got the flu this summer, and you brought that over to me?"

Tears pricked my eyes with the memory. He had spoon-fed me the whole quart, and afterwards he had massaged my aching back and read me bedtime stories. I laughed when he suggested fairy tales, but he was serious.

"You're my girl," he said. "I want to take care of you. Now what do you want, 'The Goose Girl,' or 'Ivan and the Firebird'?"

"I want you to leave," I had protested, around coughs and wheezes. "You don't want to get sick."

He claimed he had the flu shot, but a week later, the same bug laid him up. “It was worth it,” he said, as he lay coughing and sniffing in his own bed, while I spoon-fed him won ton soup. “I’d do anything for you,” he’d told me.

“I’d do anything for you too, Fenwick,” I whispered, stepping over his meter-long legs to kiss him on the brow. He didn’t respond, but lifted a can of beer to his lips, cheap domestic beer, left over from a party. He hated that stuff too.

Someone knocked at the door. James again?

“Just a minute!” I opened the door without thinking. Stupid me. Standing on the porch was the last woman I ever wanted or expected to see.

Mom was in her late forties, thick hipped, with gray-brown hair and hazel eyes. Every ounce of grief and hardship in her life had been etched into her face, adding ten years to her expression. Still, she looked much younger than she had all those years ago, when I said goodbye for what I thought might be the last time.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Surprise! I made James promise not to tell you I was coming in for the holidays.”

“Mom?” Had it been five years, or six? No call, no letter, nothing. Was this really her? And why was she here?

My mother came in and held me. She hadn’t become a vampire since we last met, because she came in uninvited. Not to say that I wouldn’t have invited her in. Probably. She held me at arm’s length and looked me up and down for a minute as if to say, “My how you’ve grown!” or something equally stupid.

“It’s really you, Mom?”

“I’m so glad to see you again, Kit. You look good. I wish you’d let your hair grow out more though. You looked so pretty with long hair.” She pushed up my bangs and saw the bindi pasted between my brows. “What’s this?”

“Uncle Fred gave it to me.” It was her. It was really her. Six years of nothing, and she came waltzing into my life as if we saw each other last week.

“He didn’t leave me a thing in his will, you know.” She pushed past me into the apartment. “I assumed Fred’s property up in Maine was kept in the family. I can’t believe James sold the house without even telling me.”

“Uncle Fred gave it to him. It was his to do with as he chose.” It was a perfect opening, an offering really. Here, Mom, let’s fight about how your own brother shunned you in favor of your children.

Mom chose another target. “James said you don’t have a phone. He said you might be here after work, and suggested I drop by. How can you not have a phone?”

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Just coffee,” my mother replied, primly.

Fenwick hadn’t eaten the coffee, at least, though finding a clean cup proved to be a chore. Mom talked of the trip here. She had had enough money to take an airplane instead of driving an ancient gutted van like me, but she still managed to make her journey sound like the Odyssey. I suspected how much effort it cost her to leave, and didn’t begrudge her the comparison.

“What do you do for a living these days?”

“I make trees. This time of year I do some silk floral arrangements too, but my specialty is trees.” I spooned instant coffee into the cups and added hot tap water. Fenwick had fresh ground beans in the freezer, and a coffee maker, but that was too much work.

“You make a living off that?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I work at James’ café to make ends meet.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very stable career.” Mom frowned at the coffee and sniffed it.

“I’m only twenty-three. You can hardly expect me to be running a Fortune 500 company by now.”

“I figured you’d have a real job.” She held the cup but didn’t drink. She must have been staying with James for several days if she were already enough of a coffee snob to turn down a free drink.

“It is a real job.” My tone warned her to stop. “What are you doing these days?”

“I’m an accountant,” she replied.

“That wasn’t really what I meant, you know.”

Mom brushed her hair behind her ear and sipped her coffee. Her face was unbruised, unhurt except for the scar below her eye where she had “slipped on the ice,” back when she was still married to Dad. She had a white scar on her wrist from a compound fracture my step-dad Dave had given her with a baseball bat. The emotional scars were harder to see.

“Dave and I got divorced,” she said, in a “didn’t want to talk about it right now” tone. That was fine with me.

“How long are you going to be here?” Not that I cared, but maybe if she were talking, Mom wouldn’t notice Fenwick sitting there staring at the boob tube. More football. Why couldn’t he at least watch old movies or something?

“James offered to let me stay with him at least until after Christmas. We can spend the holidays together as a family.”

Her eyes flicked towards the couch, then back at me. “But hey, I have an idea. We should go catch up. Let’s do lunch, okay?”

It was a ruse. Mom started disapproving noises as soon as we were politely out of earshot. Was that your boyfriend? What a useless couch potato. How could you stand to be with someone who was so rude to you? Drinking already at noon? That’s a bad sign, and she should know. I tried not to listen to her.

“He wasn’t always like this.” Poor Fenwick. I glanced back up at his apartment as we walked to the parking lot.

“He used to be so charming, I’m sure. Your dad was like that too, before we married. At least you found out how he really is before you got pregnant. You still have time to leave.”

“I’m going to stay with him.”

“You’re wasting your time. Dump him and find someone worthwhile.”

“You don’t know the whole story.” We got in her car and she drove away from the apartment in painful, angry silence. Now was the time to tell her about the curse, about the voodoo magic. I could vindicate Fenwick. It wasn’t his fault.

Mom drove with her lips pursed. “It’s so hard for me to see you make the same mistakes I made.”

“His energy has been drained. A voodoo sorcerer took it. That’s why he acts this way.”

“Oh Kit, you and your wild stories! If you won’t listen to me that’s fine, but you don’t need to lie to me. And if you are going to lie to me, don’t insult me, at the very least. I got enough of that stupid New Age crap from my brother.”

“I don’t need to defend him to you. You’ll see what you want to see.” She wasn’t the only stubborn one.

We hadn't agreed on a place to eat, so Mom circled around, pretending to look for a restaurant, but really waiting for who would capitulate first. She did. Just like old times. "At least tell me you're not pregnant."

"I'm not."

A sigh of relief. A point won. Maybe it wasn't too late to save me from my own stupidity. Maybe my fate wasn't sealed by genetics, a family tradition of choosing bad men. I knew what she thought, knew how wrong it was, but would never be able to convince her.

"Promise me you won't marry him."

"I won't promise that. I love him."

"Oh, Kit," she almost wailed.

"He's a good man. He's just, he's going through a bad patch. I'll get him back, and then everything will be great again."

"You can't change people."

"If you won't believe me, then just forget it."

"But—"

"Forget it!" I shouted. Just like old times, bickering about men. My man, this time.

"I'm sorry. I really wanted to make things up with you. It's been a long time. I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

"I know."

But she had won her point. The angry moment passed. I directed her to the restaurant Elaina worked at, since I didn't know of any others. It was a chain restaurant, full of coffee-lingering retirees and chicken-fried-steak breakfast specials. Neutral ground. We passed into a less tense silence while the waitress helped us choose which greasy sandwich and fries to eat. There still wasn't anything to talk about, except for James, but we tried, like a couple on a first date who have already learned that there won't be a second. Just a couple of strangers, with nothing in common, trying their darndest to be civil, and mostly succeeding.

We finished eating and left, sighing in relief that the mother-daughter bonding ordeal had almost ended. She actually smiled at me on the way to the car. It might have been fine if we hadn't run into Elaina in the parking lot.

"Kit! Hey! I wanted to talk to you! I've got great news!" Elaina ran towards us, braid flying out behind her. She was wearing a long blue coat, and a dark blue hat, both of which were dusted by the swiftly falling

snowflakes. I gave her a tense smile and hastily introduced my mother, silently sending telepathic “ixnay on the agicmay” thoughts. Maybe she’d get the psychic message that this was a non-openminded member of the family.

Elaina didn’t get the message. (What can I say? I’m as psychic as a phone book.) She pointed to the bare trees around the parking lot, where dark birds huddled against the cold. Elaina whistled. “My familiar showed up! Hey! Aleister!”

Kaa flew down, landing directly on my shoulder. He sidestepped closer to my head and ruffled his feathers.

“Hi, Kaa, nice of you to join us.” Yeah, so it would have been more politic to pretend to be baffled about all this, but if some women can choose their cats over their men, I could choose a loveable crow over my Mom. After all, Kaa had been there for me.

“What’s that?” Mom asked, pretending she didn’t understand. She wasn’t fooling me.

“Elaina’s familiar. She’s a witch.” I offered my wrist, hoping to give Kaa back to Elaina, but the crow wasn’t budging. “I figured you had already met him, Elaina. He says his name is Kaa.”

Elaina held her wrist to the crow. “What did you call him?”

“I asked him what his name was, and he said ‘Kaa’.” I patted my chest, then dug around in the jacket pocket. There were two utility knives in there, the one I always carried and the silvered one from Ms. Yseult’s collection. Underneath that were some scraps of dog biscuit. I got out a piece and tossed it to Kaa. Kaa grabbed it in his beak and swallowed it.

“That’s all crows can say.” Elaina finally wrapped her fingers around his legs to take him off my shoulder. Kaa made a rasping noise, but obligingly perched on her wrist. “His name is Aleister. Like Aleister Crowley.”

“Sure. He’s your familiar. You get to name him. Kaa, do you want another one?” I asked Elaina’s familiar, holding up the second half of the biscuit. Kaa nodded.

“His name is Aleister.”

“Right. Aleister.” I tossed Kaa his treat, then waved as they walked into the restaurant. “See you later.”

“Kaa!” The crow peered over his shoulder at me, as Elaina carried him away.

It was going to be a long ride back to where I'd parked my van.

"You're one too?" Mom folded her arms and frowned as she stomped through the snow to her parking spot. Her face muscles fell into their accustomed posts of disappointment. "I'm not surprised. Apparently, it runs in the family."

"A what?"

"A Pagan. A witch. It was bad enough that Fred had to steal James from me, but you too?" Her rental car was a small Japanese sedan and the doors didn't slam very well, though she tried.

"I'm not a witch." Or maybe it would be better to lie? "The familiar is my roommate's."

"So, your roommate's a witch, but you aren't. Right, Kit. Is this like the time where you pretended that all those condoms I found in your room really belonged to your best friend?"

Six years we hadn't seen each other. Maybe six years hadn't been long enough. "Let's not rehash old arguments, Mom. I'm not a teenager anymore."

"But you're still acting like one."

"I'm not a witch!" And I didn't point out that Elaina and Ulrich had been teaching me mage-craft. She wouldn't understand that you didn't have to be Pagan to cast spells.

"When was the last time you went to church?"

"Easter." And it wasn't Mass, it was a Lutheran ceremony with Fenwick's family, but she didn't need to know that either.

"You think I'm stupid, don't you? Fred converted you, and now you're a devil worshipper just like your brother." She drove the wrong way towards Fenwick's house without asking me for directions. Asking for help had never come easy to her.

"And if I were? At least James and Uncle Fred cared about me. Where have you been these past few years? Drinking your life away? Letting that scum beat you every night?"

"You think I'm a bad mother, don't you?"

"Damn right I do! Where the hell do you get off not calling for six years and then showing up and trying to tell me how to run my life?"

"You were the one who left!"

"Only because I didn't want that asshole you married to put me in the hospital too!"

She glared at me, then flinched. “Maybe you’re right. I’m a bad mother.”

I’d gone too far. This was the game we played. “You’re not a bad mother. I’m sorry I said that.”

Not enough of an olive branch. Mom frowned at the snowy road as she drove, silently demanding more of an apology.

“I’m not a witch.” Where were we? It looked like we were driving through the inside of a snowglobe, the flakes were falling so fast. Traffic had slowed to a crawl.

“That’s one of the first things we need to change about our relationship. We need to stop lying to one another.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Birch and Broadway. Eight blocks from Fenwick’s apartment, and me in a thin denim jacket. Freeze to death, or have a fifteen-minute conversation with Mom? Tough choice. “You know what, Mom? I think I’ll get out here and walk the rest of the way. I need the exercise.” And a cigarette. I got out, shut the door, and dashed across the street before she could respond.

It was going to be a long December.

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Chapter Eight

Fain had slipped the note under the apartment door while I slept. His note made me apprehensive, but I couldn't tell which paragraph bothered me more.

Melbourne,

I asked around about the doll, and found the name of someone who can disentangle the curse. His name is Twilight McGoverns, and his reputation supports his claims. You'll need to bring the doll so he can look at it. He said he'll meet you at two o'clock today. I'd advise you to go armed, but I suspect you don't have a gun. Please be careful.

I'd like to collect my first payment tonight. I'll meet you at your apartment at eight.

Leo Fain

Twilight McGoverns' place was northeast of Seabingen. I had to leave at noon from Ms. Yseult's house, which meant working a late night, which meant no afternoon sparring classes at the dojo. This better not be a wild goose chase.

The address was so far out of town that I checked the directions several times, certain that I had gone too far. The traffic lights disappeared from the road. Turning off onto the aptly named Private Drive, the stop signs disappeared as well. There are some who enjoy their solitude, alone amongst the trees and the wildlife. Even someone like me, a city girl born and bred, could still see the reasoning behind traveling away from the city to enjoy nature's beauty.

Mr. McGoverns was one of those who brought the ugliness of the city with him when he left. The ramshackle wooden house shed its paint with a shudder. Angry dogs barked, crouching on the packed earth, surrounded by an inadequate, low chain-link fence. The dead cars on blocks in the weedy yard provided their only shelter.

"What do you want?" Twilight McGoverns reigned over this splendor with a shotgun and a surly disposition. He had large jowls and thinning greasy hair, and his worn flannel shirt and grubby corduroy pants looked like they had served some time at the Salvation Army.

"I'm here on business, Mr. McGoverns." I wished I had brought a gun of my own, or better yet, Fenwick.

“Stay there,” he warned.

He didn’t have to ask me to stay behind the fence. The mutts were barking fiercely, hungry for blood. I hadn’t even tried to charm them. McGoverns came to the gate and opened it, silencing the guard dogs with a harsh word and a threatened kick. A dozen or so amulets dangled from his neck. Some of them were small pouches, some were teeth or bone or stone, and one was a chicken’s leg, tied about with ribbons in various colors. He beckoned me to follow him.

McGoverns seemed amused by my fear. “Don’t worry ‘bout them none. They won’t bite you. Come up to the house where we can talk out of the cold.”

My anger at his amusement gave me the courage to stride forward past the dogs. They watched me with feral eyes as I stepped onto the wooden porch. I ducked under wind chimes that appeared to be made of bones, and through a screen door that couldn’t even keep moths out anymore.

In the kitchen, McGoverns poured two glasses of milk and handed me one. “What do you want?”

Better get right down to it. “I have a doll that was used to curse a little girl. I heard you might be able to remove the curse.”

He drank, giving me time to admire his Formica and linoleum surroundings. The walls were pale pink, and the cabinets were a dark almost-green that indicated more than one person had a hand with the decorating over the years. A small kitten curled up on top of a waist-high stack of newspapers near the window, soaking up what little sun there was on that cold winter afternoon. Drying herbs hung from the rafters, and labeled canisters lined the wooden bookshelves which dominated the small kitchen and dining area. The dogs outside peered at me through the window. They looked towards the house for a few moments, and then went back to their lairs.

“This little girl, is she your sister or something?”

“No. It’s a long story. Do you really need to know?”

“Reckon I don’t.” He pointed at the glass. “You should drink that milk. I don’t want people in my house who aren’t guests. You might be one of the Goodly Folk in disguise. I can’t be too careful these days.”

I sipped the milk cautiously.

“It’s not poisoned. That’s why I drank some of it myself. People need a little trust with one another.”

I looked him in the eye and drank the rest in one go.

“Good. Now you’re my guest. Let me see that doll.” I set the box on the table. He reached in and took it despite my gasp of warning. “Relax. I know what I’m doing. Ain’t a curse yet that could catch ahold of Old Twi. Hmmm. This one now. This is a bad one. The woman who did it is dead?”

“Yes.” How did he know?

“I know because it’s got a woman’s touch, and because if she weren’t dead, you wouldn’t be here.” He barked a laugh. “No, I don’t read minds. You tell everything on your face. That’s a trait you’ll have to lose if you want to get much older.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I could do without his patronizing tone. “Can you undo the curse?”

Old Twi nodded. “It will be difficult, but yep, I can do it if I can get the right ingredients. The question is, can you meet my price?”

“I don’t have a lot of money, but I’ll get some in February.”

Old Twi shook his head. “I ain’t talking about money. What do you have that you can trade?” He regarded me closely, in a way that was thankfully devoid of lechery.

“I have pure stubborn determination,” I finally answered, clenching my jaw in emphasis.

Old Twi chuckled. “Yup. You do, don’t you? You’ll need that and more. There are a few things I want; things I can’t get, for one reason or another. I’ll trade these for the cure.”

“What do you need?”

Old Twi got an empty envelope and a capless ballpoint and tossed them on the table in front of me. “Write these down. First of all, I want an acorn from a dryad’s oak. It has to be willingly given. Stolen items won’t do me much good. There are plenty of dryads still in town, but they’re all sleeping this winter, and I need one well before May Day. Second, I need some mistletoe. It has to be gathered during the full moon with a golden sickle. Don’t think of just buying one of those packs they sell with the Christmas trees. I can tell if it was harvested right or not.”

He turned to feed some kindling into a pot-bellied stove. It belched smoke into the room until he closed the iron door. “Those two ain’t hard. I might be able to get them myself, ‘cept that I’m not up for waitin’, and I’m getting a bit old to be climbing trees. The last two items I need are gonna be tricky. They ain’t the kind of things you’ll find in a corner market. Since

you're dumb enough to ask Guild members for favors, I reckon you won't care about how dangerous it is."

He regarded me with one eye, petting the kitten near the window. No wonder he made this appointment for the middle of the afternoon. He didn't want to take a chance that Fain might come along as well.

"I want the knuckle of a *gneynee anatam*." (Yes, he had to spell it out for me.) And I want some elecampane. You know the herb? They call it elfswort too."

"Elf's wort? I've heard of that."

He shook his head. "The regular stuff won't do me. I need it gathered from the Realm."

"From where?"

"The Realm. The Realm of the Faerie."

"What? Is that a real place?"

"Yep." He picked up the kitten by the scruff of its neck and dumped it on the floor.

"So, I'm supposed to waltz over to fairyland and gather some weeds?"

"I didn't say it'd be easy."

I folded my arms and leaned back in the chair. "Look, if you can't do it, why don't you just say so? You don't have to jerk me around by sending me on a wild goose chase."

Old Twi drank the rest of his milk, then set the glass on the ground for the kitten. "Like I said, people gotta have a little trust with each other."

Trust, yeah, but Realm of the Faerie? Even Ulrich had never mentioned such a place. Was Old Twi smoking something funny, or was he for real? It would be so much easier if Fenwick were just depressed, if there was no magic, no sorcerer, no dying girl. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Fain had said this guy could disentangle the curse. Trust him? What other choice did I have? "If I get these things for you, you'll remove the curse?"

Old Twi nodded. "And don't try no pity tack either. I feel pretty bad about any little girl who gets a curse like this, but Old Twi has to live too, and anyways, I need these things, the elfwort 'specially."

"And if I can't get the items?"

He regarded me with one eye, like Kaa did sometimes. "Maybe you're not so stupid as you look." Then he shook his head. "Nothin' will happen to you if you don't. I just can't remove the curse, that's all."

“You’ll seal the deal with a handshake?” I didn’t want to spit, or drink blood or sign my name or anything.

“Where I came from, that’s all you ever needed.” He extended his calloused hand and I took it into my own.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. McGoverns.”

“Likewise, Miss Edgerson.”

“I was wondering if you’d recognize my bindi. My name isn’t Edgerson though, it’s Melbourne. He was my uncle, not my father.”

“He was a helluva witch.” Old Twi pressed his lips together and nodded. “If he were still around, he coulda’ helped you with this plenty.”

I nodded. Not for the first or the last time, I wished Uncle Fred were still alive.

Fain arrived at my door wearing a merlot colored turtleneck and charming smile. “Melbourne. So glad to see you. May I come in?” He took my wrists and kissed them, in a twist on the traditional gallantry.

“Of course. I invite you in.”

He picked up a bag he had brought and walked down the stairs. “Make yourself comfortable while I’m in the kitchen.”

I blinked in astonishment. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to cook for you.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to fatten you up so I can eat you later! Mwaa hah ha ha!” He leered and laughed evilly. Then he got out some rice and measured it, pouring it into a pan with water.

“Very funny.” I walked over to watch him and Kaa jumped up on my shoulder to make his own assessment. Kaa peered at Fain with one black eye and cawed as though not quite sure he approved.

“Is that your pet?”

“My roomie’s. She says his name is Aleister.” Kaa half closed his eyes in pleasure while I scratched his head gently with my nails. I found a dog biscuit in my pocket to give him, experimentally taking a bite of one myself. Not too bad, actually. “Fain, why are you here? You’re not serious about wanting to get to know me, are you?”

“Did you know you look like my sister? I had a younger sister. She died many years ago. I thought of her when I first met you.” Fain cut the vegetables with the blinding speed of a professional chef, handling the knife as well as I had seen him handle a gun. “She was a great girl. You would have liked her.”

Kaa hopped down on the counter and stole a piece of spring onion. He flapped back to my shoulder and played with it, then dropped it on the floor, evidently finding it inedible.

“Her name was Elizabeth, but everyone called her Bess. She loved to ride horses. Her favorite was a horse she called Gunsmoke. That horse broke more of her bones.” Fain shook his head, a look of pure nostalgia on his face. “That creature was a menace. We always thought that horse would be the death of her.”

“You’re not answering my question. You keep doing me these favors, and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

“I don’t have a lot of family here. I know we’re not first or second or even third cousins, and I have no descendants, but still, we look similar enough that it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that we’re related, even distantly. That’s a comfort to me sometimes, to be around people who look like they came from my hometown.”

“Why won’t you answer my question?”

“I’m getting around to it, in my own time.” Fain opened a package of bloody beef and trimmed off a scrap of fat, tossing it to Kaa, who caught it deftly. “When I ran across your name on the invitees list, I decided to flirt with you, figuring that it would be a good excuse to find out who you were courting.”

“Courting?”

“Looking for a sire.” He licked a line of beef blood off his finger. “Everyone expected you to have courted someone long before. After all, it has been half a year since you joined the Guild. Most initiates don’t have so much patience. You’re not like a typical initiate, black clad and infatuated with vampirism. I was intrigued.”

“I’m not an initiate at all,” I reminded him.

Fain searched the cabinets, and under the sink he found a large wide pan. Elaina’s wok. Neither of us had ever used it. Fain poured some oil in and set it on the burner as if he did this sort of thing every day. “It’s nice to

have normal human friends, not just hosts, mind you, but people you can visit with. People who see the sun every day.”

Kaa begged for another scrap, and Fain obliged him with a second piece of raw beef.

“So, this is just about making friends? This isn’t about getting blood or seducing me?”

“I admit I got my hopes up when you went to the soirée alone.” He tossed the sliced meat in the wok and it began to sizzle.

“Women like me get suspicious when people claim to be attracted to them.”

“I thought modesty was no longer fashionable.” Fain inspected the edge of the knife, as if wishing he had brought a sharpening stone. “You underestimate your beauty. And I’m not the only one who’s noticed your charms. Fenwick loves you, or so you say.”

“Fenwick knows me.”

“Well, I’d like to know you too.” He rummaged in the bag. “I almost forgot, I brought you a present.”

“No. I won’t accept any presents from you.”

He held out a small plastic bottle.

“Multi-vitamins?”

Fain placed the plastic bottle in my hand and closed my fingers around it. “It will help cover your dietary deficiencies. I’m a nurse, remember?”

“No wonder you can use the term ‘dietary deficiencies’ in a normal conversation without sounding strange.” I laughed. “Thanks Fain. I’ll take them.”

“Now that you’ve gotten that off your mind, tell me about your meeting today.”

“Old Twi agreed to cure Violet.”

“Just like that?” He took bottles of mysterious vinegar-colored liquids out of the bag and poured them into the wok.

“He has his price, just like everyone else.”

“Money?” Fain stirred the meat and vegetables with chopsticks. We had chopsticks here?

“Strangely, no. Which is good, because I’m broke. He wants some spell components, things he can’t get for himself.” I showed him the list I had written and he set the chopsticks down and wiped his hands before taking it from me.

“What’s a *gneynee anam*?”

“I was hoping you would know.”

He handed the list back and stirred the food again. “Is he serious that you’re supposed to go to the Realm of the Faerie? How do you know it even exists?”

“I don’t, but Old Twi seemed to think it did. If it exists, I’ll find it. Fenwick needs my help, and I won’t leave friends in the lurch.”

“And you wonder why I like you?” Fain grinned.

I blushed.

“I know blushing is no longer fashionable, but I like it just the same.”

“Stop it. I’m just fair skinned. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Wouldn’t want to do that now, would I?” The rice and his stir fry were done, and he scooped the food into dishes for both of us, brushing against me more than necessary. I let it go.

Fain’s cooking was excellent. I ate quickly, having underestimated how hungry I was. “See, this is what makes me nervous about you. How many people know the lengths I’ll go to for free food?”

“I didn’t. I just don’t like to eat alone.”

“Until recently, I didn’t think you guys had to eat at all.”

“There aren’t enough calories in blood to sustain a person. We need food and drink too.” He used the chopsticks to eat with. Me, I just stuck with a fork.

“And that’s why you cook so well.”

Fain smiled at the compliment.

I gave Kaa some scraps from my plate. Elaina didn’t like it when Kaa sat at the table next to me, but when she wasn’t around, I spoiled him rotten. Kaa liked the food too, and ate so much I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to fly.

“So, how did your sister die? Did she break her neck falling from Gunsmoke?”

Fain’s voice grew soft. “No, she got cholera. We had to put Gunsmoke down when she died. No one else could ride that nasty beast.”

“I’m sorry.”

He cleared his throat. “It was a long time ago. The pain is mostly gone.”

There wasn’t much to say to that, so I gathered the plates. Fain helped, standing close enough that our arms brushed. It was too close, too personal. It reminded me of Thanksgiving dinner at Fenwick’s parents’ house.

Thanksgiving was the last time we were together before the voodoo sorcerer got him. Fenwick had been washing his parents' china in the kitchen, handing me each wet dish to dry and stack next to the growing pile of plates to my right. The huge feast his mother had prepared sat like hugs in our bellies. I tried to remember him as he was that day, happy, with sudsy hands and honey-colored hair still bleached pale from the Indian summer. His hands, as large as dessert plates, were still ruddy from the hike we took the previous weekend. Funny, the little details you remember when someone you love is gone.

He had teased me about something, and held the towel above my head. At the time I didn't know what was going to happen or how much I'd miss him, so instead of telling him I loved him, that I'd do anything for him, that I'd never ever abandon him, I said something inane and splashed him with water.

"You miss him." Fain spoke quietly, handing me the damp dish towel. "I know it hurts."

"How would you know?" I wanted to snap. But he would know. He was over a hundred years old. He had probably seen death piled upon death, tragedy upon tragedy. And Fenwick wasn't dead. There was still hope.

"He's my best friend. He's been everything for me. I feel lost without him." I clenched the dishtowel, willing myself to turn grief into anger, into resolve. "Help me get him back, Fain."

"I'll help you get him back, Melbourne." Fain pulled me into a hug, patting my back so gently it almost brought out the tears bottled up inside. "Guild members care for their own."

And that was the perfect thing to say.

Kaa cawed a warning as the door knob rattled and Elaina appeared, followed closely by Dael. She raised an eyebrow at Fain. Somehow (she had never told me how) she had learned to spot vampires. She was generally accepting of otherfolk, having been raised in a Pagan household, but she had lived in Seabingen long enough to hear the Guild's reputation. Elaina gave me a look that said she didn't approve. "Kit, let go of my bird."

"I'm not holding him," I pointed out. Kaa huddled closer to my neck.

She crooked her finger at her familiar. "Aleister, come here."

Kaa and I looked at each other. Kaa dipped his head once, and flew to Elaina's wrist.

“Glad to see you have more clothes on this time,” Dael said to me, in keeping with the petty animosity. He wore tight pants and a vinyl jacket, both in pale lavender. Whatever look he was going for, he wasn’t quite making it.

“Are you going to be here long?” Elaina flicked her eyes to Dael’s tight pants, then back up to me, wagging her eyebrows as if I didn’t get the message that she wanted privacy to make out with elf-boy.

“Yeah, I’ve got some research to do.” I studiously ignored the eyebrow waggle. “I figured I’d read in your room for a few hours, then go to sleep.”

“Maybe you could do it later?” Elaina upped the “get out because I’m looking to score” vibes, this time actually tilting her head forward.

“No, tonight’s good. Why, what are you guys going to do?” I blinked and smiled, as though oblivious, trying my hardest not to laugh at her irritation. She looked like she was about to kill me. “Unless maybe you can answer my question? Do you know what this is?”

I got out the piece of paper and brought it closer to her, pointing to *gneynee anatam*. Elaina took it from my hand.

I addressed her boyfriend. “Or maybe you’d know, Dael? It sounds like your kind of thing.”

“What should I know about this?” He glared at me, then at Elaina, who was still frowning at the paper. Dael wavered between glaring at me and reading over her shoulder, and curiosity won.

Kaa took the opportunity to fly back to my wrist.

“What is this for?” Dael demanded. “What dark magics are you dealing with?”

“Dark magics?” I asked, scratching Kaa’s head gently. Fain was standing close enough to me that his breath tickled the hairs on my head, but he had the sense to keep quiet. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, Dael, what are you talking about? She hardly knows anything about mage-craft. Hang on, Kit, I think I know a website with a glossary. I’ll check.” Elaina kept the paper to her nose, and began to wander back to her room.

“Come on, Dael. You know, don’t you? Just tell me what it means and I’ll be out of your hair the rest of the night.”

Dael had a horrified look on his face, as if he just found out I molested children in my spare time. “A *gneynee* means ‘lady fair’ in the common

tongue of the Realm.”

“I don’t get it,” I told him. “What do you mean by, ‘lady fair’? I need more to go on.”

“A faerie woman.”

Elaina came back from the other room, her nose in a notebook. “I found out one of the words, Kit. I’m not sure if this is the right language or not, but one of my teachers was teaching us to speak the Realm common tongue, and she said that, where was it...‘*anatam*’ means ‘knuckle.’” She looked up, pointing her finger on the word. “Does that make any sense to you?”

Fain and I looked at each other. I certainly didn’t want to kill anyone to get her knuckle.

God knows what Fain was thinking.

“Why do you want to know?” She tsked disapproval at Kaa, who huddled close to my neck again.

“It came up in a book I read. Thanks for answering my question.” I waved goodbye and took Fain’s elbow. “See you later. We’re going to go shoot some pool.”

Fain grinned and winked at me. We had discussed no such thing.

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Chapter Nine

The job at Ms. Yseult's house progressed slowly, despite my inhuman work schedule. Technically, she now had me working a mere forty-nine hours a week, but in reality, I was spending almost all my free time there. I still went to the dojo, and I still went home to sleep, but working long hours gave me an excuse to not visit Fenwick.

I couldn't bear to see him like that.

I'd gone over only once that week, looking for photos on his computer from a camping trip we'd taken the previous summer. The walls in Ms. Yseult's house had fading wallpaper, and when I finished stripping it off I thought I'd get a photo of a birch forest blown up to poster size to paste onto the walls. That proved too expensive, and the resolution was wrong, so the backup plan was to project the image on the wall with a laptop and use the photo as a guide to paint it by hand. The trees I installed were in the way, which meant I'd have to take maybe thirty down and put them up again, but I'd put too much effort into this project to cut corners now.

I trudged through the snowy parking lot to my van. Kaa flew down from a nearby tree, landing on my shoulder and nestling his head under my hair.

"What are you doing here? Were you just in the neighborhood and decided to drop by?" It was several miles from our apartment, maybe less, as the crow flies. Maybe he was following me. Maybe the familiar spell made him want to be around people. But why me? Elaina was his mage. Or did Kaa not know who his mage was? Maybe Kaa could be my familiar?

That thought gave me a guilty flush of pleasure, like when your friend's hot boyfriend flirts with you.

Kaa had hunkered down on my shoulder, and we were both rapidly becoming covered with wet flakes of snow. The moon wasn't up yet, but my watch and almanac said it would rise soon. The van door slid open noisily. Kaa flapped down to a nearby Sentra, rattling in the back of his throat.

"You want to come with me? It's okay."

Kaa hopped backwards, and stared at the van with a cocked eye. At my coaxing, he flew to the door edge, flapped back again at the sound of the

van starting, hopped forward curiously when the driver's door opened, and finally allowed himself to be bribed into the van with an empty Zippo, a stalk of dried rye, and part of a broken bracelet.

"Glad you finally found your courage," I told him, shutting the door.

Kaa happily played with the lighter all the way to Ms. Yseult's house, clutching his other prizes and occasionally glancing back at the treasure trove of potential toys in the cupholders and ashtrays. Maybe it wasn't something mystical. Maybe Kaa was a once-tamed crow who didn't know how to care for himself anymore, not a wild creature made familiar by a spell. If that was so, then it was no wonder he preferred me over Elaina. Elaina never gave him anything to play with.

Usually, Ms. Yseult said nothing, not good evening, not good morning, just closed the door after letting me in and vanished up the stairs to the second floor. She didn't seem as mystical as she did when I first met her. I'd been certain she wasn't normal, wasn't human, maybe, but now I wasn't so sure. She was rich, and everyone knows that rich people are weird. Either way, she was a hard-nosed boss who had to be appeased in order for me to get paid, so I inwardly cursed my stupidity when she paused at the foot of the stairs and stared at Kaa.

"Uh, ma'am? Do you mind if the bird keeps me company? He's housebroken."

But she wasn't looking at Kaa, she was looking at me. "Treemaker, you have not yet dreamed this forest."

"Ma'am?"

"You must dream this forest. Imbolc draws near." And with that, she turned and walked up the stairs.

I set the laptop down and searched around for the extension cord, waiting half a minute for Ms. Yseult to leave hearing range before beginning my rant. "I'm getting pretty sick of this. Fifty hours a week for two months, and she's playing games about dreaming the forest. What the hell does she mean?"

Dream the forest. Sounded like a bunch of crap. Did I have "gullible" written on my forehead? I'd gone most of my life without anything supernatural touching me, and now apparently, I'd been marked as a

member of the club. Yeah, so vampires were real. Lycanthropy was real. Some of my brother's spells actually worked. Did that mean I had to swallow every patchouli-scented theory thrown my way?

"Kaa?" Kaa found the drifts of sawdust fascinating, and began to roll in them.

"Yeah, it could be worse. She could change her mind every week. Some clients have done that. She could hire me to do the job, and then not pay me. Some clients did that too. Maybe James was right. Get a day job, and then just do this for fun. Trying to make a living as an artist sucks."

The birch poles were all in place, and half of them had branches. I had left a three-foot-wide corridor around the edge of the lower floor, in order to get a stepladder in to wallpaper it, but since that plan wouldn't work, it might mean taking down some of the trunks and putting them back up again.

"What a nuisance. I'm going to have to clear at least three feet, maybe more around the perimeter in order to get a clear enough spot to project the image."

Kaa had coated his feathers with sawdust, and was now preening to get them black again. He turned back over his shoulder, as if encouraging me to continue. "Okay, after this job is over, I'm going to quit and take the first exciting, high paying, prestigious job that comes my way."

Yeah, and as long as I was wishing, I might as well wish for some paints, because Ms. Yseult probably wasn't going to let me use the store brand latex from the hardware store.

It took several hours to remove the birch trees that were too close to the wall. After that, I was about ready to call myself done for the day, when suddenly I saw the paint cans behind the corner of the kitchen wall, half hidden by the stack of silver birch logs. Ms. Yseult hadn't come downstairs since letting me in, and no one had come to the door, so where had they come from?

Maybe she really was otherworldly. Maybe my first impression had been right. Or maybe she'd hidden the paints and I just now noticed them. It was like the situation with Fenwick. Was he depressed, tired of the relationship, and just ignoring me, or was he really cursed? But if he wasn't really cursed, then what about Marius and Twi McGovern?

James lived in this world of spells and magic and curses. I wanted to live in the world of delusional New Age-y bosses who liked to play games

on people, of boyfriends who just needed a little space, of vampires who were only metaphorical vampires, of the simpler way everything had been before the jewel I inherited gave me the second sight and ripped away my pleasant ignorance.

The simplest explanation was that Ms. Yseult had anticipated the wallpaper scheme not working, and got the paints in advance. But I only changed my mind that afternoon, so she must have known. I fumbled in my pocket for a screwdriver and pried the cans open. Black. White. Yellow-green. Blue-green. To my second sight, the liquid glowed. She had brushes too, and rollers, both with bristles and nap as white as the snow falling outside. As white as nylon. They must be nylon. Normal nylon brushes and normal acrylic house paint, except why was it glowing if it wasn't magical and what on earth was she?

Push the creepiness down, Kit. You have a job to do. Weird rich human or supernatural being, it didn't matter. Either way, this forest wasn't going to get done unless I got cracking.

I worked for twelve hours that day. Nothing like finding out your boss is psychic to instill a stronger work ethic.

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Chapter Ten

The moon rises about an hour later every day. Given the option, so would I, but I had mistletoe to gather, and work in less than two hours. Kaa tapped on the casement window above my futon, just moments before the alarm beeped me into surliness. My bedroom (slightly smaller than Elaina's but with one extra window) contained a dresser and a milk crate doubling as a night stand. Most of my wardrobe was spread artfully across the floor, separated according to degree of dirtiness. The wall above my bed had my favorite Jackie Chan movie posters and a batik wall hanging, and the back of the bedroom door held my karate gi, hung on a hook, which I usually didn't see because I always left the door open when it was just me and Elaina here.

Kaa (who had grown chubby from dog biscuits) couldn't quite squeeze through the open window. I cranked it open an extra inch. "Kaa, did you shut the door?"

Kaa shook his head, then cocked it to one side with his beak half open.

"Elf-boy, eh?" I scrounged around the piles for a clean pair of jeans and a sweater. "Keep quiet then, because I'm gonna practice being invisible until I know for sure."

"Kaaaa?" That caw sounded exactly like sarcasm. What a great pet.

Elaina's door was open, and her tangled mess of quilt revealed only two arms and two legs, so I gave Kaa the "all clear" and released my invisibility glamour. Dael must have kept early-bird Elaina up late. Fenwick and I used to have nights like that. Months ago. Jealous? Me? Yeah.

My back and arms ached from painting, and my neck was a mess of knots from looking up at the wall. Projecting the image had made it easier, but it still took a long time to get it right. February second was going to be a tight deadline. The winter solstice was next week already, and Elaina's Christmas gift wasn't done either. Not to mention Old Twi's grocery list of magical paraphernalia. Mistletoe gathered at midnight under a full moon. What a load of crap.

I got out a sheet of copper, and my hacksaw, and started scrounging around for the template I swore I made earlier in the week (if I could only

find it.) After making a new template (and then finding the old one) I started sawing away. Kaa sat on my head, playing with a bunch of plastic grapes out of the floral supplies box. While I sawed the copper into a sickle shape, he dropped the occasional grape or sarcastic caw.

After an hour and a half of patient sawing and filing, I came to the realization that a sickle needs a tang for the handle. Kaa laughed at me (there was no other description for that sound).

Fortunately, the craft store was open and had one sheet of copper left. Ten minutes after getting home the hacksaw blade broke. Kaa laughed again, and offered me a stripped plastic grape stem as consolation. Another trip to the craft store and three hacksaw blades later, I finally cut out the right shape.

“There, Kaa, how’s that?” I held up the copper sickle blade. Now to carve a handle to fit around the tang, and bind it with, what, leather? Hot glue wouldn’t hold.

“What are you making?”

I jumped, startled. How long had Elaina been there? She was sitting on the couch, watching television with the sound off.

“A sickle. I’m going to gild it when it’s done.”

“Why are you doing that?” She turned the TV off, and came over to inspect my work. She poked her finger with the tip of the sickle and frowned. “It’s not sharp enough to cut much. Why didn’t you just buy one? They sell them at the gardening store downtown, you know.”

“Yeah, but I need a golden sickle.”

She reached out and grabbed Kaa, who had fallen asleep on my head. He squawked in protest, but didn’t actually peck her. “You could borrow mine.”

“You have a golden sickle? Why do you have a golden sickle?”

She placed Kaa on her shoulder. Kaa, for his part, did not appear to enjoy being a witchy fashion accessory. “For harvesting mistletoe, of course. You know I’m a Pagan. We use mistletoe in our rites. Speaking of which, have you thought about who you’re going to invite to the Yule party?”

“Yule party?”

“It’s this weekend! Did you invite Silvara?” Elaina put her hands on her hips. Kaa tried to sidestep off her shoulder, but Elaina grabbed his feet and put him back there again.

“Yeah, but I don’t know if she’ll be able to come.” Silvara was like the Dalai Lama of the Pagans in town, and having her come to Elaina’s Yule party would be a social coup. “She said she had prior engagements, but that she would try to stop by.”

“I hope so. Who else did you invite?” Elaina brushed at Kaa, who had discovered her dangly earrings and gave them an experimental tug. “Ow! That hurts, Aleister! Stop it!”

“Fain. Are you going to be nice?”

“Yeah, he’s okay. Dael doesn’t like him, but Dael doesn’t like a lot of people.”

“Lots of people don’t like vampires.”

“Lots of people don’t like the Goodly Folk either,” Elaina commented wryly. She meant me of course.

“I have nothing against the Goodly Folk. I’m just wary of them. You’ll remember I treated Dael politely when he came over.” Besides, I invited Ulrich to the Yule party. Elaina was going to kill me when she found out.

“Yes, you were very polite. Dael said you were so nice that he figured you couldn’t see through glamours. You startled him with that question about the knuckle.”

She walked back to the television and started flicking through the channels. Kaa flew off her shoulder, landing on the counter instead of my extended wrist. His ruffled feathers meant he was pissed at us both.

I got the broom and began to sweep up the metal filings. “I’m making you a present, but it won’t be ready by Yule. Do you mind if I give it to you on Christmas instead?”

“Making me a present? Not a fake tree, I hope.”

“No, I’m baking you a fruitcake,” I said.

“Aagh! Even worse!” Elaina laughed. “When do you need the sickle?”

“Tonight.” I offered Kaa a twisted coil of copper, but he declined. Yeah, he was pissed. It was going to take a while to get on his good side again. Shame on me for not protecting him from big bad Elaina.

“What do you need mistletoe for anyway?”

“Just stuff. Why, do you have some?” Kaa wasn’t appeased by a handful of plastic grapes either.

“No.”

“I kinda figured it wouldn’t be easy. How do I find mistletoe?” I offered Kaa a rubber band from my pocket, but he shook his head. I sighed. With a

grudge like this, only one thing would satisfy him.

“It’s not hard to find. You can see it in the trees now that the leaves are gone. You know what it looks like, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve dealt with the silk stuff often enough. I can get some for you too, while I’m up there.”

Kaa perked up when the jangly clump of metal hit the counter. This time I had the foresight to remove my van and apartment keys before giving Kaa the ring. Crows were excellent at hiding things.

“I don’t need any. Oh, my mom’s going to Costco again. You want a couple more cases of ravioli?”

“Yeah.” And if he had eaten through the ramen, Fenwick would be hungry. “Better make it three.”

That night was deathly cold, and the rising moon glinted off the snow with a light as sharp as a silvered knife. Armed with a golden sickle, I walked down the street looking for the oak tree with mistletoe in it.

The branches weren’t as low as memory led me to believe, which meant another trip home again for a rope and a folding chair to stand on. The chair raised me up just high enough to grab the lowest branch. For safety’s sake, it made sense to tie one end of the rope around my waist, and the other around a branch. The branches were slick with ice, but at least there weren’t any ants this time of year.

At first the going was easy. The branches were close enough to grab but far enough apart that they didn’t hamper me, even with my thick clothes. Halfway up, a tug at my waist informed me I had come to the end of my rope. Climb back down and untie it, or keep going? Better keep going. Untying the rope from my waist, I passed the next crotch and tried to ignore the chill creeping through my thin gloves.

The mistletoe looked close to the trunk from the safe vantage point on the sidewalk earlier that afternoon, but within the tree, it seemed halfway to the moon.

The chill penetrated more than just my gloves by the time the mistletoe was within arm’s reach. Unfortunately, my prize was about six feet away from the trunk, and the branch it was on looked too weak to support my weight. Should I just go for it? Better not. I climbed back down and got the

rope, untying it from the lower branch, and retying it higher, with the other end free for my waist. At least then if I fell, I wouldn't fall too far.

Climbing back up to the branch where the mistletoe was, I slung the rope over the crotch just above the infected branch before tying it again. The cold made tying and untying harder now, but the promise of a hot cup of chai and a shower when this was all over kept me going.

Holding the sickle in my numb right hand, I gripped the trunk with my left. Leaning out as far as I could, I still couldn't cut the mistletoe well enough to get it free of the branch without having it fall to the ground, or worse, get caught in a lower branch. Letting go of the trunk with my left hand, I inched out along the branch, balancing like a cat on a wall. This high up in the tree the trunk wasn't much thicker than the branches. I stretched out, wrapping both legs around the branch while cutting the mistletoe carefully with the sickle. Almost there. Got it. The bunch of mistletoe went under my jacket.

As I was re-buttoning my jacket, congratulating my foresight, and preparing for the climb back down, the branch broke. My arms windmilled forward, and the rope slid over the crotch of the trunk until it played out to its end. After an agonizing half second of freefall, my left side crashed into a lower branch with a loud crack. Pain shot up my arm, and then up my waist as the rope pulled tight, knocking the breath out of me and bending me over double. I swung back toward the trunk, and as a final indignity, the oak tree's trunk hit my ribs with a punishing whack.

I only let myself dangle there for a half second before trying to climb back up to another branch. Climbing the rope wasn't possible, since that took two arms, and my left hurt too much. I grabbed the rope with my good right arm and swung my legs up to grab the trunk with my legs. The rope's knot had pulled tight, and took more dexterity to untie than my frozen fingers could manage. The sickle had flown from my hands when the branch broke, so I had to climb up the tree one handed until there was enough slack in the rope to work the knot free. The wind picked up, making the tree sway. My fingers had become blocks of ice within the glove, and most of me was numb except for the fiery ache in my left arm. By the time the knot was undone, my left arm was throbbing with agony. It took a small eternity to climb down the tree, rescue Elaina's golden sickle from where it lay on the pavement, and drive my van to St. Jude's.

After filling out innumerable forms at the emergency room, I sat down between a woman with a sick child and a man with a twisted ankle, hoping that the receptionist's promised "not busy" state meant less than an hour. The bone hadn't broken my skin, but my arm felt as if it were on fire, despite the ice pack.

Two *Times*, one *People*, and half a *Newsweek* later, they shunted me into a small room with a sink, some cabinets, and an even more dated collection of magazines. The ice in the pack was melting, dripping cold water all over my dirty pants. The pain medication they gave me helped, but my arm hurt like hell, and I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was lie down and take a nap on the green vinyl examining table.

There was a knock at the door, and Fain came in, wearing scrubs and an expression of unalloyed curiosity. He looked more amused than sympathetic, for which I felt grateful. "Melbourne? May I be the first of many to ask how this happened?"

"Mistletoe, gathered with a golden sickle, by the light of the full moon." I pulled it out, displaying it like a badge of honor, before pushing it back under my jacket." The branch broke."

He inspected the broken arm with gentle fingers. "And here I was hoping this was just as an excuse to come and see me."

"If it makes you feel better, I did want to see you. I need help in finding that elf-girl knuckle. My first idea didn't pan out." I winced as he tested the range of motion. "Ow. Apparently, they don't sell faerie knuckles on eBay."

"No, I'd imagine not." Fain opened one of the cabinets above the sink, and got a bottle of antiseptic and some cotton pads.

"My backup plan involves a flashlight, a shovel, and someone who knows how to keep his mouth shut. Naturally, I thought of you."

"You want to dig up a grave?" He raised an eyebrow as he began to clean the skin on my arm. Now that he wasn't bending the wrist, it didn't hurt so much. He moved the melting ice pack down my arm, wiping up the condensation with a paper towel. His forearms were muscular, his nails were trimmed, and he had a watch on his left wrist. "You actually want to exhume a corpse and cut off her finger? Forgive me if I don't sound enthusiastic."

"I thought you vampires were all into the macabre."

“No, I care for the living, not the dead. Sorry, but if you want to defile a grave, you’ll have to ask someone else.” He stroked up my arm with the antiseptic-soaked cotton so gently that if I hadn’t been watching, I might not have realized he was still cleaning.

“It’s going to be tough to dig alone, but the other option is taking one from a living faerie, and I’m not willing to do that.” Only a patch of my arm was cleaned. He sure was taking his time with this.

“You do believe in faeries then?”

“Yeah. I’ve met some.” And since Fain had to ask that question, it meant that he didn’t know what Dael was. Over a hundred and fifty years old, and he still hadn’t learned the knack? Made me feel positively precocious.” Do you?”

“I’ve never seen one, but I’ve heard the Guild Leader believes in them, and my sire says she’s met one before.” Fain tossed the cleaning pad in the garbage.” I’m done with your arm, which is a pity, because I’m rather enjoying your company. Let me get the doctor to set it and put a cast on it. I’m sure this is broken, though hospital policy says you have to get an x-ray to be certain.”

“Does that mean no karate for a while?”

“Not a good idea.”

“How about grave robbing? Think the doctor will okay that?”

“Don’t dig anyone up yet, Melbourne. Let me ask around. I have friends in low places.” He leaned forward and kissed me gently. Before I had time to react, he had left the room.

My heart was still racing when the x-ray technician came in.

Chapter Eleven

Nothing I hate more than cleaning my apartment, but Elaina insisted. Lots of people were going to come over tonight, and it wouldn't do to have the place a mess. Not only did I clean the sinks and bathtubs (with a plastic bag over my left arm), but I even cut two boughs of holly to decorate the place. Elaina placed a sprig of my hard-won mistletoe on the ceiling at the foot of the stairs, between the living room and the area I used for my tree-making. By the time Kaa and I left to go to Ms. Yseult's house, the place looked spotless enough even for Elaina's tastes.

Seven hours later, when I got home, the apartment was a hive of bright talk and lively music. One of Elaina's college friends played a violin. She was accompanied by an octogenarian flautist in a lavender dress, and a stout accordion player who looked as though his great-great-grandpappy helped dig the Rheingold out of the earth. A pot of mulled wine simmered on the stove, and by the looks of some of the guests, it was fortified with more than a little something. Instead of turning the lights on, Elaina and I had lit the place with about a hundred tealights, placed on every available surface. It wasn't quite enough to banish the gloom, but just enough to make us know that things could be darker. Kaa perched on my shoulder, shifting his weight from foot to foot in what I had interpreted as nervousness.

"Don't worry, buddy. She'll be distracted. I won't let anyone touch you."

"Melbourne, so good to see you." Fain stepped out of the darkness, in that vampiric way of his, and took my wrist to kiss. Did his lips linger just a little longer over my veins? I felt my heart quicken and hoped no one else noticed my blush. "Late to your own party? We've missed you."

"I got involved in work." Painting trees, feeling myself falling into the image taking shape on the wall, despite my desperate attempts to stay sane.

"Sounds like you need some of the wine. I'll fetch you a cup."

"I'll get it. I live here."

"No, sit. You look tired." He pushed me backward, and I let myself fall onto an empty seat on the couch. He winked. "I know where the kitchen is."

“And a gentleman he is, your friend, for truth you have a fell look about you.” Ulrich had probably been hiding himself in an invisibility glamour, because he appeared suddenly, sitting close enough that we could have shared an airplane armrest. “But what is amiss with your arm?”

“I broke it. Fell from a tree. Looking for mistletoe. Yes, it hurts. Four weeks. You can sign the cast if you want.”

Ulrich’s tattoos were swirling in mirth, spirals of blue on smooth cheeks. He had shaved, that was a good sign. Was he getting over Elaina? Maybe they’d actually be civil to each other? Or maybe he just hadn’t confronted her yet, since she hadn’t seen through his invisibility glamour?

“There you are!” Elaina shouted. I leaned in front of Ulrich to hide him from her view, but she was talking to Kaa.

“Aleister, where have you been?” She reached forward to take him off my shoulder, but this time, the crow was ready for her. Kaa flapped away quickly, heading for my open door. A spray of WD-40 had made the window crank loose enough for a nimble crow to open, so he was probably looking to escape. Great. Kaa couldn’t shut the window from the outside, which meant I’d have to leave it open until he came home. A cold night and a sore neck, just because Elaina had to piss off my familiar.

“Oh, lovely. You’re here. Are you having a good time?” Knives dripped from Elaina’s tongue as she looked past me to her ex-boyfriend.

“It’s a pleasant evening, and I am in good company.” Ulrich replied with less sarcasm than he must have felt. I gave him credit for being civil.

“Glad to hear it.” She stormed off.

“Why did you invite me?” Ulrich asked. He allowed himself a brief glance towards Elaina, and a single regretful sigh. (How about that? He was recovering.) He slumped back down on the couch. “She’ll be cross with you. She has naught but hatred for me.”

“Screw her. I don’t care what she thinks. You’re my friend, and I don’t diss my friends. Speaking of which, is my brother coming?”

“He shan’t come till later, but he promised to bring his lady so we could meet her,” Ulrich said.

“James has a new girlfriend? When did this happen? And why didn’t he tell me?”

“He met her many months ago, but only recently did she consent to date him. She’s fair and kind, and James is quite taken with her. Her name is Maya,” Ulrich said. “In fact, they have arrived.”

James and Maya came in. Ulrich was right about her. She was tall and pretty, with clear skin and wavy black hair. I was about to go over and introduce myself, but Dael came in right afterward, dressed in tight jeans and a long coat with a furred collar. Ulrich gasped as Elaina slipped a hand around Dael's waist.

"Kit, tell me truth, that *quinjosto* Vargel is not her love." He stared at Dael, and his tattoos stopped swirling.

"The tall fair-haired faerie? The one dressed like a pimp? 'Fraid so."

Ulrich leapt off the couch, fists balled at his sides. I jumped after him, but he was moving too fast for me to grasp his sleeve. Ulrich stepped around a TV tray loaded with drinks, giving me time to sidle around in front of him. Dael was introducing himself to James and Maya.

"Don't. Please." I put my hands on Ulrich's chest and pushed him back towards the couch, a few strides further from a nasty confrontation.

Ulrich tried to sidestep me. "She must know of the vileness she has drawn into her bed."

"Let it go." I changed my push to a judo grab, ready to throw him again if it came to that. The mistletoe was overhead.

"He'll use her! She deserves better—"

I had to lean down to reach him, which felt pretty strange since I'd never kissed a guy shorter than me before, but it worked. Having his best friend's little sister give him a lip lock shocked Ulrich into silence.

"Let's go outside." I told Ulrich, when he came up for air. I half dragged him up the stairs. He came along peacefully, which is good because it wouldn't feel right to use one of my painful karate joint locks on a friend. When we were outside, I started into him with a lecture, as I pulled him towards the street. "I know. You still care for her. I know, she's dating a guy clearly beneath her. It hurts, but you are not going to make a scene."

"Do you know what he is?" Ulrich let himself be led across the ditch. He was tipsy, and nearly slipped, but I caught him before he fell into the icy water.

"A *quinjosto* Vargel, apparently." And was that another kind of faerie? Was that why Dael was so much taller than Ulrich?

"He's from the Realm."

"The Realm of the Faerie? It's real then? But you're a faerie too, and you said that you've always been on earth."

“We are not of their kind.” Ulrich looked insulted. “He is a cast off, refuse from the Realm. Those creatures care little for humans, and deserve them not. What knows he of Elaina’s charm? Her grace? Her beauty?”

Charm, grace, beauty? Did he even see her at six a.m. before she had a shower? “She can make her own choice. If he’s a lowlife, she’ll find out soon enough.”

“She has my heart,” Ulrich wailed, in a maudlin tone. How much punch had he had? Didn’t matter. We were at the bus stop, and in ten minutes he would be safely on it.

“I know. Believe me, I’ve tried to put in a good word for you, but she’s a grownup, and she’s free to make her own choices.” I looked at his pained eyes. “I’m sorry I asked you to come. I guess it was too soon. Go home. Get some rest. Thank you for coming, but you don’t need to see them for the rest of the evening.”

On the way back, I realized that Ulrich had left his coat in our apartment, so I ran back to get it. By the time I found his coat, Dael was coming up the stairs, behind Maya, who said something about needing a cigarette. I put my glamour on as I slipped past Dael and Maya, running as quickly over the icy steps as I dared, hoping to reach Ulrich before he changed his mind and came back to fight with Dael. The bus was shutting its doors as I reached the bus stop, and Ulrich waved to me from the back window.

“You forgot your coat!”

Ulrich mouthed something and shook his head as the bus took off. Oh, well. I slipped it on and walked back home.

In the glow of the light outside our door, Maya leaned against the wall, smoking a cigarette. She was wearing a long, black wool scarf, and a small beret perched on top of her curls. She shook her head, and said something to Dael.

“Yes, you do.” Dael took a step closer to her, and Maya took a small step away.

I frowned, trying to figure out what was going on. The cigarette smoke wafted towards me, reminding me of how hard it had been to quit. I’d been pretty good. No cigarettes for over a week. The pack in my jacket pocket had two cigarettes left. Maybe I could light one up too, and eavesdrop. Or maybe I could just pull myself invisible and eavesdrop that way. I snuck closer and leaned against the wall, enveloped in glamour and temptation.

“You going home with me tonight?” Dael asked Maya, reaching out to twirl a lock of her hair around his finger. He was pretty fast. They’d met like, what, ten minutes earlier?

“I came with James.” Maya took a drag and brandished her cigarette between them, looking right at me, though her eyes didn’t focus. Gotta love that invisibility glamour.

“That’s not to say you have to go home with him.” Dael leaned over with one hand against the wall.

“Look, I hardly know you.” She turned to glare at him.

“You could get to know me.” Dael met her eyes, and started to glow with sorcery. “You could get to know me intimately.”

Sorcery? If he weren’t so good looking, it might have been laughable. If he weren’t hitting on my brother’s girlfriend, I might have let it slide. But he was trying to cast a spell on her, and that I couldn’t abide. Maybe Ulrich was right about Dael being a lowlife.

At the sound of my throat clearing, Dael looked up suddenly, and the glow vanished. Maya took advantage of the interruption to step away from him, for which she had my wholehearted approval.

“Eavesdropping, little witch?” Dael’s malice shone through his fake smile. Dael reached out and grabbed the shoulder of Maya’s jacket with a furry leather glove. “Go away. We’re having a private conversation.”

“This conversation is over.”

Dael stared at me, and we entered that tipping neutral-zone of pre-fight posturing. He was four inches taller than me, but I had an extra twenty pounds of muscle and four years of karate on my side, and there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I could kick his ass any day of the week. If he had glowed with a spell, or moved towards me, or done anything at all, he was going to get a half fist in the throat and a kick to the knee. My lips bared aggressively. Yeah, go ahead and try it, punk. I can finish the fight I begged Ulrich not to start.

Dael had proven himself a lowlife, but he wasn’t entirely stupid. He wrenched open the door, gave me a leering sneer, and walked down the steps to the party.

Maya dropped her cigarette into the flowerpot and reached into her coat pocket for another one. Her hands were shaking. “That was weird. I don’t even know that guy.” She chuckled, to prove it hadn’t been a near rape, but her voice broke with nervousness.

“It’s cool. He just had too much to drink, that’s all. He’ll probably apologize in the morning.” Yeah, right. He had been giving her the faerie equivalent of a roofie Mai-Tai.

“How did you break your arm?”

“Fell from a tree. Looking for mistletoe. Yes, it hurts. Four weeks. You can sign the cast if you want.”

Maya laughed. She had straight white teeth and a nice smile. I hoped her personality matched her looks. “It’s getting cold. We should go inside.”

“Good idea.”

Maya and I went down the steps. James was waiting for her, and when he saw her, his face lit up. Maya reached her arms around his neck and pushed him towards the mistletoe. They looked so happy, it made my heart warm.

“What do I have to do to get a kiss like that?” Fain asked, once again standing behind me suddenly, with a cup of mulled wine. “Or are you partial to short redheads?”

“That was a decoy kiss.” The wine had cooled, but it still tasted good, like an alcoholic cookie. “I just single-handedly averted the fight of the season.”

“Is that what you call it? You forget, my kind have excellent hearing.” Fain arced his gaze across the room, to where Dael was flirting with Elaina again. “Sounded more like you were trying to start one.”

“I’ve had enough fighting tonight. I’ll kiss you if you promise to take me someplace peaceful.” I turned to face him.

“How about a seedy bar in Hillsburg to meet with some black-market dealers?” Fain suggested, speaking softly into my ear. “I found someone who has a knuckle of a *gneneynee anatam* for sale.”

“Really?” I clapped my hands like a child offered sweets, and the plastic cup clacked in protest. “When? Where?”

“I don’t have the address with me. Dress slummy and bring a weapon if you have one. I’ll give you more details later. It’s going to cost a bit.”

“How much?” I drained the wine and set the cup on an overfull TV tray.

Fain named a price that would make a sizeable dent in my bank account. I muttered an expletive.

“You have it?” He took my hands, turned them over, and pushed Ulrich’s coat sleeves back to expose my uncast wrist. He stared up at me. His eyes had flecks of gold in them. How gorgeous.

“I have it. It’s going to be lean for a while, but I have it.”

“I’ll cook for you so you won’t starve.” He kissed my wrist gently, leaving a flicker of moist coolness as his tongue traced around the bones below my palm. Somehow, we had stepped closer, intimately close, inappropriately close. It wasn’t right. Fenwick was in his apartment, hungry and alone, watching television, and here I was, his girlfriend, in the arms of another man, wearing Ulrich’s coat.

The door opened to a great exclamation of guests. Silvara. Elaina had her social coup.

I let my palm trail down Fain’s chest as an apology. “I have to go say hello.”

Silvara wore a long-sleeved, red velvet gown with satiny green holly embroidered on the back. It had brown fur trim at the neck and wrists. She was flanked by her enormous gray wings, held closely to her back to avoid the crush of people. Most people wouldn’t see the wings. I saw the wings, and the devout Pagans either saw them or faked it, as they stepped politely out of the span of those feathers.

“Glad you could make it. It must be hard to be a celebrity,” I told Silvara, when she stopped her blessings enough to greet me.

“Hi, Kit.” She hugged me.

“Thanks for coming. It really means a lot to Elaina.”

“You mean you didn’t care if I came or not?” she asked, and politely winked at Elaina, who stood just beside me, trying to pretend she was Silvara’s friend too.

“I like Silvara the manager of Tulipa better than Silvara the Avatar of the Goddess.”

She stepped forward and put her hands on my shoulders. Her wings circled around us, making the conversation more private. “How about Silvara the desperate mom who needs a babysitter for New Year’s Eve?”

Fain stood behind me, and those wings on either side kept me trapped. “Are you sure you want me to babysit? I don’t have much experience with kids. How old are they?”

Her pinion feathers flared, as if she wouldn’t let me go until I relented. “They’re six and four. They’re good girls, really sweet.”

“I’m sure they are perfect angels.” They’d eat me alive. A four-year-old and a six-year-old? They were probably just as persuasive as their mother too, but without her tact. “I haven’t sat for kids since I was a teenager.”

“Please?” You owe me, she didn’t say, though we both knew it.

I sighed in defeat. “I’d be happy to.”

“Well, there go my plans for a fun New Year’s Eve,” Fain said, with chagrin.

“Sorry, dear. She knew me first.” Silvara patted his arm, and then was brushed away by someone else who wanted a blessing on the holiday.

Fain watched Elaina’s Pagan guests fawn over Silvara, with a frown and a half-raised eyebrow. “Where do you know her from?”

Silvara touched the flautist on the forehead. The woman nearly cried with happiness, and clutched Silvara’s arm.

“Work. She sells my stuff in her shop.”

A young man in a Norwegian sweater bowed in front of Silvara, bending to waist height. She touched him on the forehead as well, and he smiled and thanked her profusely.

“She seems very popular.”

Because she had been chosen for life as the Avatar of the Goddess. For Pagans in Seabingen, she represented the Goddess in all their communal ceremonies, and the more devout believed that the Goddess resided within her. James and Elaina believed this. The wings hinted this was true. Nine years of catechism taught me it was all false. Either way, parties were not the time or the place for religious discussion.

“Everyone likes her because she’s nice. Through and through nice, not like some people.”

“I hope you’re not talking about me,” Fain said, pulling me to face him with one hand. We were still surrounded by people, but he looked at me as if we were alone, and slowly pushed me backwards.

“You seem pretty nice, but I’m not sure of your motives.” I kept stepping backward toward the bough at the foot of the stairs, knowing where he was going, but not stopping him. “Sometimes I think you’re one wrong word away from pulling a gun on someone. Sometimes I think you’re charming.”

“I can be more than one way.” Fain leaned forward and kissed me, long and slow.

What would Fenwick say when people told him about this? I could always claim I was drunk. Well, screw them. Why not enjoy myself? It was just a kiss. Fain was delicate with his fangs, somehow keeping them out of the way. He crossed his arms around my back and pulled me close. Good

thing we weren't alone. My body didn't want to stop with just a kiss, and neither did his. My pelvis tilted up, to cup against his own, despite the small voice that warned me that this was not my boyfriend, and we were in public. Better touch ground again while I still had some self-control.

"See, that's the one tradition I really like. Mistletoe." He touched the cast on my arm. "And hard won too."

"You kiss better than Ulrich."

"Glad to hear it." He slowly released me. "Monday, ten o'clock. I'll pick you up."

"I'll see you then."

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Chapter Twelve

Fain insisted on driving. Logical, since he knew the way, but I double-checked my seatbelt and prayed quickly before shutting my door.

Fain reached under the seat and pulled out a box. He opened it and took out a gun, slid a magazine into its handle, then handed it to me. "Here. You might need this tonight. Take it."

I handed the gun back. "I don't think that's a good idea. I don't know how to use a gun."

"It's better to have it." He wrapped my fingers around the handle. "You're a Guild member. You should be armed."

"I won't kill people. There's no point carrying a gun if you aren't willing to pull the trigger." I handed it back.

Fain looked at me silently for a handful of seconds before taking the gun back and replacing it under the seat. Probably very illegal to have a gun under the seat, but it's not like I was going to turn him in. Fain started up the car and started driving north.

"What has Palmer told you about the Fungace?"

"Aren't they some kind of street gang, drug dealers?" I wished he didn't talk while driving, but at least he kept his eyes on the road. Mostly. "Palmer mentioned them."

"Nothing?" Fain turned to look at me, running through a yellow light as he did so. "Hasn't he told you anything?"

"Sure. Keep your head down. Show up to Guild functions only when you're specifically invited. Be seen but not heard. Address all Guild members by last name, but don't talk to them unless they talk first."

Fain shook his head and murmured something under his breath, barely noticing that he had cut off a delivery truck. "Let me give you a lesson. First of all, despite what everyone says about us being Seabingen's mafia, the Guild does not endorse illegal activities."

"Right, the guns are just for style." I clenched the door handle as discreetly as possible, as Fain turned a corner at thirty miles an hour. At least this car had airbags.

"No, the guns are to defend ourselves, because the Guild does have enemies. We have money, and we have political influence, and we could destroy any crime ring we wanted to. Even the Fungace. They know it, and they hate us for it."

"So why don't you?" Maybe it would be better to close my eyes, and just pretend we were on a nice, safe airplane.

“If we did, they would be replaced by someone else, the Sicilian Mafia maybe, or one of those Korean gangs. So, we let the Fungace stay.” Fain turned another corner, this time so fast that I swear it felt like two wheels left the ground. “The guy we’re meeting tonight claims that he’s got what you need. He’s one of the three who run the whole gang, one of the original Fungace brothers. If Palmer found out that I took you here he’d have my balls for breakfast. With any luck, we’ll get in and out of there quickly and no one will know.”

“This guy we’re meeting, you trust him?”

“No. He’s a bastard, and damn hard to kill or someone would have done it already, but he cares about making a buck, so he agreed to meet us. I might be a liability to you, since he hates the Guild, but there’s no way I could let you go in there alone.”

Neutral ground turned out to be a shitkicker bar in Hillsburg, a tiny town so far north it was almost in the Lake District. Hillsburg still had a small-town feel, despite its proximity to Seabingen, and it had steak houses, next to five-and-dimes, next to white churches. It also had a giant garbage can—the Red Barn.

Fain parked in a dark alley behind a hardware store, about a hundred yards from the bar. He locked the door, drew his gun, checked it, and holstered it again. The alley, not much wider than two dumpsters, reeked of urine and dead cat.

“This is our rendezvous. Anything goes wrong, we meet here.”

“You think we’re going to get split up?”

“Let’s just say that if anything goes wrong, you come here and wait for me.” We walked across a parking lot filled with beat up trucks and plenty of broken glass. He glanced at me sideways just before we got to the entrance. “You sure you won’t take the gun?”

“I’m sure.” I showed the doorman my ID and pushed open the swinging wooden doors. “We’ll just be careful, okay?”

The outhouse-shaped building was filled with perpetual drunks and hard-working blue-collar types drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon un-ironically. The straw-covered floor smelled of cheap alcohol and vomit. Hair-sprayed and tight-jeaned women trolled the bar. The male to female ratio was such that they were certain to find some action if they set their standards low enough. The lights over the chicken wire surrounded stage were off, and only a jukebox kept the drunks entertained. Three well used pool tables

took up most of the floor space, and each demesne of green felt was lorded over by a pair of steely-eyed sharks, waiting to drain their prey of money.

Fain led the way to a back room, seemingly oblivious to the way we stood out. I had worn my typical jeans and jean jacket, presuming that denim fit everywhere, but I may as well have been wearing a fluffy, pink, bunny suit. Glances followed me across the room: from the women, trying to decide if I was competition (shoes to waist to hair); from the beer-drinkers, checking me out (tits, ass, then tits again, no face); and most ominously from the pool players, who sized me up in the exact manner that an opponent in the ring might (arms, legs, then right in the eyes.) The bulbs overhead didn't cast much light on the bar, probably more from economics than for mood. Fain was probably comfortable in the dark, but I wanted to hide.

Fain led us to three doors on the far side of the barn. The left door had a sign reading "cocks," the right's read "beavers" and the middle had no label at all. Supply closet? Fain knocked twice, and pushed the door open.

An enormous troll, seven feet if he were an inch, filled the room. He had a bulbous nose and large ears, but everything else reminded me more of a granite slab. One huge hand cradled a cashbox on the table in front of him, and the other hid under the table's shadow.

"Hello, Fain, it's been a while," the troll said. "You brought a hooker? Is she the price you're offering?"

"Show some respect, Blackball Willy. She's my friend."

"You haven't even fucked her yet? Amazing. You're losing your touch, old man. You used to burn through these human girls so fast you'd never even bother to learn their names."

Fain began to slide a hand under his jacket, so I changed the subject.

"I need the knuckle of a *gneneynee anatam*. If you have one, let's deal. If not, why don't you two take this little argument outside?"

"You must be a hooker. It's all about business, isn't it doll?" Blackball tapped the cashbox with sausage sized fingers in a quick staccato. "Show me the money."

I took out half the amount and laid it on the table in front of him. He picked it up with the visible hand, counted it with a few thumb-sweeps, and set it down again.

"This is only half."

"Let's see the knuckle," I said.

He opened the cashbox then, and revealed a desiccated finger, about three inches long and cut from both ends. He set it on the table. I pulled out the rest of the cash and swapped it for the knuckle, which went into my jacket pocket.

“Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Not so fast.” Blackball’s right hand still tapped the cashbox, and the other was still under the table. “Fain and I have unfinished business.”

“That’s over.” Fain’s hand was under his jacket, but he hadn’t drawn his gun yet.

“It’s over when I say it’s over.” Blackball tapped the cashbox, rat-a-tat-tat-tat, like a call to arms.

Fain was pretty tough even among vampires, but this guy looked even stronger, and even tougher. But Fain was armed. If this guy was dumb enough to pick a fight with a vampire, he must have a gun of his own, like a sawed-off shotgun under the table. I’d have one, if I were in his situation.

Blackball looked at me and then again at Fain. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a human girl. Since we’re old friends, I’ll even give her back when I’m done.”

“Let’s see if you’re strong enough to take her,” Fain said.

Great. Me, in a room, with two armed tough guys carrying a no-doubt decades-old grudge between them. I took a running leap and kicked Blackball in the face, pointing the ball of my foot towards that huge nose. I felt the ki flow through my leg as I shouted my ki-ai. If he were human, the blow would have broken his nose. Searing pain lanced up the ball of my foot as it hit that rock-like knob, and then an echo of pain as I skinned my shin on the edge of the table. Something clattered to the floor. The table knocked me backwards, but I rolled out of the fall, already scrambling for the (I was right) sawed-off shotgun.

Two shots rang out, deafening in the small office. Fain had missed. No, he hadn’t, because Blackball was bleeding through his XXXL sweatshirt. It hadn’t slowed him down though. Blackball picked up the desk and swung it at Fain, who was barely fast enough to dodge.

I rolled out from under the flying furniture and dashed through the doorway, shooting the shotgun towards the rafters to summon the pandemonium we needed for our escape. There wasn’t time to unload both shells, because someone pushed me from behind and the shotgun went skidding across the floor.

The guy who had pushed me had a thick mustache and a denim jacket with the sleeves cut off, like Tom Selleck's evil twin. He swung a cue stick overhead, and I barely rolled out of the way. What was his problem? Was he one of Blackball's hired thugs? Or maybe he was just pissed that the shotgun blast made him miss sinking the eight? The guy swung a punch at me, then a second punch, both of which I blocked, bruising my forearm with the force of it. Damn that hurt. Even through the cast it hurt. That's why we wore pads in the ring.

Screw this hand-to-hand brawling. It was time to find another weapon and get the hell out of here. The shotgun had mysteriously vanished, but behind the sharks hung a rack of cheap and kinked cues. I grabbed the first one I found, and spun around just in time to whack the mustached brawler in the head. While he was distracted, I raced for the exit, halted by a spontaneous fight which had broken out among a few patrons disputing the ownership of the shotgun. Fighting over a loaded shotgun in a crowded bar? Someone must have had stupid for breakfast.

The shotgun went off, showering us with pieces of asbestos insulation. I flattened to the ground instinctively, but had to roll to one side as a booted foot landed near my head. Twelve feet from the exit. Get to the door. That's all I had to do. Might have been easy, except for the fighting. The bar hadn't seemed so crowded when everyone was sitting still with their beer, but now it was like trying to navigate a mosh pit.

Gentle pushes weren't enough, but either the wildly swinging hardwood or the maniacal look of determination on my face parted the crowd enough for me to get a few feet closer to freedom.

Six feet from the door, I tripped over an overturned bar stool and slammed into someone's girlfriend. At her shriek of indignation, one of the sharks swung a pool cue at me. I deflected it with my own, following up with a riposte that left a dot of blue chalk on his leather jacket. A flicker out of the corner of my eye was warning enough to turn, making the shark's girlfriend smash her beer bottle on the table, rather than my head. She swung too quickly for me to dodge the second blow, but she overextended her reach, leaving herself vulnerable. Elbow to the ribs, backfist to the face, kick to the knee. Just like at the dojo.

Thank God for asshole boyfriends, because the shark was more concerned about the chalk mark on his jacket than in defending his girlfriend's honor. Only a few feet between me and the exit sign. Leap over

an overturned stool, dodge out of the way of someone coming back from the toilet, and then it was home free.

Lowlifes milled around the back entrance, probably looking for stupid women alone. Women like me. They started to drift towards me, but I ran straight and fast towards the alley Fain had arranged as our rendezvous. An unshaven drunk with an angry look stood in my way, but the broken pool cue held like a lance in front of me convinced him that some games of chicken you just can't win.

"Hey babe, where you goin'?" One of the lowlifes called out.

Halfway across the parking lot, I stumbled on a stone and fell to my (bruised) shin. I didn't bother to answer them, but looked back to see if they were following. Yes, they were. Shit, and one of them had what looked like a steel chain. I scrambled to my feet and ducked behind a pick-up truck.

Pull myself invisible. Not here. Mouse in the shadows. Gotta slow this breathing down too.

"I can show you a good time." Another voice called, closer this time.

Two and a half feet of broken cue stick against two drunk men. Someone hiccupped. No, three drunk men. Drunk, armed men. Damn, Fain, what had he gotten me into? Maybe digging up a grave would have been easier. No, I could do this. Come on, Kit. Pull yourself invisible.

The first guy walked around the corner, peering towards my hiding spot. He sniffed, rubbed his nose, and hawked up some phlegm. I didn't move, not even when his spittle landed on my pant leg.

"Where'd she go?" The second guy called out, two cars to my left.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I rose to my feet, still holding the broken pool cue.

"Dunno. Turn them headlights on," the first guy said.

I slipped slowly towards the broken glass and urine of the alley, keeping just out of headlight range. The drunks wandered around, but the invisibility spell must have worked, because after a few minutes they ambled back towards the bar. I crept the rest of the way there, still clutching the broken pool cue, and sat down against a wall, remaining still. No one noticed me, not even a stray dog who stopped to relieve itself against the wall not far from the alley entrance. The streetlight flickered, and then went out, plunging me into darkness.

It may have been half an hour before someone came down the alley. He walked around as if searching for someone. Me? The streetlight hadn't gone

back on, but with all that broken glass no one could move quietly. Might be one of the drunks, or worse, Blackball. Whoever he was, he tripped over the dead cat, and the horrible stench rose up in a cloud. I gagged, then coughed.

The streetlight flickered on. Fain. He whipped around with his gun and pointed it at my head.

“Who are you? Speak now!” His eyes were angry, feral; the eyes of someone who might do wetwork for the Guild.

I let the invisibility slip off.

“Melbourne! Are you hurt?” He relaxed, the good guy again.

“Nothing serious. You?”

“No. Let’s go.”

He drove me to his apartment just barely above the speed limit. The bar fight must have drained his gluttony for adrenaline. We didn’t speak on the way home, but I looked him up and down to make sure he hadn’t been hurt. He didn’t look hurt, he looked elated. Good thing one of us had a good time. Well, make that both of us. I had a soft spot for bar fights myself.

Fain’s condo was located in Wasserhausen, about three miles west of the river, and from his front door you could just barely see glinting dark water. He had heavy drapes on all the windows, and the wooden furniture spanned several eras, as if he had purchased a new piece every twenty years. The entertainment center and the couch were new, and both jet black. Fain walked to the kitchen sink as soon as the door shut.

“Nice condo,” I called out, yelling over the sound of rushing water in the kitchen. It was much nicer than I’d expect from someone with his salary, but not as classy as I’d expect a vampire to own.

Fain came back looking notably cleaner, and he carried a metal box, which he set on the coffee table. “I’ve lived here for about twenty-five years now. I was one of the first people to buy into this complex, so I got a good deal.”

“Aren’t you supposed to have a castle or something?” My clothes really stunk. It was going to take some serious laundering to get the reek of dead cat out of my jacket. “I thought vampires your age were always rich.”

“Some are wealthy, and others live hand to mouth no matter how old they become. I’m somewhere in between.” He opened the box and rummaged around in it. When he saw me peel my jacket off, he grinned, licking his lips and touching his tongue to a fang. “Your pants are filthy too.”

“See, that troll was right. You’ve lost your touch, and you know my name too.”

“Troll? Ah.” He raised his eyebrow at that, then gestured for me to sit on the couch in front of him. “It took me a long time to realize he wasn’t human. We, my sire and I, call them trolls too.”

“Is that what they are?”

“It’s as good a name as any. I heard a legend that when God first made man, He made him out of stone, not clay. The trouble was, the stone men were too tough. They wouldn’t die. And so God stopped making them out of stone and made them out of clay instead. My theory is that Blackball and his brothers are those that God made first, the stone people.”

“That sounds about right. I noticed your bullets didn’t do much to slow him down.”

“They slowed him down enough for me to escape. And how did you know about the shotgun under the table?” He had opened the metal box and was rummaging around for bandages. He gestured for me to sit.

“I just guessed.” I sat gingerly on the edge of his couch. “He kept one hand under the table, and if I were in his situation, I’d have a sawed-off shotgun too.”

“I’m so glad your cynicism paid off.” Fain chuckled. “Don’t worry about the couch. Leather wipes clean. Let me see where you’re hurt.”

“I’m not hurt badly.” My flannel shirt had a tear in a shoulder, and the cloth felt damp. “And I’d hate to make this nice leather couch smell like puke and dead cat.”

Fain pulled hair back from my ear and probed my scalp. His fingers were wet with blood. He found a flashlight in the metal box and used it to look into my eyes. “Not so bad. No concussion, as far as I can see.”

“Her forehand was better than her backhand.”

“Anywhere else?”

“My shoulder.” I undid my flannel shirt’s buttons and pulled the injured arm out, leaving me in a thin t-shirt and a bra.

He rolled the t-shirt sleeve up to expose the gash. “When did you get this?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Looks like a bottle cut you. There’s glass in the wound. Let me get my tweezers.”

Fain vanished again. I surveyed the living room for signs of female habitation. Either he lived alone, or he had meticulous foresight. Could be either. The prints on the walls were black and white photographs, classy enough to impress chicks without having the interior designer touch. An enormous red Persian carpet provided a spot of color in the room. The only thing that really seemed out of place was the crucifix on the wall.

Fain came back with tweezers and a cup. He glanced from me to the crucifix and raised his eyebrows. "That surprises you?"

"Well, in the movies, the vampires can't abide them." I tried not to wince as he dug around in the cut for a piece of glass.

Fain picked shards of glass out of the wound and dropped it in the cup. It made a slight tinkling sound. "There's a lot of things the movies get wrong. God and I are still on pretty good terms as far as I know."

"You are a complex person, Leonard Fain."

Fain dropped the last piece of glass into the cup, and rooted around in the box for a plastic bottle of saline. "Complex good, or complex bad?"

"Complex, I'd like to get to know you better, complex."

"The very best kind." He rinsed the wound with saline until it bled freely, staring at the blood flowing with something like longing. "Melbourne, I know you said you weren't into this, but would you mind?"

"Go ahead." I owed him. It would make him happy, and wouldn't cost me anything.

Fain lowered his mouth on my arm. It didn't hurt. He licked the blood that trickled to my elbow, and then followed it back up to the wound. His hands wrapped around me, and one touched my breast accidentally. Yeah, sure it was an accident. He left his mouth over the cut for a moment, like a long kiss, sucking gently. When the cut stopped bleeding, he rinsed it again and took a bandage out of his first aid kit.

"I suppose you never do that at work."

"I'd be fired in an instant." He wrapped the bandage around my arm, slowly, with one hand steadying my elbow. He had scooted forward until our thighs were touching. "Besides, mostly we just get transients and junkies on my shift. That'd be like eating off the floor."

"You didn't drink very much."

"It's not about food. It's about being intimate with someone you care about." His face was very close to mine now, and I could feel his breath.

“And you care about me?” A small voice cried out against this. Stop it, Kit. You’re flirting. Don’t flirt. You have a boyfriend. Remember what this is all about? Fenwick.

“Yes, I do.” He leaned forward, pressing those blood-flecked lips against my own. His mouth tasted metallic. I felt his fangs lightly with my tongue. Just a kiss. It wasn’t cheating. Just a kiss.

Except that a moment later, it wasn’t. Fain reached under my clothes and I wrapped my hands in his hair. Oh, God, yes. I needed this. I wasn’t made of stone. I was tired of lonely nights and the promise of more to come. Fain was a great guy: strong, dependable, the kind of man I needed. I raked my nails down his skin, and a soft moan escaped me as Fain’s mouth explored the hollow of my throat. His hands started to remove my filthy pants. Why not?

Because I’m not the cheating kind.

“I can’t.” I pushed him off with great reluctance.

“You want this.” He drew me back towards him.

“Yes. I do.” Desperately. “But I can’t.”

“Still loyal?”

I nodded. “He lives. He may come back to me.”

“How long will you wait?”

“Spring. Easter.”

Fain kissed my wrist, and continued kissing up my arm. I almost lost my resolve again. “I’ll wait for you to choose me.”

“Don’t. He’s coming back.”

Fain’s face told me what I was afraid to admit to myself.

“I’m going to save him.” It sounded weak even to my own ears. “He’ll be normal again.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“Easter. We’ll continue what we started tonight, see where it goes.”

Fain stared at me silently, still holding my wrists. I couldn’t read his expression. Anger? Patience? Desire? He dropped my wrists and picked up my jacket. “I’ll drive you home.”

When I got back to my apartment, Elaina and Dael were in her room with the door shut. I could hear her passionate moans and Dael’s grunts. I put a pillow over my ears and tried to sleep, alone in my bed.

Chapter Thirteen

The cloudy day had turned into a stormy night, just warm enough to alternate between snow and rain, dousing hopes of a white Christmas in the hearts of the romantic. The rain would freeze by morning, making the roads slick and increasing the usual crop of alcohol-induced fatalities. Another lovely holiday to bear.

Mom came over on Christmas Eve at around eleven p.m., ready with a bottle of eggnog and a speech full of recriminations.

“Where have you been all day? I thought you’d spend Christmas with us!” Mom wielded her guilt well. She must have been practicing on James.

“It’s not technically Christmas yet. I went to work, and then I went to the dojo for a few hours.”

“They didn’t close the dojo today? It’s a holiday.”

“The Kishimotos are Buddhist.”

“What about your boss? What kind of woman makes people work on Christmas Eve? Doesn’t she have family over?”

“I don’t ask about her private life.” Ms. Yseult drinking eggnog and listening to some Christmas carols on the radio? Ms. Yseult had probably been old before Jesus was a twinkle in God’s eye, and I doubt she cozied up to her family once a year, even if her family still walked these hills.

“You should have taken the day off.”

“I have to run an errand out of town after the New Year, so I’m trying to get most of the job done before then.” I had worked twelve hours that day, and every day in the past week, still taking time to go to the dojo, but not much else. Did Ms. Yseult comment on my puritan work ethic? No, she just bitched about me not yet “dreaming the forest.”

“You working tomorrow too?”

“I was planning on it.”

“Don’t.” She had that hurt look again, trying to make me feel guilty. It worked.

“I’ll spend tomorrow with you, but I really should work a few hours. Let me know when you want me to come over to James’.”

“Let’s meet at my new place instead. I’ve decided to move here. Did I tell you?”

“Really? That’s great.” The horror! “When did you move out of James’ apartment?”

“Two weeks ago—”

“Really stupid of me not to even notice.” I said, before she could throw it in my face. Verbal judo. Push when they expect you to pull. “And of course I’m going to Mass with you tonight. It will be a good chance for us to get together, pray together, especially on Christmas Eve.”

Mom blinked, startled.

“And can I have a little of that eggnog?”

She handed it to me. It was non-alcoholic, but good nonetheless.

Mom navigated slowly along with the other cars inching their way towards the relatively wind-free parking lot. Usually volunteers draped banners (painted by the pre-school children) around the church. This year the driving slush reduced the banners to sodden lumps of paper and paint. Only the devoted came to Mass this evening, running from their cars or from the bus stop to the safety of the carved stone doorway.

St. Bridgid’s was a beautiful place, even when not bedecked in holiday splendor. I came here sometimes in the summer and spring, when the stone planter boxes in front were filled with buzzing bee-filled lavender. St. Bridgid’s had been built when it was still fashionable to emulate the Gothic style, and its tall arches with downward gazing angels appealed to anyone with an artistic or romantic streak. The worn stone steps leading into the antechamber attested to its rank as one of the city’s oldest buildings. Tall, arched stained-glass windows depicted scenes from saints’ lives on sunnier days, but on Christmas Eve the church was too dark to see them. Inside it smelled of wax, incense, and warm human bodies. The choir was still setting up, gracing us with half-hearted arias and two-bar preludes to the night’s music. I stood in the back while my mom wandered off to fetch programs and candles.

I saw a familiar face, or rather, the familiar back of a head sitting in the last pew. I put my hands over his eyes, leaning forward to speak quietly in his ear. “Guess who?”

“I recognized your voice, Kit,” Fain said, turning around.

“I’m not ‘Melbourne’ anymore?”

“Your friends call you ‘Kit’.” He took my hands and pulled them around him before bringing my wrist to his lips to kiss. “I’m your friend, aren’t I? It’s good to see you here.”

“I’m glad to see you too. Why do you sit way back here? You can’t see or hear much, and there’s plenty of space, what with the storm and all.”

“I’m not welcome here. I don’t want to make a scene.”

“Sit with us.”

“Us?”

“I’m here with my mother. She went off to fetch candles. I’ll introduce you to her. If she sees me talking to you and I don’t introduce you to her, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

The woman in question had already returned, and gave me a smile and raised eyebrows of curiosity.

“Mom, this is—”

“Leonard Fain. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Melbourne.” Fain smiled and shook her hand. I found myself relieved to see that he didn’t kiss her wrist.

“Edgerson. Nelly Edgerson,” she corrected.

“Are you related to Frederick Edgerson?” Fain asked, with a raised eyebrow. “There aren’t many Edgersons in town.”

“Yes. He was my brother. Are you, ah, that is, did you know him?” Mom hedged, clearly not willing to say “witch” in a church.

“He ran for mayor once. A co-worker of mine helped stuff envelopes for his campaign.” And with one lovely sentence, Fain managed to sidestep the whole witch question right there. God bless him. “I didn’t know Kit had a famous uncle.”

“I wasn’t aware he was that famous.” She broke off at the first organ chords. The service was starting, so we took seats to listen and watch.

I hadn’t been to Mass since before my parents’ divorce, so I wasn’t mentally ready for the old Catholic pageantry that St. Bridgid’s offered. My mom had picked up two wax candles when she entered, and handed me one as we sat down. I noticed Fain held one too. He didn’t speak to me during the ceremony, but listened intently to the music. I managed to say the right thing, and pay attention enough to stand or kneel at the appropriate points, but other than that it may as well have been in Latin. The priest wasn’t very

inspiring. It was so dark in the church, and so cold outside. Kind of depressing, actually.

Then someone came down the aisle carrying a candle, and we all lit our own tapers from it. The hall filled with light and warmth, and the scent of burning wax overcame the damp smell of sleet-soaked clothes. Fain's face filled with some deep emotion I couldn't entirely fathom. Mom's face held nothing but nostalgia. Even a cynic like me found it pretty uplifting, especially when the choir started "Oh Holy Night," which I sang as a child in our own church, back when Christmas was still full of wonder.

After the ceremony we all filed down row by row to take communion, setting the candles in a basket. We were the last row. Fain knelt between my mother and me. My mother cleared her throat just before the priest got to her. Turning to see, I managed to catch a glimpse when the priest looked at Fain. He passed Fain over, and placed a wafer in my hands. Was it a mistake? No, no mistake.

I broke the wafer and handed half to Fain, looking up at the priest as if daring him to say something. He let it go, pretending it hadn't happened, and went on to the next person. The altar boy came by afterward with the cup, either not seeing Fain's teeth or not knowing what it meant. Fain drank with reverence as if it really were blood, eyes closed in piety, and crossed himself with the ease of a lifetime of Catholicism.

"Thank you." Fain said quietly, as we walked towards the back alone. (Mom had manufactured an excuse to dawdle.)

"It meant something to you."

"It still does, after all these years."

We found a bench next to one of the side altars and sat on it as the crowds passed by. Humans, on their way home to bed. I felt tired too, but of course Fain was used to this schedule. It was probably one of the few times in the year he could attend a Mass.

"That was wrong of him."

Fain shrugged, as if he didn't care. "Every once in a while, someone realizes what we are. He isn't the first priest to show his opinion of me that way."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a monster. I'm an unholy, blood-drinking, night stalker, who preys on innocent humans." He had the tone halfway between sarcasm and seriousness.

“No, you’re not.”

“At least someone believes that.” He put his hand on mine and squeezed it once, but didn’t make any other comment.

“Here you are. Are you ready to go?” Mom strode forward, smiling and yawning.

“It was nice to meet you Ms. Edgerson. Sorry we didn’t have a chance to talk more.” Fain stuck out his hand to shake with her.

“Why don’t you come by tomorrow? Unless you’re spending Christmas with your family?”

“I have to work. People keep getting themselves hurt even when there’s a holiday. The ER is usually packed on Christmas day.”

“Oh, well, maybe you can stop by sometime if you get the chance. Kit can tell you the address.”

“I’ll make sure she does.” Fain kissed my wrist again. The gallant charmer was back, and no sign of the vulnerability of a few minutes earlier.

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Chapter Fourteen

“You going to your mom’s house tonight?” Elaina asked, knowing full well the answer.

“Yes. You’re welcome to come, if you’d like.” I sat on the sofa, with Kaa on my knee. Kaa crooned with pleasure as I scratched his head with my nails.

“You know I won’t go to celebrate a Christian holiday.” Elaina put more holly over the windows. Holly protected against the Goodly Folk. Did this mean she found out about Dael trying to cheat on her?

“Suit yourself. The food will be good.”

“I’m trying to diet.”

Ridiculous. How could anyone pass up good food? “I have a present for you. I hope you’re hypocrite enough to accept it.” I gestured to the package on the table in front of the couch.

“I’m even hypocrite enough to give you one as well.” Elaina smiled, and walked over to her bookshelf, where a book shaped package rested between old college textbooks. She slid it out and handed it to me. “You first.”

I tore off the yellow tissue paper and read the cover. “A cookbook?”

“I thought you should learn how to cook. There won’t always be a vampire around to feed you.”

“Thanks. Thank you very much. And here’s yours.”

Elaina opened the package and drew out the light blue shawl I had knitted “Is this what you made for me? This is so soft!” She was delighted, stroking the wool and holding it to her cheek. “Where did you find cashmere wool?”

“Internet.” I beckoned to Kaa, who had just flapped in from my bedroom. He flew to my wrist, snatched the yellow ribbon from the package, then hopped to my shoulder to rip it to shreds. “You’re a good friend, Elaina. You deserved something special.”

“I had no idea you even knew how to knit. What a nice surprise.” She wrapped it around her shoulders. It did suit her.

Kaa jumped to my head when I slipped my jacket on, then hopped back down again, digging his claws into the denim.

“It’s snowing out. Maybe we’ll get a white Christmas.” I drew a pair of gloves from the jean jacket pockets and slipped them on.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“I’ll manage. Ms. Yseult keeps her house pretty well heated. I’d just take a coat off anyway.”

“You’re going to work again? Aren’t you done yet? You work there often enough.”

I sighed as I lifted the couch cushion, looking for my keys. Kaa made a chuckling sound, as if to deny hiding them. “The mural is mostly done, and I think I can get all the branches on in two or three weeks. She keeps getting angry at me. The progress isn’t good enough for her. She tells me I have to dream the forest. I don’t know what she means.”

“Dream it?” Elaina sat down next to me on the couch.

“She’s very strange, Elaina. Very strange, and very dangerous.” I pulled the pillows off one by one, looking for the keys. Kaa chuckled again.

“How do you know she’s dangerous?”

I plopped down on the couch with a sigh. “I can’t explain it. I can just sense it. She’s old and powerful. I don’t know how to dream her a forest, but I’m afraid of what she might do to me if I fail.”

“Get rid of the dreamcatcher.”

Kaa flew to the kitchen and rooted around in Elaina’s fruit bowl. He drew out my key chain, displaying it like a prize, then cawed in triumph.

“What?” I rummaged in my pockets until I found a pair of dog biscuits, then held them up, hoping Kaa would bring the keys over.

“The dreamcatcher. I saw it in your room.”

“But that doesn’t really do anything. It’s just a piece of wire wrapped in leather and sinew.”

Kaa landed on my fingers and ate the biscuits, finally relinquishing the keys.

“A dreamcatcher is made to catch dreams. That’s what it does.” She pretended to watch television, but it wasn’t on. “You know, Kit, that’s why you can’t do mage-craft. You don’t believe in anything.”

“I try not to cling too tightly to any beliefs. You never know when the world’s going to change on you.” I scratched Kaa behind the ears. Gotta love that little crow, even if he was a key-stealer. “I should go now, if I’m going to get any work in. Do you mind if I take Ka—Aleister with me?”

“He’s more your familiar than mine anyway.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to steal him.”

“He chose. He’s free to choose.” She didn’t look angry.

“Merry Christmas, Elaina.”

“Goddess Bless, Kit.”

It would have been nice to paint more of the mural, but I had pulled a muscle at the dojo the day before, and it hurt to raise my arms over my head, so I worked on the undergrowth instead. That was much easier. I couldn't make grass, but a few ferns and shrubs went a long way to create the illusion of a forest. Ms. Yselt had provided the materials for these as well. Their texture felt more like paper than silk. Different materials from what I would have chosen, but she was the boss.

Each fern took about an hour, when I was particular about getting it right, which I always am. I bent over to fasten the papery green fronds together to the wire frame, while Kaa perched on my back. Completing my fourth fern, and setting it down at the base of a white trunk, I noticed a pair of brown bare feet planted in front of me. Her toes were splayed out as though she never bound her feet in shoes. The toes connected to sinewy ankles but my view from calves to thighs to torso was cut off by a frost colored hem. I held still but didn't stand or look up. Maybe she was still angry with me.

“You have not dreamt this forest yet.”

Yup. Still angry. “I don't understand, ma'am.”

“If you do not dream this forest, it will never live.” Each word fell upon me like flakes of deadly snow.

“It's fake, ma'am. I make fake trees. I'm not a mage.” Please don't curse me. I'm doing the best I can. It's not my fault I have no idea what you're talking about.

“You can dream here. I cannot. You must dream this forest.” She didn't change her inflection, but I felt the weight of her disappointment.

“I think I may have discovered the problem, ma'am. I ... I had a dreamcatcher. I'll remove it from my room tonight.” The room felt cold enough to make me shiver.

“See that you do.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She drifted away, and the room felt warmer again.

“Kaa,” the crow said, when Ms. Old and Dangerous left.

“You’re right Kaa. I hope getting rid of the dreamcatcher works. If not, well, I don’t know what I’ll do. Sleep here maybe? Do you think she’d get mad? Maybe that’s what she wants?”

“Kaa?”

“I care about getting this right, but I don’t know how to do all that witchy stuff. Maybe there’s something to make me dream more clearly? I should ask Elaina. It’s so frustrating.”

Kaa hopped down in front of me, so I fished out a dog biscuit for him.

“Kaa. Don’t ever leave me. No matter what happens.”

I don’t know what prompted me to say that.

By the time I left work, the weather had turned bitterly cold, and snow obscured vision so badly that everyone drove under the speed limit. Ms. Yseult hadn’t shown up again in the last six hours of my shift, but the weight of her displeasure tainted me, like a forgotten insult whose rancor still stings, even as I plowed through six inches of powder in a parking space. My mom’s new apartment was a bland one-bedroom in an apartment complex so large that it took fifteen minutes of walking just to find the right building. I was over an hour late by the time Mom opened the door.

“Where have you been?” Mom held her fists on her hips, ready for the fight to end all fights. I was too cold to come up with a funny or sarcastic remark, so I told the truth.

“W ... w ... w ... working. I lost t ... t ... track of time.” I stomped my feet on the beige tile of the foyer, trying to shake the snow off my shoulders, and unbuttoned my jacket. Kaa crawled out from under the denim, where I had stowed him to protect him from the cold. He wasn’t shivering, but his feathers were all puffed out.

“You always say you lose track of time.” Mom stood in the brown and beige kitchen with folded arms. One hand clutched a spoon.

“It’s always t ... t ... t ... true.” I put Kaa on my shoulder and strode past the cheap, brown furniture towards the radiator. I felt like kneeling down and clutching it, but instead I stood next to it and shivered. My apparent discomfort made Mom slack off on her rant. Suffering children couldn’t be naughty at the same time.

“What’s that bird on your shoulder?” James came in from the other room and put a cup of something hot and cinnamon-scented into my hands. He was always my hero.

“This is Kaa. Don’t worry, he’s housebroken.”

“You have a familiar?” James asked.

“He’s Elaina’s familiar. She just lets me take him to work sometimes.”

Kaa pecked my ear.

“Ow! What?”

Kaa looked at me with one eye.

“Okay, so you’re mine. Elaina doesn’t love you enough so you switched camps.”

Kaa nodded and jumped on my head while Maya put an afghan over my shoulders. “Thanks, Maya.”

“Why aren’t you wearing a coat?” Maya asked.

“It got destroyed when my apartment got trashed last year, and I don’t have any money for new clothes right now.” My teeth chattering started to subside a bit with the blanket.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” Mom was bustling around in the kitchen. It sounded like she was making up a plate of food.

“I explained about Fenwick, Mom.”

“No, the nice one. Leonard Fain. The man we met at church last night.”

“He has to work, and he’s not my boyfriend.” The snow in my hair had melted, and the dampness made me feel even colder.

“That’s not what we saw. That looked like a pretty serious kiss under the mistletoe,” James said.

“It doesn’t mean anything.” But I couldn’t help blushing.

“He seems a lot nicer than that blond guy,” Mom said.

“Fenwick’s a nice guy. You just don’t know the real him. Fenwick has stood by me through a lot of hard times.” Oh great. I could guess where this was going.

“You can’t chain yourself to a person if there’s no spark there,” Mom said. She had a plate of food, but still hadn’t offered it to me, and used the fork and knife to gesture.

“She’s right, Kit. Let him go.” James sounded like he was telling me to cut my leg off to save my life. “Tell us about this Fain guy.”

No escape. Might as well pay my penance for not coming on time to this little Christmas shindig. “If I can have some dinner, I’ll tell you anything you want to know.” I took the plate of food from Mom, and started tucking in, sharing bits with the greedy little black bird on my shoulder.

“Where did you meet him?”

He and four other vampires asked me and Fenwick to help them rescue one of their comrades. "Through some mutual friends."

I ate like a starving woman. Well, I felt like a starving woman too, and Mom had spared neither time nor expense on dinner. Roast turkey, gravy and mashed potatoes, green beans, rolls, butter, more butter, and more butter. It tasted like a two-thousand calorie plate of nostalgia.

"What does he do for a living?" James asked.

"He's a nurse. He works in the ER at St. Jude's." And he does the occasional muscle job for the Guild, the details of which would probably keep me up late at night.

"Are things getting serious between you two?" Mom wanted to know.

Well, let's see, only a tense, polite respect for Fenwick keeps us from ripping each other's clothes off, but so far we've only kissed. "There's no future in him. We're too different."

"Different how?" James and Mom took turns with the nosiness. I finished the meal quickly, trying to think of a good answer for that one. Man was I hungry.

"He's older than me, for one." By over a century.

"That's no big deal."

"I never see him during the day. It gets kind of frustrating."

"Why not, because he works the night shift?" Maya asked this one.

"Because he's a vampire." I said it jokingly, half serious, but caught James' eye so he knew the truth. "And don't tell Fenwick I kissed Fain. I'm trying to stay loyal."

Mom didn't say anything about the vampire comment. Either she didn't hear or ... No, she heard. She spent most of her adult life with alcoholism. Mom and denial were best friends. Did Maya know? Did she even know she was dating a witch? Well, none of my business.

Mom fetched more deliciously fattening snacks. "Dump Fenwick. That other guy is much nicer. Besides, he doesn't look that much older than you. He looks like your twin."

"I agree. You should say goodbye to Fenwick." James looked in my eyes with sadness and pity, as if trying to convince me to have my puppy euthanized. "Let Fenwick go. The price of keeping him is too high."

How dare James tell me that! Even if it was true. Especially if it was true. "How about I interrogate you about your love life now?"

“Let’s open presents!” Mom said, with the ease of a woman used to steering conversations away from dangerous areas.

We all dutifully gathered around the small fake tree Mom had hung with lights. I found myself appraising it, and rejecting it as inferior in quality to what I could make. James and Mom professed to like the books I bought for them, and exchanged matching useful but uninspired clothes with each other. Then they fetched a small package for me. They had amused and smug expressions, so I opened it apprehensively.

“What is it?”

“A cell phone,” said James.

“I don’t have money to pay for a cell phone.”

“You do now. We paid the first six months for you,” Mom said.

“Well, that’s ... um ... thank you.” My first phone ever. It rang. “Aaaah! How do I answer it?” James came over and showed me which button to press. He said hello to Maya, who was talking on Mom’s house phone from the kitchen.

“This is great. Thanks guys.”

“Merry Christmas, Kit.” Mom hugged me. All forgiven.

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Chapter Fifteen

Silvara's husband reminded me a bit of Fenwick's dad. Mr. Holmes was in his forties, and had receding brown hair. He had plenty of laugh lines, and a good sense of humor. He and Silvara were two of the most easygoing people I had ever met. Therefore, it was with great shock that I discovered what terrors their daughters were. This was my first time meeting the little hellions.

"This is Iris," Mr. Holmes pointed to the six-year-old brunette coloring at the table, "and this is Elianto." He gestured to the little blonde four-year-old clutching his tuxedoed leg.

"Where's mommy?" Elianto piped, with her blue eyes gazing at Mr. Holmes.

"She's upstairs getting ready."

"Do you think she'd mind if I went up to talk to her?" I asked.

"No, that's fine. I'll make a list of emergency numbers. We don't have to leave for another twenty minutes anyway."

The inside of their two-story Craftsman home matched the outside. The living room had shelves full of books, and two computer desks. The polished pine floor was strewn with toys, and as you'd expect in the house of a florist, they had fresh flowers even in winter. I noticed a couple of trees that I had made for Tulipa, and felt quite touched that Silvara had purchased them.

After walking up the creaking stairs I looked around until I found Silvara's room. The bedroom she shared with Mr. Holmes was austere to the point of severity, dominated by a large futon on a pale wood frame. A Japanese floral arrangement sat on the table by a window. Had she had arranged it herself? Probably.

"Knock knock."

"Hi, Kit." She glanced over her shoulder at me. Her wings appeared translucent. "I'm almost ready."

"Don't rush on my account. I wanted to talk with you, and I guess you'll be pretty drunk when you come home."

"Actually, it's my turn to drive." Silvara's long gray wings twitched. She put on her mascara and blinked, checking her reflection in the mirror. She wore only a bra and underwear. Her back had an extra joint where her wings attached. Muscles flexed under the skin.

I tried not to stare. It was just an illusion. It wasn't real.

Silvara finished putting her make-up on, and, to my surprise, attached a bindi to her own forehead. It was a blue jewel set in gold. She caught me looking and winked. "It's not magical. I just like the look. You have something on your mind, Kit?"

"Yeah, I wanted to talk to you about Ms. Yseult."

"Who?"

"The woman I'm doing the commission for. You must have met her, right? Or did she just call you?"

"I don't know who you're talking about." Silvara sat next to me on the bed to roll on her stockings. Her wing tip brushed a branch of her floral arrangement and one of the chrysanthemums swayed.

"They're real!" My world just shifted.

"What?"

"Your wings. I thought they were just illusions."

"Yes, they're real. They were a gift, a mark of Her favor." She looked up from her other stocking. "Kit, does this bother you?"

"A little."

"Then think of them as an illusion, a slightly substantial illusion." Silvara stepped into her gown. The gown was nearly backless, peacock colored lace over topaz satin. The lace had an elaborate design based on octagons rather than the usual cabbage roses. She probably made it herself.

"That's not an illusion."

She tilted her hand, offering a way out, an opportunity to deny. Her wings flared out to either side, brushing against the doorframe of the bathroom and the dark wood of her dresser.

"May I touch your wings?"

"Sure."

I reached out and grasped a feather, which was larger than any bird's. Upon closer inspection, her wings weren't really gray. Each feather was black with narrow strands of white, not unlike her hair. I touched the base where it met her back. Nearly seamless.

"Don't they get in the way?"

"Not really." She stepped into her gown. "They're not really part of my body, although I can control them as if they were. Zip me up, would you?"

I zipped her up and fastened the eyelet. The gown had a missing oval in the back.

"I know what I see, Silvara, and I know what everyone says it means. I still consider myself Catholic, but if this is real, then I don't know how to treat you."

She held up a hand to stop me. "Don't. You're one of the few people who don't treat me as the Avatar. I like to be a normal person too."

"Well, Ms. Normal Person, do you seriously not remember Ms. Yseult?" I described her, but Silvara kept shaking her head as she slipped on her shoes.

"No. I really don't know her. The last commission I got for you was the palm tree."

"If I didn't get the commission from you, where did I get it from? It wasn't like she could just call me."

"I don't know, Kit." And then she turned to look at me with eyes that didn't quite seem of this world. "But there is reason behind all mysteries. The Lord and Lady sometimes touch our lives. They may even have brought you here tonight."

"I prefer to keep my fate in my own hands."

"As you wish."

Mr. Holmes poked his head in. "You look ravishing, my dear. Are you ready?"

Silvara nodded, and the three of us walked downstairs so they could say goodbye to their little angels.

My sense of foreboding started the moment the door clicked behind Mr. and Mrs. Holmes. Elianto started first. I quickly learned that she dominated most conversations, although she was the younger of the two.

"How did you break your arm?"

"Fell out of a tree; two more weeks; yes, you can sign the cast."

That took up about fifteen minutes, as Iris and her sister dredged up every crayon and colored marker they could find. I drew the line at finger-paints, but if they hadn't been bored with coloring before they found them, I might have lost that battle as well.

"You're our babysitter tonight, so that means you have to do what we say."

"No, it means you have to do what I say," I replied.

"No. You have to play games with us." Elianto grabbed my hand and led me to their playroom.

"What do you want to play?"

“Dog Pile on Kit” came first, then endless games of “Hide and Seek,” where they both hid in the closet every single time. After that, they wanted to watch videos, but kept changing their mind about which video to watch, always deciding on a new one just after we had sat through the endless ads and previews. We saw the same stupid “Baby Animals” preview about fifty times. When I thought I couldn’t take any more, I looked at the clock hopefully. Seven o’clock. What time had Mr. Holmes said they had to go to bed?

“Where’s that paper your daddy left for me?” I asked Iris.

“Elianto ate it.”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

“Alright! Let it go!” I rubbed my temples. “What time do you have to go to bed?”

“Our other babysitter lets us stay up as late as we want,” Elianto said.

“Yeah. Our other babysitter is nice,” Iris said.

“Tell me about your other babysitter.” Maybe if they sat and talked instead of running around breaking things, they would become tired enough for bed.

“Her name is Nuala,” Iris said.

“And she’s tall and brown. Much taller than you.”

“She’s taller than the house!”

“Than two houses!”

Uh huh, sure. “Why isn’t she babysitting for you tonight?”

“She’s sleeping,” Elianto informed me.

“And where does she sleep?” I asked, playing along. “Does she have a great big bed taller than two houses?”

“No, she sleeps outside.” Iris seemed angry at my stupidity.

“In a snow bank?”

“We’ll show you.” Elianto dragged me to the mudroom so they could put their boots and coats on.

“Is it a long walk?”

“Noooo.” Iris rolled her eyes. Adults could be so stupid some times.

Why not? Maybe they would get tired, and this would kill some time. Bromley was a safe enough neighborhood that we could walk for a little way even at this time of night.

Elianto was very particular about her shoes, and had to look for the exact pair she wanted. Then she changed her mind. She eventually picked out one pink boot and one lavender boot, and insisted that Iris had to change her own coat to match the boots. When I threatened to forget the whole thing and go back in the kitchen, Elianto dropped her fashion nitpicking and got herself dressed quickly. They made me borrow one of their mommy's coats because, as Elianto informed me, "You have to wear a coat when you go outside." (Elianto knew everything, having just passed the 'Why' stage.) Forty minutes later, both girls had their boots and coats on.

Finally, after all this effort, the three of us walked fifteen feet into the front yard and stopped at an oak tree.

"Well, are we going to see your babysitter?" Silvara's coat was warm, at least, but our breath plumed out in front of us, and my tennis shoes didn't do enough to keep my feet from freezing.

"This is her. This is Nuala. She's sleeping now," Elianto said, patting the trunk. She greeted the tree. "Hi, Nuala. This is our new babysitter, Kit. We told her we like you better."

Iris put a finger to her lips and whispered. "Mommy says not to wake her up."

"Mommy said she couldn't wake up," Elianto said.

"We have to be quiet when people are sleeping."

I looked up at the tree while they argued with each other. It was an impressive looking oak. There was a maple on the other side of the front walk, but the oak looked more alive somehow. The trunk twisted, and the branches were shapely, looking almost like arms. In fact, one whorl of broken branch looked a lot like a face, if you used your imagination.

And then I saw it. She was a dryad. The oak was a dryad. A dryad who babysat for Silvara's daughters. "She's a dryad."

"Well of course she's a dryad. Mommy said you were smart, but you don't seem to know very much," Iris said.

"Did she ever give you any of her acorns?"

Both girls nodded happily.

"I would really like an acorn. Would you give one to me?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

“Please?” Even grown-ups like me could play the persistent whiny game.

“No.”

“Please?”

But both girls shook their heads. Damn. Old Twi said it wouldn’t do if the acorns weren’t willingly given.

Elianto began to whine. “I’m cold. I want to go inside.”

Inside we spent another twenty minutes taking the boots, gloves, hats and coats off. Then Iris and Elianto were already screaming up the stairs, looking for something else to mess up. The mudroom was a jumble of little girls’ outerwear, and after a few minutes of ominous thumping overhead, I abandoned my futile attempts to straighten it and trudged up the stairs.

The girls were jumping on their beds, trying to jump from one to the other. Neither one seemed in the least bit tired. Surely it was late enough for bed?

Their bedroom was decorated in pink and white, overly feminine and girlish, completely opposite from the subdued earth tones the rest of the house. Iris’ half had two posters on it, one featuring a scantily dressed teenager, with bold print declaring her to be the one and only Tiffany Bailey. The other poster had five man-boys not yet old enough to shave, posing in a manner their photographer no doubt had assured them was convincingly heterosexual.

Elianto fell off the bed and bonked her head on the floor. She took a breath and let it out in a wail. I went over to hold her. Where had I heard the name Tiffany Bailey? There was an ad for that, wasn’t there? Something on the radio, one of those annoying ads that bored a hole in your skull when you were stuck in traffic.

“Tiffany Bailey is coming in concert next month. Would you like to go?” I asked Iris.

“I wanna go too!” Elianto wailed from my arms.

“Maybe your mom would let me take you to the concert, if there are still tickets left.”

Iris bounced off the bed and started jumping up and down on the floor. “I wanna go! I’ll ask her. She’ll let me. I’m a big girl.”

“I wanna go too!” Elianto whimpered again.

“Maybe she’ll let you both go,” I said, “But, I don’t know. You two weren’t very nice to me.”

“We’re nice!” they cried.

“Well, I really want a dryad acorn. I really need one. Will you give me an acorn if I take you to the concert?”

“Yes,” they said.

Free will? That sounded like a legitimate bargain. “Then I’ll ask your mom if it’s okay. Now, who wants another game of hide and seek?”

They fell asleep on the closet floor, so I picked them up and tucked them into bed. They hadn’t had baths, they hadn’t brushed their teeth, or had their story or good night snack like they insisted they needed, but as long as they were alive and uninjured by the time their parents came home, I figured my work was done.

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Chapter Sixteen

I had told myself I was going to check on Fenwick and make sure his heater was working, but I hadn't gotten around to it for a week. The apartment was too cold for my tastes, but it was over 55, so at least he wouldn't freeze to death. Fenwick was sitting in front of the television, as usual, watching endless ads between one program and the next. There were empty ravioli cans piled up in the kitchen. His shirts hung limply on arms that had once been taut with muscle.

After an hour of cleaning, the kitchen looked less like a roach paradise. I changed his sheets, and thought about washing a load of laundry, but he had been wearing the same clothes day in and day out, so what was the point? Fenwick hadn't responded to anything, not even changing the channels when another infomercial came on. He didn't look at me when I sat next to him on the couch, but his nostrils flared, as though somewhere deep within that shell he knew my scent.

The things we cling to.

"Merry Christmas, Fenwick. Sorry it's late." Since he wasn't going to open it himself, I unwrapped his present, a framed picture of himself as a bear, posing among the birch trees. I set it on the coffee table, with a post-it note that said *Merry Christmas—Kit* along with my cell phone number. "I suppose you don't even notice the picture here, but I'm hoping you'll like it when you get better."

Maybe he would get well without my help, and I wouldn't have to go to the Realm of the Faerie. One day Violet would just get better spontaneously, and Fenwick's soul would return to his body, and he'd see my message there and call me and tell me he missed me. He'd race over to my place, and sweep me into a huge embrace, swearing we'd never part again. He'd profess his undying love, and present me with an engagement ring, and we would marry and live happily ever after.

Yeah, right.

"Let me tell you a story, Fenwick. You like fairy tales, right? I'll tell you one of my favorites." I turned off the television and sat next to him. He kept staring at it as if it were still on. "Once upon a time, there was a young man

named Ivan who was the son of a czar. No, wait, this is my story, let's make her a woman. We'll call her Ekaterina. Ekaterina was the daughter of a czar."

I started telling him the story of Ivan and the Firebird, with Ekaterina instead of Ivan. Fenwick had a comic version of it somewhere, and he had purchased a copy for me as a gift, trying to get me hooked on comics. I had been hooked already, but the story appealed. Of course, it appealed. Wasn't I undertaking a quest of my own?

"After walking a while on the same road Ekaterina found her horse again. This time it was dead, and a huge wolf fed on it. It was a brown-haired wolf, with gold-flecked eyes and sharp fangs."

I paused to look at Fenwick. He wasn't showing any signs of listening, but he may have been. I resumed the story, telling him of Ekaterina, and the wolf, and their quest to get the firebird. If he were here, he'd smile at my cleverness. But he wasn't here. Only an empty husk stared through those lifeless gray eyes.

"The wolf agreed to help her find the firebird."

I went on with the story, making up the parts I forgot, about how Ekaterina had to get the firebird but she touched the cage even after the wolf warned her not to, and then she had to steal the horse with the golden mane to give to the prince who had the firebird. She messed up here as well, and got caught trying to steal the horse from the queen. This wasn't exactly how the story went, but Fenwick was too far gone to correct me.

"The queen made a deal with her. 'I will give you the horse with the golden mane if you can fetch for me the speaking bear. He is handsome and kind, and I much desire him.' Ekaterina agreed, and went back out to tell the wolf what happened. 'Why did you touch the bridle after I warned you not to?' the wolf asked. Ekaterina explained that sometimes things don't always go to plan. 'Very well,' said the wolf, 'I will help you find the bear, but my price is another small piece of your heart.' Ekaterina was afraid, but she had gone this far, and couldn't see any way to turn back.

"Ekaterina and the wolf traveled many days, and at last they found the place where the bear was kept. Ekaterina saw the bear, and he was indeed handsome and kind. Ekaterina desired him for herself, more than anything. She would be willing to trade all manner of fiery birds and golden-maned horses to have the bear."

Fenwick hadn't responded this whole time. Was he even hearing me?

“I don’t know how the story ends, Fenwick,” I said to him. “Will Ekaterina get the bear back home before the wolf takes all of her heart? Will the bear even want Ekaterina, if her heart has been given to another?”

I threw my arms around him. His chest felt almost sunken, and he smelled terribly unwashed, but I clung to him anyway. “Come home to me, Fenwick. Come home. I miss you. You don’t have to help Violet. Just break free and come back to yourself. Then call me and we’ll get together and everything will be fine again. It will be just like old times.”

Fenwick curled his fingers around the clicker, and turned the television back on. A thin blond woman was explaining how to use expensive rubber bands to get the body shape you wanted.

I pushed myself away from him. He stared at the television.

With a sigh, I walked out the door, and drove to the dojo to practice for a couple hours before my date with Fain.

“Do you want to go to the same bar as last time?” Fain asked with a grin as I met him at the door.

“Not really. Let’s go someplace a bit classier.” I shivered in my sweater and jean jacket as I walked to his car. “Do you mind if I drive?”

Fain looked offended. “Why?”

I sighed. Men. “Nevermind.”

Fain chatted about his work on the way to the club. His gruesome descriptions of blood and gore did not distract me from the fact that he had just driven down the same street twice. I didn’t let on like I knew he was lost, even after he passed the same parking lot for the third time. Eventually Fain parked and led us to a warehouse which had been converted into a dance club. There was a line to get in, but the doorman was a vampire and let us in ahead of the other people. (Who knew being in the Guild had mundane benefits?) We walked inside to a dark throbbing mass of hip young people and techno music.

“You like dancing?” he shouted over the din.

“I don’t know how.”

“That’s right. The soirée. Well, I don’t care much for modern dancing anyway. Not enough chances to caress your partner in public.” He licked his lip and touched his fang with the tip of his tongue. Fain led me to the

back, where stairs led up to a quieter area filled with pool tables and the haze of cigarette smoke. I inhaled the nicotine scent, to test my strength against the temptation. Nope. I wouldn't smoke. I felt pretty strong, pretty relaxed. Maybe I could quit for good.

"I figured you for a pool player. Just try not to hit anyone with the cues." Fain winked at me. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Well ... I usually like to pay my own way."

"The first one's on me. After that, loser buys the next round."

"I guess you'll be buying them all night then," I said, feeling aggressive.

"We'll see." He vanished quickly, and later came back with a couple beers.

We sipped our drinks and racked the balls for the first game. Fain was amazing. He wasn't exactly a pro, but he had incredible luck, sinking shots that should never have gone down. I suspected foul play, but couldn't see any spells cast in the hazy atmosphere and dim lighting.

Fenwick and I used to play game after game of pool, in the quarter tables at bars near the U. Sometimes he and Rob and I had played together, me against the two of them. Pool was a great game. You didn't need to be strong or fast, just steady, and you had to have a good eye. After a few months, Rob and Fenwick refused to play me for any stakes higher than domestic beers and "next game" quarters.

But Fain was too lucky. Or maybe it was my cast? No, my cast was on the left arm. I bought the second round, and the third, and then I bought drinks just for him. Fain stayed completely cool, and the alcohol didn't touch him.

"Scratched again!" I swore. The bar was about to close, but we had enough time for one more game. "One more."

"You'll lose." He was mocking me.

"You're cheating. I know it."

"I can't help being talented." Fain started to put his cue back.

"Bull crap. One more game." I pulled the cue off the rack and put it back in his hands.

"I'm through for tonight." He yawned dramatically, the big bullshitter. He never slept before dawn.

"Chicken." I pushed him in the chest with the ball rack.

He smiled wickedly, showing just the tips of his fangs over his lower lip. "You think I'm chicken? I can take you on. I can win left-handed."

Maybe he could, actually, with the way my luck had been that night. "Left-handed? I don't think so. What shall we wager?"

"What do you really want?"

"Besides Fenwick?"

I can't do that. I would, you know." He leaned under the table to fetch balls and the rack.

I doubted that. "A winter coat."

He raised an eyebrow as he set double handfuls of balls onto the felt. "That's a reasonably high stake. What do you put up against it?"

"What do you want?"

Fain rolled the eight ball over his fingers. "Stand me a pint."

"What are you talking about? I've been buying you drinks all ... Oh." I narrowed my eyes and put some more chalk on the end of the cue as if it would help. "You're on."

Fain circled around the table like a matador. He graciously let me break.

No more slacking. This game, every shot was placed just so. Every strike was focused. I played my heart out, I really did, and since I had been losing all evening, I was a lot more sober than I wanted to be. Nothing seemed to work. My shots were off by a fraction each time. It wasn't the cast. Fain sank a polite two balls per turn, letting me have another chance with a wry look. He was doing something. He was toying with me. Five scratches in one game? I had never played so badly.

Fain sank the eight ball with his left hand. Anyone else would have scratched with that angle, but somehow the cue ball slowed down enough to not fall in.

"You cheated."

"A desperate man does desperate things." He looked at me with a hungry expression, and put his cue on the rack.

"How?"

"You don't get to be as old as I am without picking up a trick or two." Fain took the cue out of my hands. "You want to back out?"

"No. A deal's a deal, even if you did cheat."

Fain took my hand and kissed my wrist, lips pulling into a triumphant smile. "I'll take you home."

A half hour later, we entered my apartment. Elaina wasn't home, fortunately. I wasn't cheating on Fenwick, but it would sure look like that if

I brought Fain home and let him in my room with the door closed. Fain kissed my wrist again. It felt too nice. I tried to hide my body's response.

"You can still back out."

"I made a deal." I took my jacket and cardigan off.

Fain sat on the bed and pulled me on to his lap. He unbuttoned my shirt enough to slip one sleeve off my shoulder and started kissing my neck with parted lips.

I liked this too much. It was terrible. What if he didn't stop? What if he stopped? "What are you doing?"

The soft warmth of his breath caressed the curve where my shoulder hits my neck. "I want to make this last. You'll never agree to this again. You're only doing this to punish yourself."

"For what?" My fingernails bit crescents into my palm. Don't touch him. Don't encourage him. Just let him drink.

"For liking me. You think you're being disloyal to Fenwick." And his lips were caressing my ears, nibbling along the outer edge, and he was playing with my hair too.

"What makes you say that?" My fists were aching, they were clenched so tight. I crossed my legs, then uncrossed them.

"I've been around long enough to know these things." He drew a fingertip down my back.

"What do you see in me? I'm just a mortal woman."

"That's what I like about you." Fain leaned forward and bit me on the neck, sinking his fangs deep into the flesh.

It hurt like someone jabbed two pencils into my neck: searing, hot aching pain. Then, it subsided to something more tolerable. Okay, that wasn't so bad. Fain held me close in his arms, with his mouth pressed against my skin, his arms wrapped around me, pinning me. Did vampires always do this? Predatory instinct? I wriggled, experimentally, and he clenched tighter. He was stronger than I imagined.

Thirty seconds passed. This was the worst part. I had to trust him to stop. I didn't feel weak, but my nerves were getting to me. Would he stop? A pint, he said. Could I trust him? What if he liked it too much? What if he didn't want to quit?

But Fain held me as if I were the only thing in the world he cared about. He made small murmuring noises of pleasure as each beat of my heart pumped another mouthful down his throat. His hands caressed my back

gently, fingernails tracing my spine. He wouldn't hurt me. Fain cared about me. Trust him. Relax and enjoy the closeness. I rested my head against his shoulder. A small eternity passed with me in his embrace.

Finally, he stopped. He produced a clean handkerchief from somewhere, pressed it against the wound on my neck, and lifted my chin with one hand. "Are you okay?"

"It's a lot to trust someone with. I couldn't stop you if I wanted to. You're so much stronger than me."

"You can trust me." Fain kissed my wrist, leaving a faint smear of blood.

I turned away and shut my eyes.

"The sight of blood bothers you?" He licked my skin.

"A little, yeah." When my eyes opened, his face was close enough to touch noses.

"Some people find it erotic to be a host." He didn't whisper, exactly, but spoke quietly, like a nightclub singer, making me want to lean forward to hear him better.

"Well, I guess so. I never understood that until now, but the intimacy ..." I'd said too much. If he knew how much I wanted him, he might not go home tonight. I turned away. "I'm pretty tired. I need to go to sleep."

Fain released me. "Very well." He was standing at the door suddenly, silently, watching me with the expression of a man who had just eaten an appetizer and felt hungrier than ever. We stared at each other for a moment, three paces apart, daring one another to make the first move.

I broke eye contact, looking down. "Don't tell anyone about this. I don't think Fenwick would understand."

When I looked up again, Fain was gone. He had left, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Chapter Seventeen

A package came in the mail. Elaina handed it to me, hopping from foot to foot with curiosity. “What is it?”

“I didn’t order anything.” There’s something really special about gifts that come in the mail. I brought my utility knife out of my jacket pocket and slowly cut it open, savoring the moment.

“It’s a bit late for Christmas, isn’t it?” Elaina peered at the invoice.

“Better late than never.”

A long wool coat lay inside the box. New, heather gray, with a soft weave, and a label that made even Elaina grunt with appreciation. My arm slid inside each sleeve, caressed by the heavy material. The buttons mated with their holes easily, pulling it snug, but not too snug, around my waist. I twirled around, and the skirt of the coat flared. It fit perfectly.

“Nice. Who’s it from?”

“Fain.” Who else?

“You’re sleeping with him?”

“No.”

“Why’d he give you such a nice gift?”

“Maybe he didn’t want me to be cold.” One of the pockets held a note, computer printed on crisp stationary. A special request of the mail-order company, no doubt.

Something to keep you warm until Easter.

A warm flush coursed through my body, thinking of him.

Then guilt. I was Fenwick’s girlfriend.

Chapter Eighteen

Ms. Yseult let me in the door just one minute before moonrise. She said nothing, as usual, not even “good morning,” just floated up the stairs to the forbidden second floor as I laid my new coat across a log.

And the green paint had faded again. It hadn’t peeled, there were no flakes on the ground. It had simply faded to white, so that instead of undergrowth, billowy patches of what appeared to be snow gathered around the trees in the painting. Not unlike outside, actually. But if the painting had snow, it wouldn’t match the room. The room was going to have undergrowth.

“Ma’am?” I started to set one foot upon the stairs, but Kaa cawed a warning, as though my shoe was about to come down on a snake, instead of the polished hardwood step. “Ma’am? I want to ask you a question about the mural.”

No response.

“You see, Ma’am, the paint is fading, some of it, and the mural looks like it’s snowy in the forest, but the real room isn’t going to have snow, and, Ma’am? Can you hear me?”

“Kaa?” my familiar asked.

“You want to go up and see if she’s there?” I jerked a thumb towards the stairs.

Kaa shook his head, and dug his claws into the denim of my jacket.

“So, now what do I do? I was going to apply the sealer today, but what if it fades again?”

“Leave it as it is, Treemaker,” Ms. Yseult said, from directly behind me. “Do not fight the will of the forest. You will lose.”

Two things went through my mind. One: how did she get behind me, if she hadn’t come down the stairs? And two: what the hell was she talking about? “Okay, sure. You got it.”

She began to ascend the stairs again, but this time she paused halfway up, and turned to regard me. “Treamaker, you have not yet dreamed this forest. The time draws nigh.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Just under three weeks left, and the job wasn’t nearly done yet. The empty border of birch trees around the perimeter of the room had to be re-installed, and the right half of the room didn’t have enough trees. After that, I had to cut dowels and drill holes to join the branches to the trunks. Oh yes, and then make and affix over a hundred ferns for undergrowth. Just under three weeks left.

“Maybe she’d grant me an extension?” I asked, staring up the wooden sweep of stairs. As if in answer, a draft of cold air poured down, making me shiver.

Kaa rattled in the back of his throat, and huddled closer to my neck. I threw myself into work.

Twelve hours later, a tinny melody broke me out of my sawdust covered trance. I blinked, wiped sweat out of my eyes, and set down the birch log I had been drilling pilot holes into.

“What’s that?”

Kaa, who had been amusing himself by caching screws, cocked his head to one side to listen, but offered no suggestions.

“My phone!” I barely managed to answer it in time.

“Hello, Kit?”

It was Fenwick’s voice. He was better? He was better! He was talking to me! My heart soared, and then crashed, as a half second later he spoke again, and I recognized the voice of Fenwick’s dad.

“I’m here at Alan’s apartment. I got your number off the photo.” Gus Fenwick sounded unbelievably tired, as though he hadn’t just been on a month-long cruise in the Bahamas. There were noises in the background, like people moving furniture, and rustling paper. “We heard your messages last night, but we didn’t quite understand how bad it was.”

I reached into my jacket pocket for a cigarette, but the pocket held only the utility knives. “I took him to the hospital, they said they didn’t know what was wrong except that it was depression.”

“I saw the medical report. I’m going through his papers right now. He obviously has something wrong with him, and it may be more serious than depression. That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Carol and I have decided to get him a full-time caretaker. I know you’ve been taking care of him, but you shouldn’t have to do that.” He sighed, and there was a thump, as though he had just slid a large pile of papers into a trash can.

“Oh.” My fingers played with the blade of the utility knife, sliding it in and out, worrying it. Stress did that to me. I needed to do something with my hands.

“Do you want to come over and get anything that might be yours? We’re clearing out his second room for the nurse to live in.”

“No, that’s okay.” It would hurt too much, to see his empty apartment. My thumb pushed the blade in, out, in, out. Think about the clack of metal. Don’t think about your empty husk of a boyfriend.

“Well, if you forget, we’re putting his things in storage, for when he, if he gets better.” Gus sounded so hopeless. Was it just fatigue? Or maybe he saw something that my denial hid? “We took him in for a psych evaluation this morning.”

“Yeah?” Clack, clack, clack, went the utility knife. Fey metal. What if it really wasn’t fey? What if the Realm of the Faerie wasn’t real, and Old Twi was just jerking me around?

“Kit, I hate to say this, and it’s too early to tell, but the doctor thinks, he thinks it might be schizophrenia. Not the wild type, but the catatonic type. Schizophrenia isn’t curable. It’s treatable, but not curable, and if it’s this bad this quickly, well, I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Oh.” I gripped the fey-bladed knife. Go to the Realm, get the elfwort, come back. Old Twi would cure Violet, Fenwick could break free.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with this on your own. We should have been here. You’ve been such a good friend to him.” Gus cleared his throat, and he sounded so much like his son that it made my eyes sting with tears. “He, I wasn’t supposed to tell you this, but he wanted to propose to you at Christmas. The ring is paid for. I think, I think he’d want you to have it.”

I had accidentally pricked myself with Ms. Yseult’s fey-metal blade. I licked the blood and wiped it on my dirty jeans. “It won’t mean anything if he doesn’t give it to me himself.”

“Oh. Yes. I can see how you might feel that way.” He sighed again, and his wife asked him something just out of hearing range. “Well, I have to go now. The nurse from the care center just arrived. You can stop by and see him if you want. I put you on the list of visitors.”

“Thank you.”

Gus mumbled goodbye and disconnected. I sat there for a moment, gripping the knife until my knuckles became white. Then I grabbed Ms.

Yseult's fey-metal saw and cut logs until my palms became blistered and the wood became damp with tears.

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Chapter Nineteen

The woman who opened Fain's door had dyed black hair with extra short bangs and plenty of black eye makeup, which matched her black lipstick and black velvet ballet top. Her torn jeans were black too, as was her ragged fishnet leggings. The only non-black thing on her was a moonstone choker around her pale neck.

I didn't expect anyone to be at Fain's condo. He was so good at maintaining the illusion that I was the only woman he was pursuing that my mind imagined him as always alone. It made me grateful for the dark red turtleneck hiding my healing bite marks and my chaste (if damp) jeans. Kaa sat on my shoulder, with one loop of a wool scarf draped around him.

"It's a woman, Leo, should I let her in?" the Goth Chick shouted over her shoulder. She had fangs, which looked quite real, but no smudgy aura. Maybe she was just a very young vampire?

"If she can come in without being invited, let her in. Otherwise, let me see who it is first," Fain shouted from the kitchen.

Goth Chick shrugged and stepped back to let me in.

"You're not a vampire, are you?" I asked Goth Chick, to her obvious delight. Then she touched her hands to her penciled-in eyebrows a couple times in a very human gesture. When she pulled at her hem nervously, it confirmed either she was as human as I, or she was quite good at pretending to be human. I voted for the former.

She smiled and refused to admit she wasn't a vampire. "Cool bird. Is that a crow? Can I touch him?"

"If he lets you."

Kaa didn't, shying away from her touch with a hop and a flap to the top of my head.

A lanky, sullen young man slouched on the couch. He had a black leather jacket and looked like he'd rather be in Paris writing poetry or something. His black Doc Martens and artfully torn jeans perfectly matched his world-weary youth look.

"What are you here for? Is our vampire friend going to feast on the blood of three humans tonight?" Goth Boy asked me.

"No, actually, I was going to ask if he could remove my cast." Actually, I had come over because I wanted to see him. Elaina was out with Dael again, and James and Maya were inseparable these days. Kaa was a good companion, but, might as well admit, I really liked Fain. "I can leave if I'm intruding."

“No, it’s fine. Stay, really.” Goth Chick gripped my cast with one white hand. The whites of her eyes showed briefly, and she gave me a thin-lipped smile. “You can give him blood too. We’re both giving blood to Leo.”

“Selling it,” Goth Boy said, “selling blood. Capitalism at its finest.”

“Stay and donate. We’ll make a party of it.” Goth Chick reached up to touch Kaa again, but Kaa shied away.

“Sounds personal. Maybe I should come back later.” Yeah, it was time to go. I just wasn’t an orgy kind of girl, and I didn’t think I could handle seeing Fain drink from someone else’s neck, no matter how blasé I was about our non-existent relationship.

Fain came out of the kitchen, wearing a dark red turtleneck and jeans. We took a look at each other’s outfits and began laughing. He was carrying some plastic bags and needles for drawing blood. “Kit, so nice to see you. Great outfit.”

“Especially the coat.” I twirled to display his gift. “I’m sorry I didn’t call first. I was in the area and decided to stop by.”

“Are you two brother and sister?” Goth Boy asked, looking from Fain to me and back again.

“No, she’s a friend. Who wants to be first?” Fain asked, looking from one to the other.

“I will,” Goth Chick said.

Fain had her sit down on the couch and extend an arm. Was he going to bite her wrist? The Goth Chick looked away. Fain brought out a sterile wrapped needle from his pocket, hooked it up to the plastic tube, and stuck Goth Chick’s vein.

How ... professional. Did he filch the bags from work, or order his own supply from somewhere? He would have been even more professional if he wore his work scrubs, but then Goth Chick and Goth Boy wouldn’t have gone for that. Not the right look.

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” Goth Chick said, relaxing her fist and looking both relieved and disappointed.

“I have done this before,” Fain said, drawing the needle out of her arm and bandaging the little blood spot. He did the same for Goth Boy. When he was done, he thanked them and gave them each some money, and asked them to wait a few minutes before leaving, in case they got dizzy. Then he walked back into the kitchen with the bags of blood. I followed him so I wouldn’t have to talk to the creepy humans on the couch. Kaa flew to the

top of the entertainment center and tucked his head under one wing, ignoring all of us.

“I hope you don’t mind me stopping by unannounced.”

“I’m glad you came by.” Fain put one of the bags in the refrigerator and cut the corner off the other one to pour it into a tall tumbler. I found something else to look at while he drank from it.

“So, this is how you usually get blood?”

“There are always students looking to make an extra buck. Thirty dollars a pint, and they can go out drinking for the evening. You came by to ask me to cut your cast off?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”

“Because I don’t have insurance, and I’m too broke to pay another emergency room bill.” I felt embarrassed, as always when forced to admit how poor I was. “I was hoping you might cut it off for me, since it’s about time, and I’m sure you’ve done it before.”

“Well, if you’re that hard up for money, you can sell me some blood in a few weeks.” Fain put the bag in the garbage and filled the cup with water, draining it into his mouth, so as not to waste any precious platelets still clinging to the sides of the glass.

“I won’t sell you blood.” How to put this? My rehearsed dialog didn’t sound right. “I’ve been thinking about last week.”

“That bad?”

“No.” I walked towards him. “It didn’t hurt very much. I kind of liked knowing how much you enjoyed it. If you want, I will host you again sometime.” I put my arms around him and looked up into his gold-flecked eyes.

Fain leaned down and met my mouth with slightly parted lips. He tasted metallic from the blood, but I didn’t mind, as long as I didn’t have to see it. He lifted me onto the counter and for a few moments we lost ourselves in each other. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him close, and dug my fingers into his sweater. Fain held me equally close, with one hand gripping the back of my neck as if this time, he wouldn’t let me go. Our tongues and fangs and teeth and lips explored each other, and we both wanted more, but just then Goth Chick coughed politely in the doorway leading to the kitchen.

I jerked in surprise, but Fain kissed me lightly again, as if trying to prove he wasn't embarrassed at all.

"You said you wanted to talk with me?" Goth Chick asked Fain, nonplussed at interrupting us.

"Yes." Fain turned to talk with her, while I jumped off the counter and moseyed back into the living room. Kaa flew back to sit on my shoulder while I eavesdropped on the conversation coming from the kitchen. "Your test came back, and you have hepatitis. You need to talk to your doctor about this."

"How could I get hepatitis? I don't know anyone with hepatitis."

"You must know someone with it. Talk to your partners and discuss it. They should be tested as well. I'll still be able to use your blood, but you need to—"

"Fine, whatever." Goth Chick stormed out past me, slamming the door behind her. Goth Boy had already left. I guess they hadn't come together.

Fain looked unconcerned.

"I hope you have other blood sellers?" I kicked my shoes off and pulled my knees up onto the couch.

He shrugged. "Enough."

"I thought you guys were immune to disease."

"We won't die of disease, but it wasn't me I was concerned about. She needs to take care of her health." He walked in to the living room and took a seat opposite me.

"How did you know she had hepatitis? Do you test the blood?"

"She's jaundiced." He picked up one of my feet and began rubbing it. "Many of my blood sellers have diseases, actually. I'm less fastidious than the Red Cross, and I pay in cash."

"Remind me never to become a vampire."

"You have to be invited." He sat still like a statue.

"Well, I don't want it." I picked at my cuticles instead of looking at Fain.

"Not even if it meant immortality? You're well-placed to court a sire." He ran his fingers up my ankle, sliding them under the cuff of my sock in a way that felt almost sensual. "I could put in a good word for you."

"Goth Chick sure wants it bad."

"Goth—oh, Joanna?" He chuckled. "She doesn't know what it means to be a vampire. People like her imagine their lives would be so much easier,

so much more romantic if they were of the blood. She wants to be a blood seller to be part of my life, but she doesn't even see me. She sees all the vampires she ever saw on the silver screen."

"And here I thought you were after me for my blood, when there were all those other people waiting in line to bare their veins for you."

He sat next to me, one of those swift vampire moves where I didn't know he moved until he was there. He grabbed my wrist and kissed it gently. "Never for a moment think that a beloved host is the same as a casual blood seller." He pulled my sleeve back to kiss further up my arm.

Time to have the long-delayed heart to heart talk with him. "Fain, what do you want from me?"

"Anything you want to give me," Mr. Romantic murmured, sliding even closer.

I pushed him back. "I don't understand you. You've been so kind to me, so helpful, and, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. A human guy would be, you know, putting the pressure on, but you've been a perfect gentleman. What's the deal?"

He leaned back, sitting upright on the couch. "When you're a child, say six or seven years old, three weeks is forever."

"Yeah, and?"

"As you get older, time seems to lengthen, because the way we perceive time is as a piece of all our years on earth." Fain had his own way of answering questions. "How old do you think I am?"

"Maybe one sixty?"

"You don't really know what that means, do you?"

"I can't picture it, except, I wonder what you see in me. I must seem like a little kid to you. I'm only twenty-three."

"Some would say that twenty-three is the ideal age for a woman." He wrapped his arms around me and smelled my hair.

"Yeah, according to the pornos I've seen. And yet sometimes you seem to care about me as a person."

"If I just wanted sex, I could ask Joanna for some of her hepatitis. You're different." He cradled me on his lap, laying my head to rest against his chest. "Kit, are you really going to the Realm of the Faerie?"

"If it exists. If I can find a way there."

"See, that's where I'm selfish. If you go to the Realm, you know there's a chance you won't come back for years and years. That's what the fables

all say.”

“I’m trying not to think about it. I hope I can get my business done quickly and return in a day or two.”

“What if you come back and it’s ten, twenty, fifty years later?”

I closed my eyes and pressed my face against his chest. I didn’t want to think about that.

“Fenwick will be married with children or grandchildren.”

“Fenwick will be dead,” I said.

“Well, your brother and mother will be older, all your friends will be gone, and who will be left?”

“You.”

“Me. See how selfish I am?”

“Oh, Fain. I’m selfish too! How could I do that to James? I can’t leave him for years and years!”

His hands crossed over my back, and he kissed me on the cheek. “Kit, it may not happen. Maybe you will go and come back in a week or two.”

“I’m so confused. I’m so afraid. I can’t let Fenwick die, but I don’t know if I’m brave enough to go.”

“Kit, I’ve met a lot of women, and you are one of the bravest humans I’ve ever known.” He stroked my hair, running his fingers gently along my scalp. “You’re as nervous around vampires as any other human, and yet here you are, resting your head on my chest.”

“Yeah, so you’re a big, bad vampire. I trust you anyway.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I’m just a bad judge of character.”

He laughed. “I love your honesty.”

“Why should I not trust you? You’re less likely to kill me than a non-Guild member, and anything less than that I can survive.”

“What do you mean by anything less than that?”

I laid my face down on his chest again. “I expect my heart will be broken pretty soon. When I get back, I’m going to have to stop seeing you, and I don’t want to do that.”

“Kit Melbourne, are you falling for me?” Mock incredulous, as if he hadn’t been angling for that for the past couple months. Ass.

“Not yet, but it’s inevitable, if you keep being so nice to me. What are you going to do about it?”

“Wait.” He kissed me chastely on the top of the head. “I’m patient, and Fenwick is bound to make a mistake sooner or later. When he does, you’ll be mine.”

It wasn’t true, but it was a sweet thing to say. We stayed on the couch for a while, and I fell asleep on his chest. When I woke up, my cast was in two pieces on the coffee table, and I had a blanket over me. Fain was elsewhere. I left the cast on the table, cradling the sleeping crow with my thin left arm, and let myself out.

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Chapter Twenty

The Tiffany Bailey concert was as dull as expected. Most of the good seats sold out quickly, and the only three left together were in the back near a huge pole. Iris and Elianto were so excited at being allowed to go to a Tiffany Bailey concert that they didn't care how the acoustics sucked. I didn't care much either. My taste in music was eclectic, but derivative teeny pop wasn't on my top ten list.

The dark amphitheater was filled with screaming prepubescent girls and their guardians, either women like me, trying to be patient, or men, trying with various degrees of success to pretend they weren't interested in the tight-abbed blonde girl bouncing around on the stage, and her equally nubile fans, gyrating to the canned beat. A few men even came without the ruse of a niece, and leered shamelessly.

Three ear-deafening hours later, I carried Elianto and dragged Iris through the crowd surging towards the parking lot. Iris whined, but her sister had fallen asleep halfway through the last song, her forty-pound frame severely testing the strength of my atrophied left arm.

"Kit?" Someone called from behind me. I turned and saw Rob, holding the hand of a young girl.

"Hi, Rob. Roped into escort duty I hope? I never figured you for a Tiffany Bailey fan."

Rob smiled. "This is my baby sister."

"I'm not a baby," the blonde girl protested. "I'm in the fourth grade."

Elianto started to slip off my shoulder, and I had to let go of Iris' hand to grab her. Iris started to whine that she was tired.

Rob either ignored or didn't notice my discomfort. "Dude, you still going to the dojo?"

"Yeah, but I've got a weird work schedule." I got Elianto up on my shoulder, but Iris wouldn't reach up to take my hand.

"Did you hear what happened to Brandon?" Rob followed me through the river of people flowing to the parking lot, but didn't offer to help with either child. His little sister had pulled a cell phone from her pocket and began conducting a play-by-play of the concert at a discreet distance. "He got in a bar fight. He tore a ligament in his knee, had to have surgery."

"That sucks." And why on earth had I parked so far away from the entrance? Iris had taken my arm again, and was using it to support most of her weight.

“Brandon said the bouncer has kicked him out so many times that they know each other by name now.” Rob laughed.

“Wasn’t he dating Hannah for a while?”

“I think that was Kendra. Hannah was engaged to that rich guy, Anton D. Everyone thinks she’s a gold-digger.” Rob had his hands in his pockets, and kept looking around at the ground, as though trying to figure out how to say something.

“I don’t stay up with gossip much.” And thank God, this was Silvara’s car. I beeped it open and slid the heavy lump of four-year-old into her car seat. Iris crawled inside and fell immediately asleep. “Rob, I’d love to chat, but I have to get these girls home.”

“Kit, I just wanna say I’m sorry about Fenwick, you know?”

“Yeah, me too.” My fingers had gone numb from the cold and the stress of holding Elianto, and fastening the car seat proved to be a terrible chore.

“I heard about you hooking up with some dude, and I got kind of pissed and all, because Fenwick’s my man, but since he’s all crazy and shit, well, I kind of understand.”

“Gee, thanks.” And Rob was too dense to hear the sarcasm, as usual.

“You think he’ll be okay again?”

“I hope so.” The car seat finally clicked. One down, one to go. “And you can’t always believe the rumors you hear, Rob. I’ve been hanging out with a guy I know, but I’m not sleeping with him. I’m still Fenwick’s girlfriend. When Fenwick is better again, everything will go back to normal between us.”

“So, who is he? Anyone I know?” Rob wasn’t usually this curious, and sounded as though he weren’t asking entirely on his own behalf.

“No.” I clicked Iris’ car seat shut. “Tell everyone at the dojo hello for me. I’ll be by when I can. See you later, Rob.”

And to think, there was a time when I had a crush on that guy.

The streets were icy, but traffic was light, and the three of us made it to Silvara’s house in one piece. Mr. Holmes took his daughters one at a time upstairs to their beds and Silvara invited me in for a cup of tea.

I walked into the kitchen and sat at the table, stirring honey into a cup of tea I knew I wouldn’t drink

Silvara wore a blue and white cotton yukata with a padded, dark blue, Japanese-looking jacket over it. Her grey wings extended through slits in the back, and she had the same regal calm she always did. “Did you enjoy the concert?”

Three hours of unending misery, the likes of which will make Purgatory seem like a Cancun resort. The price of these dryad acorns was even higher than the price for the mistletoe and the knuckle. “No, but they enjoyed it.”

“Well, it was nice of you to take them. They were so excited, they hardly talked about anything else all week. I’m surprised you offered. I certainly wasn’t going to volunteer.”

“Um, about that. I sort of made a deal with them.” I held the mug in my hands, enjoying the warmth and the smell, even if it was too late for caffeine.

Silvara raised an eyebrow.

“I told them I’d take them to the concert if they each gave me an acorn from Nuala. I need a dryad’s acorn. Will you help me hold them to their agreement?”

“I have some. I’ll give them to you.” Silvara stood and walked to the small cluttered desk in the room with the bookshelves. She came back with two acorns. “I didn’t know this was something you needed. I could have given them to you without you having to go to the concert.”

“It had to be freely given.”

“Then take these, freely.” She smiled. “See, the Lord and Lady work in mysterious ways. I told you there must have been a reason why they drew you to me.”

“Thanks.” I closed my fist around the acorns, which looked and felt no different from any others, except perhaps slightly larger. I reached under my coat to feel for the flap of my jean jacket pocket.

“Are you seeing that nurse now? I thought that you and your blond friend were quite serious.”

“He’s not well. Fenwick’s dad took him to a doctor. The doctor diagnosed his condition as catatonic schizophrenia, and now Fenwick’s in a hospital.”

“Oh dear.” She frowned, and her wings curled closer to her body. “And yet your face tells me there’s more to this story?”

“The truth is hard to believe. Or maybe it’s not the truth. Maybe he really does just have catatonic schizophrenia. But there’s another theory, a

mystical one.”

Silvara raised her eyebrows and her wings at the same time.

“The short version is that Fenwick got his energy tapped by a mage. The mage took his energy to save a little girl. If the little girl dies, Fenwick will go with her. So, I’m gathering items to save the little girl from a curse. The dryad’s acorn was one of the items.”

“And the other items?”

“Mistletoe.” I tried to sip the tea, but it was still scalding.

“Which is how you broke your arm.” She gestured her teapot at my anemic left arm, before pouring another cup. “And something expensive, or you wouldn’t have asked me for a loan.”

“I can pay you back after Imbolc.”

She tipped her hand up to gesture that it didn’t matter. “And the fourth must have you quite worried, because you keep touching that pack of cigarettes in your pocket.”

I pulled my hand sheepishly away from the half-pack of Marlboros. “I have to go to the Realm of the Faerie. I don’t even know how to get there, or if it exists, but I’m going to have to go.”

“The Realm of the Faerie.” She spooned another sugar cube into her cup. “I’m sure it exists. Do you love him enough to risk going there? You may never come home.”

“It’s not just about love. It’s about not leaving your friends in the lurch.”

“He’s lucky to have you.”

I stared at a calendar on the wall, embarrassed.

Silvara raised her eyebrows. “What’s that look for?”

“I kissed Fain. A couple times. I think I’m falling for him.”

“The vampire?” So, she knew he was a vampire. Bless her for withholding judgment. “So, there is something going on between you two?”

“No. I can’t cheat on Fenwick like that. I never would have agreed to go out with Fain, but he offered to help me find a cure, and he’s really nice, and he likes me. It’s hard.”

“And what’s going to happen when Fenwick’s better again?”

I rubbed the finger on my left hand, where Fenwick’s ring should have gone.

She patted my shoulder. “Go to the Realm and figure things out when you come home.”

“Thanks for not saying ‘if’ I come home.”

Silvara reached up with two hands and brushed her fingers through my hair, pulling out several loose ones. She bound them up and put them in a small plastic baggie.

“I’ll bind these into a spell to bring you home again. It may not do anything—you know I’m not much of a mage—but I’ll do what I can.”

I looked at the clock. Eleven thirty. Time to go. “Thanks for your advice, Silvara.” I put my coat on quickly and put my hat back on my head, wrapping my scarf around my neck and looking for my keys.

Silvara held the keys in one hand, and hugged me as I reached to grab them. Her wings wrapped around my back and I felt them against my coat. She smiled at me and touched my forehead, just below the bindi. Warmth spread from her fingertips. A blessing.

“Thanks,” I said, and meant it. Yeah, so she was Pagan. I was going to take all the help I could get.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Tonight I would stop slacking off. Tonight I would see how many trees I could finish. Could I finish the branches in one night? One way to find out. There were about a dozen trunks left to finish attaching branches to, and I had to do the branches before finishing the undergrowth, since moving the ladder around tended to crush the silk ferns. Kaa came with me, and we had enough dog biscuits and bottles of water to last us for days.

Not for the first time, I wished I had a radio to listen to. Instead, we listened to silence as snow muffled everything outside. It fell for hours and hours, piling up to the level of the porch, then drifting over the wooden slats like beach sand on a boardwalk. The golden street light shimmered and sparkled off the smooth crystalline surface. Snow is so much prettier when you're looking at it from inside a heated house.

When the moon had risen high in the sky, Elaina called my cell phone.

"You coming home tonight?"

"Uh, what time is it?" I climbed down the ladder to cut more branches, since I couldn't hold the phone to my ear and attach them at the same time.

"Two a.m."

"Already?" Where did the time go? Ms. Yseult's still-sharp knife bit into the wood of another branch.

"Would you mind terribly staying somewhere else tonight?" Somehow I could picture her twirling her hair around her finger as she asked that.

"I guess so. Why? You and Dael want to watch porn without being interrupted?"

"Don't be crude." Elaina could be such a priss sometimes. Like I didn't know she screwed him on the couch when I wasn't there. "But yes, he's over and we want to be alone."

"You should go to bed. It's late."

"I plan on it." She had a smirk in her voice.

"That's not what I meant. I meant you should get some sleep." I blew on the end of the branch, then used my fingernails to tug off a shred of loose bark. The birch branch went into the "completed" pile.

"Kit, you can be such a prude sometimes."

“Elaina, I want you to ask Dael something for me.” I used the fey-metal utility knife to cut the next branch.

“Ask Dael something?”

“Ask him if he’ll help me find the way to the Realm of the Faerie.” This branch was too thick. Better get the saw.

“He doesn’t talk about how he got here. I’ve asked, but he says it’s secret.”

“Just ask him, okay? Ask him if he’ll tell me the way.” My right hand was still covered in blisters, so I grabbed it awkwardly in my left. The left hand had fewer blisters.

“Fine, just don’t come home tonight.”

We said goodbye and I got back to working on the branches. I kept working even as the moon arced towards the horizon. Only halfway done with my goal for the night. The branches were taking longer than I thought.

I didn’t finish them that night, because I sat down for a second and the next thing I knew it was midmorning. Kaa pecked at the bag of dog biscuits, trying to get it opened enough to get some breakfast out.

“I’ll get that for you, Kaa.”

“Kaa!” He left his beak half-open, Kaa’s expression of irritation.

“Well, I know you don’t like it when I roll the plastic back up, but they get stale when you leave the whole thing open.

He snagged a biscuit, and swallowed it whole. “Kaa.” His caw sounded like a scoff.

I gave him a couple more biscuits, and ate some myself. The convenience store had those protein bars too, but these tasted better and were much cheaper. Probably healthier too. Three dog biscuits and some tap water. Breakfast of champions. A cigarette would make it go down easier, but there was still half a pack left, and this was the absolute last pack of cigarettes I was ever going to buy. Ever.

“I didn’t mean to sleep here. I hope Ms. Yseult isn’t mad.” Ms. Yseult probably wouldn’t encourage smoking in her forest either.

“Kaa?” Kaa had found a branch, and was using his beak and claws to rip leaves off. He sure did love to break stuff.

“Well, I’m sure she knows I spent the night. She seems to know everything.”

Kaa turned his head to look at me out of one eye, tapping the rest of the twig on the ground. He was trying to tell me something.

“What? What is it?”

Kaa just kept staring at me.

“What is it boy? Has little Timmy fallen down the well?” I laughed at my own humor.

“Kaa!” Kaa hopped forward, and pecked me.

“You think she meant for me to sleep here? For my dreams? I don’t remember.” But that wasn’t true. I did remember my dreams. I remembered running in a birch forest.

“You are making progress,” my tall employer said, as she came down the stairs. Kaa and I cringed, startled. She might have been coming down for a cup of coffee, but there was no coffee in the kitchen, and I hadn’t seen her drink anything except that first day. Ms. Yseult wore another simple white dress, which contrasted with her dark legs and arms like tree trunks in a snowbank.

“I hope you don’t mind that I slept here last night, ma’am. I didn’t mean to, but I got so tired I just fell asleep.”

She didn’t say anything, but walked to the window to look at the snow outside; it had drifted almost to the level of the lower sash. I ate a couple dog biscuits and climbed back up the ladder with the pneumatic nailer and one of the branches I cut the previous night. (The nails were that same weird silver material.)

“You will finish this before Imbolc.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will.”

“You will not leave this world until your task with me is completed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Okay, that cinched it. She could definitely read my mind. She knew of my plan to go to the Realm. If only she’d tell me how to dream the forest, we’d get along just fine.

Even with me standing on the ladder and her a couple feet lower on the ground, Ms. Yseult appeared to be looking down upon me. She answered my unspoken question. “Sleep here tonight, and the night after. Do not leave this forest until the moon rises on the third day, and dedicate your dreams to the trees.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Well, that was pretty clear. Half a bag of dog biscuits left. We’d get pretty hungry, but I didn’t dare ask any friends to bring food here, and my budget was too lean for ordering pizza. If I could get this done in three days, I’d beg Fain to cook for us again.

Kaa and I worked all day, and got the branches completed by bedtime. We carefully put the ladder away and I walked around to all the trees one by one.

“I dedicate my dreams to you,” I said to each one, feeling slightly less ridiculous each time I said it. Good thing Kaa wasn’t a mynah bird. There could be advantages in having companions who don’t talk.

“Did I miss any of them, Kaa?”

Kaa cocked his head and flew to a thin sapling in the corner by the window. “I dedicate my dreams to you as well.” I told the tree, after mincing my way over there, careful not to step on the ferns. The snow was pretty high outside. If it didn’t melt enough for me to leave by the third day I’d go crazy. Well, crazier. I was already talking to a bird and trees.

Kaa and I nestled up between some trunks in an area that didn’t have undergrowth yet. The floor was hard and uncomfortable, but at least the house was warm enough I didn’t need a blanket. Would I dream tonight? Maybe.

I dreamt of the birch forest again. Not too surprising, considering how Kaa and I had been spending our days. I couldn’t remember anything special happening, just me and Kaa trying to attach fallen branches and re-assemble fern fronds into plants. There were birds in the trees, and one kept screaming at me. I awoke. It wasn’t a bird, it was my phone.

“Hello?” My watch said one a.m.

“Kit? Are you coming home tonight?” Elaina asked, obviously hoping the answer was no.

“No. I’ll see you on Saturday night or Sunday morning.” The birch log I’d been using as a pillow had grown decidedly uncomfortable. I rolled it out of the way and looked for something better.

“You’re sleeping at Fain’s house?”

“No, I’m at work.” I took off my jacket and bundled it carefully, after removing the utility knives and the cigarettes. It made a better pillow, and Fain’s coat was warm enough to serve as a blanket.

“You don’t have to lie to me. I don’t care if you’re cheating on Fenwick. Might as well, since he’s being a loser and all.” I heard her giggle in the background and slap someone playfully. Dael must still be there.

“I’m not lying. I’m really at work.” The overhead lights were off. Kaa must have flicked the switch before roosting.

“Whatever. Will you be here tomorrow morning?”

“No, I said I wouldn’t leave, so I won’t be there until Sunday. And I really am at work.”

“You won’t leave at all? You’re just sleeping in your clothes? What about food? What are you eating? Are you just ordering pizza?”

“Kaa and I are splitting a box of dog biscuits, and yes, I’m sleeping in my clothes.”

“You are so disgusting sometimes.” She giggled again, and whispered to Dael. I heard Dael’s voice, suggesting something nasty, and Elaina chuckling seductively in response.

“I’ll see you on Sunday. And don’t forget to ask Dael how to get to the Realm.” The snow outside had drifted up high enough to see it out the back windows. Seeing the snow made it feel colder, like seeing the blood on a stubbed toe made it hurt more. I shivered under the coat and pulled my knees up.

“Yeah, I’ll ask him later.”

Hmph. Time to hang up, and finish sleeping. Alone. On a hardwood floor.

The third day was a day for making ferns. It’s amazing how much you can accomplish when you stop for neither meal nor cigarette breaks. Kaa, who had had quite enough of this schedule, demanded to be let outside for a few hours, but I kept chugging away, making fern after fern until I was too tired to go on. Kaa came back in that evening, and cawed in appreciation when he saw that most of the floor now had undergrowth. A path led from the front door to the stairs, and a nearly invisible trail led from the stairs to the kitchen and bathroom, but the rest of the lower floor had a rapidly thickening green carpet. I left a space just large enough to sleep on, and piled the rest of the materials in the kitchen. Almost done. And about time too. There were only two days left before Imbolc.

When Kaa woke me up on the morning of the fourth day, I rubbed my eyes and tried to figure out what was on me. The coat rustled, and something smelled dry and musty. Leaves. There were leaves blanketing me, the floor, drifting into the kitchen and bathroom.

Every single leaf had fallen to the ground during the night.

I looked up. The branches, finished just two nights before, were denuded. From my height up was nothing but bare branches and the fluorescent lights set in the ceiling. All that work, gone. How on earth was I going to glue all those leaves back on before February second? Despite my growing hunger, I spent four hours on a stepladder, trying to glue leaves back on the branches.

It was hopeless. Not only had they fallen off, but the color had faded: the leaves were brittle and yellowish brown. I climbed down and sat against a tree trunk.

“What am I going to do, Kaa?” My voice quailed with despair. Kaa rubbed against me. Two months of work. She wouldn’t pay me for this. This wasn’t a forest, this was a room full of sticks. Oh, she was going to be pissed. When Ms. Yseult saw this she was going to do Something Awful. Toads would fall from my mouth maybe. Donkey ears. Turn my brother into a swan.

The leaves didn’t even seem like silk anymore. They seemed like real leaves. Real, dead, leaves. If we had used my supplier they wouldn’t have faded like this. My wholesaler didn’t sell me branches that fell apart. Of course, Ms. Yseult wouldn’t see that. She’d take one look at the horrible mess and say it was my fault. Shit. It wasn’t fair. I did everything I could, and I still screwed up. I put my hands over my eyes.

“You may go home now.” Ms. Yseult stood before me.

I didn’t even stand. I leaned forward, head bowed, hands clenching my dusty jeans. “Ma’am. I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. I really did everything I could. I tried to put the leaves back on, but it’s hopeless.” Please don’t curse me, I pleaded silently, daring to look up at her.

“Let the leaves stay as they are. It is winter now. The leaves fall in the winter.” She gestured to the one tree I did, and the re-glued leaves fluttered to the ground, undoing four hours of work. “Come back tomorrow and finish.”

“You’re not angry?”

“Your work is acceptable.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll come back tomorrow.” Kaa and I backed out of the house as fast as we politely could.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Elaina let me get a shower, some food, and a change of clothes before she lit into me about the housekeeping. “Kit, help me get all this holly out of here. I won’t have time to do it over the weekend, since I’m working double shifts.”

“You know, in my family, we left the Christmas decorations up until March.”

“It has to be gone before Imbolc, or we’ll have bad luck.” Elaina pulled down a bough of holly from the top of the bookshelf and put it into a plastic garbage bag.

“This is one of those witchy things, isn’t it?”

Elaina put another bunch of holly into the trash bag. “What else would it be?”

“Decoration? At first, I thought maybe the holly was protection against the Goodly Folk, but you and Dael are still dating. And did you ask him how to get to the Realm of the Faerie?”

“He won’t tell you.” Elaina scraped at some masking tape with her thumbnail, trying to get it off the window frame. “He said that he doesn’t want humans going to the Realm.”

“Why not?”

“The Realm isn’t like the real world. The only way a new child can be born to his clan is if someone agrees to come here to the ‘dying lands,’ as they call Earth. Dael came here as a sacrifice, to make room so that someone in his clan can have a baby. If you go to the Realm, you might take that child’s place.”

“I’m not going to apply for a faerie green card, I’m just going to run an errand.” I tied the handles of a holly-stuffed trash bag. She had most of a bush in there. “Did he tell you where it was?”

“No.”

“If Ulrich knew, he would tell me.” I dumped more holly bits into the trash. “He’s a nice guy, unlike some.”

“If he’s so nice, why don’t you date him?” Elaina said.

“I’m with Fenwick,” I replied, ignoring her tone of voice.

“Yeah, right,” Elaina said sarcastically. She moved a chair to the other window and started taking holly down off the lintel.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She dumped more holly berries into the pile on the floor. “You’re sleeping with that vampire. Even if Fenwick gets back to normal, things are

over between you two.”

There was no point in arguing with her. She’d believe what she wanted to believe. I dropped the broom on the floor and stormed out the door, stopping just long enough to grab my sparring gear. My plans for the afternoon included a few hours at the dojo, and then hanging out with James, and damned if I was going to waste free time cleaning up more leaves. Stupid witch could clean her own mess.

It started to sleet again on the trip from the dojo to Ishmael’s. With school still in session, parking spaces within a mile of the University district were few and far between, but luck was with me today, and I found a spot for my van only three blocks from James’ café. The icy rain penetrated my coat, and soaked through the jean jacket underneath as well, but a cup of chai and conversation with my big brother was worth getting wet.

“Hey, Kit! James called as the door’s brass bell tinkled and the warmth of the café brushed my numbed nose. “You look frozen.”

“F ... f ... feels nothing like spring. G ... g ... groundhog’s going to see his sh ... sh ... shadow tomorrow.” I shivered and took my soaking jacket off to dry on the back of a chair in front of the fire. Right now, the half-logs burning in the little brick hearth felt like a Yule log bonfire to my frozen arms.

“How’s your commission going?” James walked from behind the counter, thrusting a cup of something warm in my hand. Usually he wouldn’t slack during business hours. James was a workaholic, really. I don’t know where he got that trait. No one else in our family was like that.

“Almost done. I only have an hour of fine-tuning and clean up tomorrow.”

James frowned at me shivering near the fire. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.” With that, he disappeared up the stairs in the back, presumably to get something from his apartment above the shop.

I glanced around the café, looking for a familiar face, but I didn’t see one except for Barnabus the coffee maestro making espressos and lattes. Most of the caffeine addicts sipping hot drinks and reading books or newspapers were students or local business folk. One guy sitting near the window had that craggy, half-wild look that spoke of faerie blood. His ears were just barely pointed, and he had four fingers on each hand. He wore a vinyl coat, frayed at the edges, in a shade of brown only found at secondhand shops—the colors of the never-in-style. His cap was a jauntily

perched red beret: worn, faded, and damp from the sleet. Was he of the Realm or earth fey like Ulrich?

The gnome face turned toward me, as though he sensed me watching. The gnome had cuts on his face, and his hauteur indicated he was used to more than physical slights. He looked tough and ornery, but outside of the (currently out of my budget) Pygg and Wassail, where was I going to have a chance to chat with one of the Goodly Folk? I stood and walked across the room, hands in my damp jean jacket pockets, coat still draped over a chair by the fire.

“You got something to say to me?” the gnome asked me, narrowing his eyes. My second sight couldn’t see the chip on his shoulder, but it was there, nonetheless.

I took a seat opposite him and set my cup of chai down on the tiny bistro table. “I need to know the way to the Realm.” Maybe he did something magical, maybe he just moved too fast to see, but suddenly the gnome had a leathery brown hand clenched around my jacket, and he pulled me forward to face him. “What did you say?”

“I need to know the way to the Realm of the Faerie. Can you tell me how to get there?” I had to place my hands on the table and push back to keep myself upright.

“You think I’m dreck from the Realm?” The gnome readjusted his grip, this time taking in a piece of flesh and my bra strap under the jacket. “My kind haven’t been to the Realm of the Faerie in aeons.”

“Oh, sorry. I don’t know much about the fey.” Most of the time I wouldn’t let people push me around like this, but James would kill me if I got in a fight with someone in his café. This was the University district, not some warehouse district slum.

“I should teach you a lesson about insulting a redcap, little girl.” The hand not clenching my jacket became a fist, but before he could strike, I grabbed his wrist with my right hand and held it. He struggled, but years at the dojo and two months sawing logs had given me Popeye-like forearm muscles.

“I said I was sorry, now let go of my jacket.” I tightened my hand on his arm.

“Here, Kit! I brought you a dry sweater. It’s too big, but it’s drier.” James came down the stairs carrying a bundle of fuchsia wool. He glanced

from my coat drying by the fire to the table where the gnome and were conducting our standoff. “Karlus, are you trying to hit on my sister?”

“Your sister?” The gnome’s aggression poured out of him, and he let go of my jacket so quickly it made me jerk backwards. “You’re his sister? Why didn’t you say so? James Melbourne is a friend of mine.”

“You weren’t trying to pick a fight, were you?” James asked Karlus, like a patient babysitter.

Karlus looked guilty but shook his head no.

“It’s okay. No harm done.” I took my sodden jacket off and replaced it with the dry sweater in James’ hands. Warmer already. “I’m Kit.” I offered the gnome my hand.

“Karlus.” He shook my hand, but he still looked at my brother. “I wasn’t fighting, James, truly.”

James’ look said he wasn’t buying it. “Karlus, you remember what I said about picking fights?”

“Aye, James, you know I can’t help it. I meant no harm to her.” He stood, drained his cup, and set it on the table. To me, he added, “I’ll stand you a drink. At the Pygg and Wassail tonight. This I swear. And bring your boyfriend, that I might warn him of your ferocity.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” James folded his arms and frowned down at the gnome.

“Does he do this to everyone?” I asked James, after Karlus left the café.

“Often enough. He fights, I kick him out, he says he’ll never enter this place again. Then he comes back. He can’t help coming back. He likes my coffee too much.” James sat down in the seat the gnome had vacated. “I was wondering when you’d come by. I’ve done some interesting tea-leaf readings about you.”

“I went to the dojo this afternoon. Everyone’s heard that Fenwick is officially crazy. Some of the guys flirted with me, like I was single.”

James patted my arm. “It’s going to be hard to get used to.”

“I’m not going to get used to it, James. I’m going to go to the Realm of the Faerie, get the elecampane, and then come home again. Old Twi will use the stuff to cure Violet, and then Fenwick will be okay again.”

“Don’t you dare!” James turned my head away from the window to face me. “It’s far too dangerous. I know you love him, Kit, but if this is what it will take to get him back, just let him go.”

“He’s my friend. I can’t abandon a friend.” I stared out the window, watching the double image of sleet becoming snow outside, and James flickering between fear and worry inside.

“And what about me? You would send my favorite sister off to abandon me the rest of my life? How do you think Mom would feel if you disappeared forever?”

“It wouldn’t be forever.”

“How do you know that? Promise me you won’t go there.”

“I won’t promise that.” I folded my arms and stared at the flakes drifting down, as if attempting to scry the future.

“Goddamn it, Kit! This isn’t a game! Don’t go!” James did raise his voice then, causing not a few of the customers to turn at the unusual outburst.

“If I don’t go, both Violet and Fenwick will die. How could I live the rest of my life knowing I let them die? I’m sorry you don’t understand.” I kept staring outside, pressing my lips together and willing my eyes to dry before James noticed.

He noticed.

“Please don’t go to the Realm. Please?”

“I know it’s dangerous, James, but I have to see this through. I’m going to go as soon as I find a way. I’ll pack my things up though, just in case.”

James grabbed my hands and clenched them. “Kit ...”

“When I get paid, I’m going to give Elaina an extra two months’ rent. Marius thinks Violet can last until Easter. If I’m not home by then, take all my stuff, okay?”

“And Kaa? Are you going to leave your familiar as well?”

“I’ll come back for him. I’m coming back, James.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” I drained my cup of chai.

“I’ll hold you to that.” James pulled the corners of his mouth up, attempting a smile, but it was spoiled by the lines of worry etched into his face.

I tried to reassure him. “And hey, it may not happen for a while. I still haven’t figured out how to get there yet.”

James peered at the ring of brown in the bottom of the empty mug. “Like I said, Kit, I’ve been getting strange tea-leaf readings about you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Fain arrived just after dusk. "Are you ready to go?" he asked, as he came down the stairs into my apartment.

"Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted a drink first." I made no move to put my coat on.

"We can drink at the pub."

"I meant something else."

"Oh yes. I'm always thirsty for a little Kit Melbourne." Fain stepped forward to hold me and spoke quietly in my ear. "But it's only been a few weeks since the last time, I should wait a while." That was Fain the nurse talking. Fain the vampire licked his lips, touching the tip of his tongue to one fang seductively to say he wanted a little sip of me right then and there.

"I'm leaving soon, so it will have to be tonight." I let myself kiss him behind the ear. Fain smelled good. He felt good too, strong against me.

"You don't have to host me, you know."

"I offered, and I'm not that much of a tease." Besides, being his host was something, at least, since I wouldn't be his lover.

"At least I can feed you as well. They have food at the Pygg and Wassail, if I remember."

"I never turn down free food."

"Nor do I." He scooped me up gently and carried me to my bedroom, shutting the door behind himself with a foot.

I sat down on the bed, suddenly realizing I was wearing a turtleneck sweater. Fain didn't say anything about pushing up my sleeves. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. I pulled my sweater off, and felt really, really naked, despite my bra. I blushed and crossed my arms in front of me. The only guy who had seen me unclothed in a long time was Fenwick.

Fain watched me without saying anything, but he took a throw blanket off the bed and wrapped it around me, leaving my shoulders free. "So you won't be cold," he explained, sitting on the edge of the bed as he pulled me onto his lap again.

I tensed with involuntary fear, remembering the last time.

"Lean against me. Trust me." He kissed my neck and shoulder again. "I will know when to stop."

"Give me a minute to calm myself."

That whole blood thing still bothered me. It hurt the last time. Why was I doing this again? I leaned against him, resting my chin on his shoulder, and his hand started kneading my neck and shoulder muscles. His hands

were warm, and strong, and gentle. Fenwick sometimes massaged my neck like that too, when I strained something at the dojo or worked too hard. The guilt at cheating on Fenwick made me tense up again, but Fain smoothed it out with his strong fingers.

I'm doing this because Fain is a friend, because I want to do something in return for his kindness. It's not cheating. It's like blood donation.

Fain started humming, and it relaxed me so completely that when his fangs bit my neck it came as a shock. I tensed up like a rabbit scenting a fox.

He drank.

Fain kept kneading my back under the blanket and I stopped resisting, slouching against him like a sleeping child. He was strong enough to support my weight.

He kept drinking, and after a long moment with nothing but the sound and feel of his throat swallowing and his mouth drawing blood from my neck, he stopped, pressing something over the cuts to make the bleeding stop. I breathed in deeply, and out in a long sigh, as though waking up.

Fain ran his tongue over his teeth to remove the blood traces before speaking again. "This means a lot to me."

"I hoped it would."

"Very few women trust me this much." He lifted my chin gently so I'd look him in the eyes. "My sire asked me to find out about you, and I flirted out of habit, but now I'm falling for you, Kit. I didn't expect that."

"I'm not beautiful, Fain. I'm not real educated. I'm not even talented or rich or anything." I ducked my head slightly, embarrassed again.

"How many women would have figured out to kick a troll in the nose, much less been able to do it? We are very alike, Kit, in more ways than just our looks." Quieter, he added, "I resent Fenwick."

"I'm starting to resent him as well, for making me sacrifice so much, although if Fenwick were here, I know he'd tell me not to do it. He'd tell me to pursue my own happiness. He'd yell at me if he knew I were risking my life to save him."

Fain continued my thought. "And that's why you love him."

I nodded, and stood. "Fain, let's go to the bar before we get too romantic."

"Right." He handed me my sweater and I pulled it back on, not begrudging him the admiring looks he gave me. No small part of me

wanted to take the sweater right off again.

The Pygg and Wassail, Seabingen's famous Irish bar, was crowded, what with it being Saturday night and all. The small stage had a singer who accompanied himself on guitar, but the noise of the pub was such that I couldn't even hear what kind of music he played, although it was presumably Irish, in keeping with the shamrock and Guinness décor. Fain and I scanned the crowd, hoping against hope for a small scrap of empty table. Not only was every table taken, but the bar was filled as well.

"Over there," I tugged and pointed to a table with two free seats. Karlus, James' gnome friend, guarded them with a fierce eye.

"Karlus, may we sit here?"

The gnome nodded assent. Karlus looked Fain up and down like a dachshund inspects a great Dane. "This your boyfriend? Too bad. I thought I had a chance."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Fain said. "I'm Leo. Kit and I are friends."

"Just friends?" Karlus leered.

"She is my host, and under my protection, although I can tell you she hardly needs it." Fain smiled, not quite friendly.

Karlus cleared his throat. "Well. Uh, how about that drink I promised you?"

"Sure, if you can find a waitress."

He whistled, not enough to be heard over the din of the pub, but the gossamer-winged waitress appeared like magic. That was the kind of spell I needed to learn. "Summoning of waitresses in crowded pubs." Wonder if Elaina had a spell like that in her notebooks? Fain and I ordered enough food and drink to last us the night, and resigned ourselves to people watching, since conversation was almost impossible.

Maybe it was the loud Irish music. Maybe it was the Celtic knotwork wallpaper and horse tack. Maybe ley lines crossed here. Whatever the reason, the Pygg and Wassail was a magnet for otherfolk. If you could see through glammers as easily as I could (although no one else had a magic bindi like mine) it was usually a great place for people watching. Usually, but not tonight. Fain and Karlus sat next to me, of course, and the pixie waitress always worked there, but except for them there were nothing but humans.

And then a vampire entered. The vampire wore a dark brown blazer, and had narrow features. He had an arm around a human woman. She was also Asian, in her thirties, and dressed like a Land's End model. They resembled each other almost as much as Fain and I did, and touched each other like a couple.

"You know him?" I asked Fain. Maybe Palmer wasn't the only one with a taste for human women?

Fain nodded. "We all know each other in this town. That's Nguyen. He's been here for about forty years."

"Is that his wife?"

"His host." Fain slid his arm around my waist and kissed my cheek. "As you are mine."

"Being a host isn't the same as being a girlfriend, is it?" There was that by now familiar feeling of guilt again.

"Not exactly." Fain leaned over and spoke quietly into my ear. "Don't think about him tonight, Kit. Tonight is for us."

Boy did I like the sound of that "us." Boy did it make me feel guilty.

"Hosts can be either gender, but she is his girlfriend too." Fain nodded at Nguyen across the bar, and Nguyen nodded back.

James showed up about half an hour after we finished our dinner. Neither Ulrich, his old sidekick, nor Maya his new, were with him, unfortunately. I would have liked to see both of them again. On the other hand, maybe it was a good thing that Ulrich wasn't there. Fain seemed very proprietary tonight, and probably remembered how I kissed Ulrich at the party.

The guitar player packed up and left, and a trio of folk musicians took his place. By the roar of the crowd, they were a favorite. Then the crowd quieted so we could hear the band better, and if the scuffed wooden tables hadn't taken up most of the floor space, I'm sure someone would have started dancing a jig. The fiddler was fantastic.

Between sets, I turned to make a comment to Fain, and caught sight of a familiar figure at the table where Nguyen and his host had been sitting. The human woman was still there, but Dael had slid into Nguyen's seat. His spell glowed in the dim light of the bar. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on. Good thing neither Ulrich nor Maya had come to the Pygg and Wassail that night.

Dael got up and led the human woman out the front door, not glancing at either Fain or me at our table. And where had Nguyen gone? Secret Guild business, or had Dael bespelled the vampire too? I pretended to look at my cell phone, although no one would have heard a call over the music and the talk and laughter of the pub.

"I have to go. Something just came up. See you later," I shouted. As I leaned down to pick up my coat, I spoke softly enough that only Fain could hear, "Follow me. There's going to be trouble and I might need your help."

Fain nodded, while pretending to give me a nonchalant wave goodbye, and turned back toward the music.

I put my coat on swiftly before reaching the door, and pulled my invisibility glamour on just outside. Dael had his arm around the woman, whose wrist-thick braid of black hair fell to her waist. She didn't seem too put out to be with him, and even leaned against him like a lover.

Charm spell. What a nasty trick. No Vargel rapist should leave home without it. No, push the rage down. Getting angry is not how you stay invisible. Dael led Nguyen's host to an alley. He didn't even grant her the slight dignity of the back seat of a Buick? Asshole. My estimation of him sank yet another notch.

"You won't remember any of this," Dael told the human woman, as he pushed her against the wall. A faint glow surrounded him.

"Remember what?" She shifted her eyes from side to side, as if she couldn't quite concentrate on anything and was trying to clear her head. The woman's almond eyes didn't focus on me, but she didn't focus on Dael either, so that may not have meant my glamour was working. Reaching into my jean jacket pockets, I found both utility knives. He deserved a garrote, but this would have to do.

"That's right. You walked home and nothing happened." Dael lifted her long wool skirt up around her hips with one hand and was undoing his belt with the other. I slowly crept behind him, trying not to make any noise.

Dael had managed to get his pants unzipped, and showed a whole lot more of him than I really wanted to see. With one utility knife in either hand, I pricked his throat. "That's right, Dael. She went home and nothing happened."

"What the—" Dael started to turn around, but I pressed the blade in my right hand into the flesh at the base of his neck. Didn't want to cut the vein. Not yet, anyway.

“First, she goes home, then, we talk.”

“Get out of here,” Dael told her, gesturing with his hand. Nguyen’s host walked off calmly, as if she were pacing off the steps in a parade route, rather than fleeing a near rape.

“You picked the wrong woman, Dael. That was a vampire’s host. If I tell them you almost raped her, you’re going to get a bullet in your skull before the week is out.”

“I didn’t rape her. She was totally willing.”

“You’re a lying sack of shit. You forget, I saw you do it once before.” The knife blade in my right hand didn’t seem to be cutting him. Was it dull?

“What do you want?”

“I want you to show me how to get to the Realm.”

Dael laughed and pulled away. Jesus! The blade of Ms. Yseult’s silvered utility knife had been embedded in his neck! No blood, no resistance. How could that be? Even as I stored the knowledge away for further use, I recognized my shock was a mistake. Dael used the moment’s pause to grab me around the neck with one of his hands and push me against the wall of the building. I tried to stab him with my left hand, the one with the normal craft knife, but my left arm was still weak from being in a cast for so long. When he blocked it, the knife flew from my fingers, skittering along the cement of the alley. He wrapped his other hand around my right wrist. With a snarl, I drew my boot up to kick him.

Then I looked into his eyes. Kick him? Why kick him? Dael was a pretty nice guy, after all. I just misunderstood him. He was really attractive. I thought he was a hottie when I first met him, hadn’t I? Elaina said he was nice. He was nice. He was a really good friend. I wanted to be his friend. Who wouldn’t?

“See, you chased my friend away. Now I’m lonely. You have to come home with me tonight. I’ve got some knives of my own we can play with.”

“Yeah. I should go home with you tonight.” What a nice guy. Really, I’d love to go home with him. I’d love to do anything he asked.

“You won’t tell anyone anything. It will be our little secret,” Dael said, kindly. He smiled at me.

“You should know better than to do that to a vampire’s host,” Fain pointed a gun at Dael’s neck. Dael turned just enough to break eye contact with me.

What the hell was I thinking? I dropped and grabbed the fallen knife with my left hand.

“Take me to the Realm next week or we both tell the Guild about tonight’s incidents,” I snarled at him. Dael started to glow again, and tried to meet my gaze, so I slashed him across the cheek with the steel knife, leaving a bloody slash and a tiny bit more respect in his eyes.

“If you don’t want to go to the Realm after all, I’d love to kill him right now, Kit.” Fain had a calm cool tone, suggesting it’d be no trouble to him to do such a small favor for me, though he probably wasn’t stupid enough to ice someone with so many potential witnesses.

“I’ll take you.” Dael had a stammer of fear in his voice.

“Swear it, on whatever you hold dear, if there’s anything at all,” I said.

“I swear it on the Tree of Life.”

“Wednesday at midnight work for you, Dael?” I asked charitably.

He nodded.

“We know where you live. Don’t back out.” I pushed him away. “Now get the hell out of here.”

Dael walked calmly down the street with an exaggerated nonchalance, like a cat pretending it hadn’t just fallen in the toilet.

Fain and I walked back to his car and he drove me home. We didn’t speak on the way, and he walked me across the ditch bridge in silence. I unlocked the door but didn’t open it. We stood in front of my door, me with my hands in my pockets, him leaning against the frame.

“Fain? Will you see me off on Wednesday?”

“You want moral support?”

I shook my head. “Follow him and make sure he really leads me to the portal. I wouldn’t put it past a prick like that to kill me and leave my body in the woods.”

“So cynical, my dear.” Fain reached out and stroked the side of my face.

“And tell the Guild Leader I’m going, so he doesn’t waste time avenging my death if I’m not dead.” My heart pounded. He could probably hear it.

“As you wish.” He drew my hands to his mouth and gently kissed my wrists. “Are you going to invite me in?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Did he know my nipples were hardening? Did he know how much I wanted to drag him inside?

“Oh?” He kissed further down my wrists, smiling wryly. “Don’t you trust me alone with you?”

“I don’t trust me alone with you.”

“Well, then I’ll just have to kiss you here.” And he did. He pressed hard against me, kissing gently, then deeply, then nipping at my lower lip with those fangs. Snow blew around the two of us, turning the world into a swirl of white and dark. Inside my coat and jacket, my body turned to fire, and I longed to take them off, but I didn’t. This was just a kiss. It wasn’t enough, but it was more than I should have had.

Fain pulled away, staring at me with intense passion. He leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “Beware of Dael, my dear. I’ve seen that look before. He wanted to kill you.”

“I won’t let him,” I whispered back.

Fain stepped back into the swirling snow, and then vanished into the darkness.

I sure wanted to put holly over the lintel of my room’s door to protect me from the Goodly Folk, Dael in particular, but Elaina had gotten rid of every scrap in the house.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ms. Yseult looked as stoic as ever when I arrived that last day, but I felt euphoric.

The birch forest looked astoundingly real. Good thing that the photograph idea didn't pan out. My blurry paintings on the walls actually added to the feeling of depth. The undergrowth covered at most half of the hardwood planks, but with the fallen leaves over every other surface, you couldn't tell it wasn't a real forest floor. I had taken special care to trim around the bark on the branches, to hide where the joints matched up. Even the ones with nails instead of glue looked natural, because the fey-metal nails blended in with the pale bark. It would have looked better with leaves on the branches, but hey, you can't have everything.

"It's Groundhog Day, ma'am." I looked up at her face to see if she was as pleased with the work as I was.

"Yes. You have fulfilled your part of the bargain." Her stony silence left something unsaid. Would she pretend she had financial problems, and couldn't pay me, or would she say that I didn't do something right? "I have established an account for you at the National Bank in Bromley. Your money is in this account."

There was no way I could verify this, and I would rather have had a check in my hand than a pale promise, but Ms. Yseult stared at me in that creepy way, and I couldn't meet her eyes anymore.

"Do not doubt me, Treemaker. Humans are the oathbreakers, not my kind."

"Yes, ma'am."

Kaa didn't offer any comment. For once he sat on my shoulder silently.

"There is the other part of our agreement as well."

"Ma'am?" What was she talking about?

"I offered you more, if you completed this task to my satisfaction. You have fulfilled your half of the bargain. What would you have as a reward?"

This was one of those situations where afterward I really, really regretted saying the wrong thing. In retrospect, I should have asked for something special, the most obvious being "save Fenwick," or "release

Violet from her curse.” They say pride goeth before a fall, and that was my problem. I had spent nearly every day for over two months making this beautiful birch forest; I almost wept thinking I wouldn’t be able to see it again. So, before I even thought about something powerful or magical that I suspected she might be capable of, I blurted out,

“I want to come here again, please ma’am.”

She nodded, as if she had expected that all along. Perhaps she had. “You may go now. Your obligation here is finished.”

I bowed, as to my sensei, and walked out the familiar wooden door, down the steps off the porch, through the snow-covered grass under the leafless elm trees, and into my waiting van.

“Kaa,” my familiar offered his comment.

“Yeah, me too.”

It didn’t take very long to pack up my stuff and attend to the details. There was money waiting in the bank, as Ms. Yseult promised, so I was able to pay my debts. I shouldn’t have bothered doubting her. I didn’t spend too much time calling friends to say goodbye. James knew I was going, and Silvara, and Elaina suspected. Everyone else could find out from them, or from me when I came back. I sure was going to miss Kaa. I debated taking him, but Kaa couldn’t really give consent.

That evening I was writing cowardly letters outlining what to do with my stuff in the event that I didn’t return for years and years when I heard a knock on the door. Two vampires with long black coats stood on my doorstep. If they hadn’t been vampires, I never would have opened the door to such dangerous looking people at this time of night. I’m not completely stupid.

The taller one, a thick necked bruiser with a pearl earring, folded his arms and stared down at me. He wore sunglasses, and no hat, despite the cold. “Melbourne?”

I nodded.

“Invite us in.”

Pretty arrogant bastards, really, to not even give their own names. Fain and Palmer had been much more polite when I first met them. Since they

wore holstered guns, they were probably on official Guild business, but that didn't mean they had to be rude.

"What is your business with me?" I barred the door casually with my arms. They might have been able to get in to a normal house without being invited, but not this one, not with all Elaina's spells.

The second vampire, a rapier-thin brunette with an obvious penchant for black leather, folded her arms and scowled. Her cleavage pillowed above her corset, pale goosepimpled skin dotted with snowflakes. Neither one of them were dressed warm enough for this kind of weather. "You have been summoned for an audience with the Guild Leader."

"I'd love to see him again. Let's not keep him waiting, shall we?" No one is completely blasé about seeing the Guild Leader, especially not when summoned personally, but it wasn't their business if my gut clenched at the thought of it. And if they were going to be jerks, they could freeze their butts off outside.

"I'll get my coat and be right there." I shut the door in their faces and took my sweet time getting my coat.

"Great, now I'm just about ready." Shutting and locking the door behind me, I began to cast the closing spell Elaina had taught me, and felt a meaty hand on my shoulder. I knew a defensive move against that, but wasn't sure I wanted to do it.

"I'm almost done." Casting spells wasn't easy, especially with a bully threatening me. After the protection spell hummed into place, I turned around as if nothing was wrong, clenching my fists so they wouldn't see my hands shake.

"You waste our time, human." The woman spoke coldly. "We are not people to be trifled with."

"Neither am I, and I don't appreciate being threatened when I'm unarmed." I stared them down. They didn't have the authority to kill me, and really, threatening someone who was technically on your side? Tacky, tacky, tacky.

After a half-minute staring contest, she broke eye contact. "Shall we go to the car?"

That was polite enough for me. We passed the short walk to their black Lexus in silence, and kept the silence on the drive south. South, not south-east? We weren't going to Wasserhausen? That was strange. The Vampire Guild Council convened in a houseboat in the southern district of town, and

the Guild Leader usually conducted business there. This time we drove to Ipswich, the district sandwiched between the upper-middle-class district of Bromley and the plebes in the city proper. I knew the Bromley district pretty well now, after going there every day for the tree job, but didn't spend much time in Ipswich except for the Pagan festivals in the park. We were a few miles from Ms. Yseult's house, but I could almost feel it, nestled in the corner of my mind.

Corset Vamp parked behind a hulking wooden farmhouse. It looked as though this house stood on the land years before the city's limits overwhelmed it and the farmhouse's lands were sold lot by lot to create its neighbors. The house still had a few enormous horse chestnut trees and an oak in the front, but half of the back garden had been graveled for parking.

Both vamps flanked me as they led me to the kitchen door. No light leaked through the windows, but I could tell by the starlight reflected off the snow that the house was newly painted white, and the screened porch off the back of the kitchen had wicker furniture with chintz cushions.

The big vamp closed the kitchen door behind me, and turned on a light over a maple dining table. The walls had cheerful floral print wallpaper, and the scrubbed wooden floor had a braided rug covering most of it. Tin enamel plates on a ledge near the ceiling completed what looked like a decorator's ideal fantasy of cottage living. It smelled like years of cooking. The wooden chairs on either side of the table had shiny worn spots on the seats. Heavy drapes covered the windows from the inside, but other than that, it could have been any human's home.

Corset Vamp spoke. "He's waiting for you upstairs. Last door in the hallway on the left after you get to the top of the stairs."

"You're not going to frisk me for weapons?"

"You're not carrying. Besides, he trusts you." Foolish to trust a human, she said with her tone, but didn't frisk me.

I walked up the stairs. Paintings blanketed the walls in the European style. The steps creaked, as I slid my hand up the polished banister, turning left as directed. The door at the end of the hall appeared solid, but echoed hollowly at my knock.

A moment's pause. "Come in."

The Guild Leader stood facing a table in the corner. The room looked like a home office, with bookshelves, a huge desk, and a computer. A gun

clip held down the mound of paper stacked in front of the monitor. I closed the door quietly behind me, remaining standing.

“Spring always seems so long in coming. It’s only the beginning of February, but it feels like the winter has lasted half a year already.” He turned to face me. His movements seemed too slow, unnatural, as if scripted.

“It’s a pleasure to see you, sir.”

“Please, Melbourne, have a seat.” He gestured to an upholstered chair in front of the desk. I sat down in it, keeping my posture as straight as if I were in the principal’s office.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Yes, thank you.” No blood, please?

The Guild Leader poured sherry from a crystal decanter into matching glasses, handing one to me before replacing the decanter on the shelf.

“To your safe return,” he toasted.

“You’re too kind, sir.” We drank. I don’t think I’ll ever develop a taste for that stuff, but it was better than blood. Much better.

“Why didn’t you ask me for help when you discovered Fenwick was ensorcelled?”

That was not a question I had expected. I drank the sherry, and clutched the glass to have something to do with my hands.

“I knew, of course. His absence at the soirée was noted. I would have assigned someone to help you if Fain had not volunteered. He has kept me abreast of your developments.”

“It never occurred to me that you were interested, sir.”

“Everything that happens in my Guild is of interest to me. You are in my Guild now.” He sat down, placing his hands on the desk in front of him, regarding me calmly. “Do you believe you will be able to return from the Realm?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And yet most do not, or can not.”

“Fenwick needs me to come back before Easter, so I will return before Easter.”

“Such loyalty.” He touched my left hand, turned it over. “And you are not even married? Not engaged?” The Guild Leader swirled the sherry around. It was an act, pretending to be human just to put me at ease. I felt comforted that he bothered to make the effort.

“Friendship, sir, is stronger than romantic love. He was my friend first. Lover came later. Besides, it’s not just his life at stake now. A little girl will die if I don’t act.”

“You’ll risk your life for them?”

“It’s not really risking my life, sir. Besides, even if I were, two for one is a good deal.”

He stood up then, setting the glass down and clasping his hands behind his back. He walked over with his back to me, pretending to peruse the contents of his bookshelf. More act, but why did he want me at ease?

“I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Yes, of course, sir.”

“Listen, before you agree. You must do this of your free will. The Goodly Folk detest compulsion, and it will unravel things if you do not agree freely. I made a promise years ago to deliver a package to the Realm of the Faerie. Humans who travel to the Realm are few and far between. Will you take it for me?”

“Will people be harmed by this action, sir?”

“No humans will die.”

“I said people, sir, not just humans.”

“No. I’m not making war, or smuggling drugs. Just fulfilling a promise to an old friend.”

“I accept, sir, of my own free will.”

“Excellent. Let us go downstairs and I will ask my associates to help fetch the package for you.”

The other vampires didn’t salute when the Guild Leader entered the room, but they stood up a lot straighter. He beckoned them to follow him into the basement, and we all filed down the steps.

The Guild Leader, by definition, was the most powerful vampire in the city. He was conceivably the most powerful person in Seabingen. I was relieved to see that despite the fact that he held sway over all the vampires, more than a few humans, and had his hands in the pockets of both the mayor and the city council, the Guild Leader had the same storage issues as anyone else. The corseted brunette looked at the cluttered basement with a moue of dismay, especially when their leader pointed to the farthest corner to indicate where they should start digging.

I thought just the rude minions and I would move the stuff out of the way, but fortunately the shadowy and nameless duke of the underworld

wasn't above getting a little dusty. With all four of us working together, we managed to clear a path in the boxes and clutter in little over an hour. Finally, the bruiser with the earring reached up on a shelf near the ceiling and pulled down what appeared to be a child-sized casket. The lines scraped in the dust by their fingers revealed old cracked leather in a violet hue, banded by dull, pewter-colored metal.

"That's the package, sir?" It looked heavy.

"Yes." He stroked the leather, wiping it free of dust.

"Sir, I don't know how I'll be able to carry that."

"Fetch that backpack," the Guild Leader ordered.

Among all the other junk in the basement was an external frame backpack. The brunette found some nylon cord to secure the casket to the frame. She lifted it up so I could try it on experimentally. The thing must have weighed eighty pounds or more. Even after the straps were adjusted to fit my torso, I staggered under the weight. Suddenly I had enormous sympathy for all the women in the "before" pictures on the weight loss ads. I couldn't imagine carrying an extra eighty pounds every day.

"Can you bear it?" The Guild Leader asked me.

"I'll manage, sir, if I don't have to walk too far."

"Open the package when you get to the Realm."

"Yes, sir."

The corseted vampire helped me take it off, and carried it to the trunk of the car tucked under one arm. I envied her vampire strength. The other minion and I followed her, but the Guild Leader stopped me before I left the kitchen.

"Melbourne, come see me when you return. I will see you rewarded for completing this task."

"Yes, sir." I bowed to the Guild Leader and followed the others back to the car.

"You going to fairyland?" the bruiser asked, as he shut the car door.

"Yeah. That's the plan."

"Is that a real place?"

"I think so."

"Good luck," he said.

"Thanks." And then we drove back to my apartment in silence.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dael had spent the night on Tuesday, saying it was easier than driving over that early in the morning. I barred my door with a chair, but it wasn't necessary, since he and Elaina were thumping the mattress all night. Apparently Dael liked willing women too. I got dressed in my familiar jean jacket over a long-sleeved flannel shirt and jeans. What did people wear in the Realm? What was the weather like there? Impossible to be prepared.

"Are you ready yet?" Dael asked, as I stumbled out of my room, groggy-eyed and surly. He was already drinking a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Fain had arrived too, and was sitting on the couch, leafing through one of Elaina's magazines.

"I need a few minutes to talk to him." I pointed to Fain.

"Hurry up."

"You'll be rid of me soon enough," I shot back. Fain and I walked outside for privacy. I shivered, staring at the darkness for signs of Kaa. I felt him, somewhere nearby in the trees, but Kaa was too angry with me to perch. He knew I was leaving.

"You're not wearing the coat?" Fain put the casket in my van.

"I don't want it to get muddy. Besides, it might be spring when I return." The coat was packed in a box, along with anything else which might get in Elaina's way. If I hadn't come back by Easter, she was to give everything to James. She still didn't act like she thought I'd even leave. "I have a letter for you. It's for my mom. Could you mail it for me?"

Fain nodded as he tucked it in his pocket. "I have something for you too, something to take with you. I want it back when you return."

"What is it?"

Fain reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small velvet bag. I cupped my hands. He pulled open the drawstrings of the bag, pouring its contents into my hands.

It was a rosary, with small rose-shaped beads carved out of ivory. The cross was gold, and covered with filigree and small garnets.

"Jesus Christ! This looks like it belongs in a museum! Are you sure you want me to take it?"

“It’s a symbol of my faith.”

A double entendre. He believed in me. Fain wrapped it in its bag again, and tucked it in my jacket pocket. Then he took my hand and kissed my wrist one last time. If he had asked me to stay, or told me he loved me, or even suggested postponing the trip, I might have done so, but he didn’t.

When his lips finally left my skin, he merely said, “Time to go.”

I nodded.

“You ready yet?” Outside, Dael didn’t bother hiding his asshole tendencies, since Elaina wasn’t around to impress.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Dael got in my van and we drove north, following the river to the park where Fenwick and I had once taken pictures and had our picnic, years ago, centuries ago, in that far distant time before Marius and Violet made a shambles of my normal life. Did Dael remember the exact spot where he came through when immigrating however many years earlier? Was the portal still there?

“Stop here.” He pointed at the side of the road, a slushy and muddy morass dotted by the occasional snowdrift.

Dael took my keys and pocketed them. The van had served as a storage room, a studio space, a crash pad, and occasionally a were-bear transport unit. Now it was empty. Five years with that thing. The first ride I ever owned. So long, old friend. I slid the backpack and casket out of the back.

Dael didn’t help me put the casket on, and laughed mockingly when I staggered under its weight.

“You know, most men would offer to help.”

“I’m not a man.”

“True.” Prick. Hopefully his kin were more polite.

Dael led the way through the slushy forest, with me slowly trudging behind under the weight of the backpack. This area was mostly conifers, with a few hardwood trees, and more undergrowth than I wanted to deal with, even though it was bowed down under the weight of the winter’s snow. We had enough of a thaw to make the ground soft under the path, but not enough to remove all the icy drifts. Within minutes, my jeans were soaked and muddy to the knees. Dael led up hills and down gulleys and occasionally back-tracked, like a taxi driver trying to find the longest possible route to a hotel.

“Slow down a minute!” I called, panting, trying to catch up. Despite my thin jean jacket, the sweat poured down my chest and pooled in my bra. When he was only a few feet ahead, I leaned on my knees to catch my breath. “How much further is it?”

Dael looked back. “Half a mile. Not far.”

A marathon. Longest half mile ever. That involved a scramble (and a fall, for me) up a slick slope to get around a rocky ravine filled with ice and jagged stones. And then there it was.

It looked like a pane of antique glass set in an invisible frame, but was oblong and jagged, more like the entrance to a cave than a door. The top came to barely three feet above the ground, and the bottom was truncated by slushy snow, as though some of the portal extended down through the earth. This was it? Could I even fit through this?

He waved both hands towards the portal. “Go on through, if you dare. Just don’t expect to come home again.”

I spat at his feet. “I’m coming back for my van.”

He turned and walked away. Anything to say to him? No. I’d said my goodbyes.

The Realm

I slid/stepped through the portal, just remembering to duck at the last minute—and knelt on a grassy field, which was shorn as if by sheep or a lawnmower. My first impression was that everything became silent and slow, but after a half second the new world seemed almost normal. It felt like stepping off a very fast people-mover in the airport.

First things first, got to get rid of the casket. Kneeling down, I unfastened the straps and crawled out from under the pack. My arms and legs ached from the strain. I felt damp all over, damp from sweat pooling under my bra, and damp from slush soaking my pants to the knees.

Turning back around, I saw no sign of the portal to the slushy forest I'd come from. Somehow that wasn't surprising.

The land here looked like a golf course without the sand traps. To the sunward side, rolling hills extended as far as my eye could see. Opposite that grew more grass, and purple mountains. To my left and right was a grove of white-trunked trees with quaking leaves. The casket lay on the ground, still with a trace of dust, one corner caked in mud from where I'd dropped it.

I'm not the world's most curious person, but anyone would have wondered what was inside. I brushed mud off the hinges and tried to figure out how to open the thing. The clasp on the casket didn't involve a key, fortunately, because Holzhausen hadn't provided one. The ancient hinges protested, but with a little maneuvering, enough rust came off the latches that the top lid swung open.

Inside, the corpse of a Rottweiler-sized rabbit lay on a bed of padded satin. If he had been white instead of brown, and with a watch and a waistcoat, he might have resembled Alice's tea party companion. This rabbit was late, too. His fur had grown dry and patchy, the skin sunken in on the bones. The paws were twisted at an odd angle away from its head, and the half-open mouth revealed yellowed teeth. The nose and shoulder had been unnaturally flattened from where it pressed against the side of the casket, and the hind legs looked moth-eaten.

As I watched, the fur rippled, as if in a breeze. The skin on the chest slowly bellowed out, obscuring the ribs, expanding. A moment later, the air left the body, and the ribs appeared again. Almost like he was breathing.

No, not almost. He really was breathing. I fell back, sitting on the grass, unable to turn away as the dead rabbit came back to life. The paws scratched its face, and the ears twitched, each breath filling out the shrunken frame and restoring shine to the desiccated fur. He blinked, revealing bright eyes, and its nose began to twitch as whiskers sprouted from his face.

He sat up in the casket, scratching idly at his ear with a hind leg. He turned to look at me, leaned forward and sniffed in my direction. I licked my lips and scrambled backwards a few more feet.

“You are a human woman?”

I nodded.

“And we are in the Realm of the Faerie?”

I nodded again.

“Where is Grant? He promised to bring me here.” He reached down a paw and scratched himself. “You do speak, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“I am Jack. As in Jack Rabbit, but I am no rabbit. I am a hare. How did I get here, if Grant didn’t bring me?”

“I carried you through the portal.” I turned to point, but the portal had vanished. “I’m Kit.”

The hare hopped forward, then leaned down on his front paws to sniff me. “You are marked. Maybe you can help Grant? You are Grant’s friend?”

“We’re not exactly friends, but, we’re not enemies. I frowned and tilted my head. “And what do you mean, I’m marked?”

“Just that. You’re marked. Can you do any magic?”

“No. Look, as much as I like talking to you, I have something to do here, and I need to finish my errand so I can get back to the real world. Do you know where I can find some elecampane? It’s also called elfwort.”

In my pocket was a photocopy from an herb book. The colorless line drawing showed leaves and flowers, but didn’t give any information as to height or habitat. Too bad I didn’t know herbs like I knew trees. I had forgotten most of what Uncle Fred taught me, which wasn’t much to begin with.

“Jack eats plants. Jack doesn’t ask their names.”

“Take a look at the picture.”

Jack looked at it briefly but shook his head. “That is Elecampane? Jack doesn’t know her.”

“Well, I’ll have to find someone who does.” I tucked the photocopy back into my pocket and stood to go.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“The Pilell get angry when they find strangers wandering in their lands. If they think you are a Vargel, they will sever your head and carry it away.”

“Should I go to the Vargel then?” Dael was a Vargel, wasn’t he? Were his kinsmen assholes too?

Jack considered. “No. The Vargel keep slaves. They are likely to imprison you.”

“Is there anyone here who might be able to help me?”

“The Pilell.”

“I thought you said they are dangerous.”

“They are. Very dangerous. They are also the only people who can travel here.”

“Great,” I said sarcastically.

“Unless you meet someone who is not a person, but most of us are even more dangerous.” He cocked his head to one side. “Jack will give you a gift, since you brought me home.”

Jack ran off into the forest. After a long while, Jack came running down the path behind me, carrying leaves in his teeth.

“What is it?”

“To help you speak to the ones here.” Jack pulled the leaves off. They looked like aspen leaves.

“I can talk to you just fine.”

“Jack knows English because Grant liked to speak in English with me. Most here don’t know English.” He chewed the leaves in his mouth.

“They speak a different language here?”

“Everyone speaks his own language, but we have one tongue we sometimes share with each other. Bend down and open your mouth so Jack can give it to you.” Jack reached up with a paw and stuffed a bit of the chewed leaf in my mouth.

“Did you have to chew it first?” I asked, not enjoying the bitter taste of the leaves, and not liking the idea of dead hare spit either.

“Yes. Now bend down again.”

Jack spit more of the leaf paste on his paws and rubbed it on his own ears, and then rubbed it on mine, pulling gently on them as if trying to make

them longer.

"It's done. Now. Try to speak to Jack in the new language." Jack sat back on his haunches and waited.

"I don't know how to do that."

"Use the new language. How many languages do you have, that you can't recognize the new one?"

"English, and two semesters of high school French." He was right, somewhere I felt a new language, like an extra gear in my van. I shifted my mouth, changed my expression slightly, and pushed in the mental clutch. "Do ye ken me now?"

Jack nodded, and spoke back in the same tongue. "That was well spoken." He scratched his neck with a back leg. "Jack has a message for Grant. You shall return to Grant's world?"

"I have that desire." And how cool was it to suddenly know a new language without having to study?

"Jack should like to tell Grant about you, when you see Grant again, tell him of the strange woman Jack met in the Realm. He will laugh, Grant will, to think of a human in the Realm!" Jack chuckled then, slightly hysterically, reminding me of one of Alice's other tea party companions. "Give him Jack's message. Tell him, tell him Jack Rabbit loves yellow ones too."

"Jack Rabbit loves yellow ones too?"

Jack nodded enthusiastically.

"Your message is 'Jack Rabbit loves yellow ones too.' I shall tell him true, but I do not understand the message's meaning."

Jack scratched an ear. "He will understand."

I patted the pocket with the photocopy. "I'd better go now. I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Why? There is no time here."

"I have to get home before Easter."

"You may never get home." Jack laughed maniacally and hopped away. I ignored him and headed towards the mountains over gently rolling hills that wouldn't have strained a golf cart.

The green grass stretched out for miles in every direction, except for the small grove of trees where Jack had gotten the leaves. Elecampane grew in meadows, didn't it?

I kept walking.

Several hours, or several days, or several minutes later, with the purple mountains still hovering in the distance, the landscape hadn't yet changed.

I kept walking.

Time moved differently in the Realm. I didn't get tired, and I didn't need to sleep, but the solitude began to drive me crazy.

I walked and walked and walked, but it never seemed like I got anywhere. When it felt like I couldn't bear another minute of it, another minute became another day, which became another week, which became months, except that the landscape never changed. Despairing, I kept placing one foot in front of another.

I tried counting my steps, but lost count somewhere in the ten-thousands. So, I counted to ten thousand again and again, using Fain's rosary. I went through it several times. I even prayed. It didn't do any good.

The pale green grassy hills rolled on and on forever.

I cried. I laughed and then I cried again. I tried to tell myself stories to keep the solitude from driving me crazy, but it just made me think of Fenwick, which made me cry again. I counted my steps again, and again, and again, starting over when I lost count. I couldn't count my breaths, because I could hold my breath as long as I wanted and never grow weak or dizzy.

The green rolling hills went on, and on, and on, the purple mountains remaining tantalizingly in the distance. If I had been walking this far on earth, I would have crossed Asia twice by now.

No one died in the Realm, they said. But what about the people who got lost in the hills and never found their way out? This is what they'd warned me about. This is what I had to fear. Where were the Pilell? Please let them find me. Even if they decapitated me, at least I wouldn't be alone anymore.

And still I kept walking.

At one point, I gave up hope. I fell to my knees, crying. The earth was soft, the grass, perfectly trimmed. The air felt sweet and warm, the sky a crystalline blue. No dampness soaked into the denim of my jeans, no insect bit me. A beautiful, flawless landscape. An unending prison.

I cried.

"James, I'm sorry. Fenwick, I'm sorry. You were right. I'm alone and I can't go anywhere and I don't know how to get back and I made a mistake and I'm sorry."

I cried until my body heaved with sobs. I cried until I ran out of tears. I cried for my failure.

“Help me! Jack! God! Anyone! Please! Please help me!”

And nothing happened. No one came to save me. Nothing changed. So, I got back to my feet and kept walking.

Long past the point of hopelessness, long past the point when I’d grown certain I would never escape, someone laughed, a laugh halfway between a laugh and a series of barks.

A coyote appeared. At least, it looked like a coyote in that its muzzle was longer than a wolf’s, and its fur was brownish gray instead of the white and charcoal husky markings that wolves have. It had skinny legs and a lean tail, and stood as high as a Clydesdale at the shoulder.

“Jack said I’d find a marked human wandering alone, and here you are,” the coyote said. “I’m still trying to decide if it would be funnier to help you or devour you.”

“Helping me would be hilarious. Joke of the ages,” I said. “Do you know where I can find elecampane?”

“Yes. In the garden at the foot of the Tree of Life.” The coyote slunk closer, sniffing at my back and stomach as if wondering what my entrails tasted like.

“Great.” I held completely still. “How do I get there?”

“You don’t.” The coyote snapped its jaws at my throat, and then laughed when I flinched. “The Pilell are the only people who can travel in this land. Unless you’re with them, or with one of my kind, you can’t go anywhere.”

“How do I find the Pilell? I was told they’d find me.”

“You don’t want to find them. They have been known to sever intruders into several pieces and scatter their limbs across the Realm. Such a conundrum. You can’t go anywhere unless you’re with the Pilell. And they won’t help anyone who is not one of them.” He sat on his haunches, idly scratching an ear.

If I hadn’t been walking alone for centuries, I would have turned and left. The last thing I needed was someone showing up to convince me that all hope was lost. I could figure that out on my own.

“If you’re not going to help me, why are you here?”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you. But nothing comes for free.”

“I’m listening.” I knelt, trying to be closer to eye level to the coyote but it was so tall that it now looked down on me.

“I can make the Pilell accept you as one of their own. They will love you. They will think you are their prodigal daughter, their cherished pet. They’ll want to hold you close and never let you go. You might not even want to leave. You can forget who you are and join your true tribe. It will be like your childhood fantasy of running away to join the Indians.”

My eyes widened and I jerked my head back.

“Oh, I know all kinds of things that people try to keep secret. That’s why you call yourself Kit, isn’t it? It’s for Kit Carson, who ran away to join the Indians when he was sixteen. Trust me, the Indians have their own problems, and the last thing they need is a white girl trying to make them into something they aren’t. But the Pilell really are a magical people. You really can join the Pilell.”

“What’s the catch?”

The coyote grinned, in that malevolent way that canines have, showing all his teeth. “The catch is that there will be a balance. If I gave you a third arm while you were here, you’d have to lose an arm when you went back. If I gave you a pile of gold here, you’d return to find yourself penniless.”

“How is that going to affect me when I go home?”

The coyote grinned. “It doesn’t matter. You don’t really have a choice, do you?”

He was right. “I accept. Thank you.”

“You’re not welcome. I’m only helping you because you’re marked.”

“What does that mean, marked?”

“It means that it’s funnier to help you than devour you, so you should be grateful.” The coyote started to walk away. “Are you coming or not?”

“I’m coming,” I said, loping behind him. “What do I call you?”

“Your Grace? Majesty? Great One? What sort of honorifics are they using in English these days?” The coyote grinned. “Then again, I suppose that’s not appropriate, considering who you belong to. I am known here as Alsethu.”

“I’m Kit.”

“I know. Be quiet now. I’ve taken a disliking to you.”

I shut up and kept my eyes on the coyote’s furred back.

Even though he said he disliked me, and threatened to devour me, the coyote was good to his word.

He ran, and I followed. The landscape changed around us as we ran, as if we stood still and the film of the earth progressed. The grass grew longer,

more varied, wilder, until we ran through a prairie. Did prairies like this even exist on Earth anymore? With a hundred thousand blades of grass pointed skyward, in land that had never been plowed? It wasn't a land for humans, but Alsethu dove into it like a swimmer into a deep lake, and I had no choice but to follow.

Alsethu didn't slow down for me, and only by sprinting full out was I able to keep sight of the gray tail vanishing through the grasses that grew above my head. It was as if we were swimming in a prairie sea. I ran with my arms poised like a plow in front of me. The grass blades whipped past my arms, slicing the skin. Twice he startled a flock of birds, and they burst from the grass in front of us like students rushing from a school at the end of summer. He snapped at a few, but missed them.

The ground rose. On earth, we would have been exhausted by now, but here in the Realm, each breath brought enough energy to keep going. The ground rose higher and higher, until the prairie broke away and we found ourselves in flat hardpan desert.

Alsethu led me towards red sandstone cliffs. Pillars of striated gold and rust rose towards the sky like arthritic fingers. He sprinted towards them, dodging and turning, as if he were trying to ditch me in the maze of sandstone. The floor of the canyons curved in a V, as if carved by water, and a human couldn't run here as well as a coyote could. I twisted my ankle, and the pain made me want to stop and nurse it, but Alsethu showed no signs of slowing down, so I willed my body to ignore the pain and sprinted on. He was almost out of sight, and he turned to grin fiercely at me, as if losing me had been his goal all along.

The ground rose steeply, until we scrambled up a wind-carved bank of stone, knobbed and pitted like candle wax on a bottle. Here, a human could climb better than a coyote, and I caught up to him. The ground flattened out into a high mesa, with pinkish stone open to the sky. A group of people ran towards us from the other side, and when they saw Alsethu, they knelt, bowing towards him with their arms across their midsection like people suffering stomach cramps. These must be the Pilell.

"See, human? Now this is the kind of reception I deserve."

"I'm sorry, Alsethu. I didn't know." I knelt.

Alsethu gave a canine huff. "I'll devour you for your impertinence later. Shut up now, I'm going to talk to these Pilell."

Alsethu began to talk to them in a language I'd never heard before. It sounded nothing like the one Jack had taught me. There were eighteen of them, and they resembled one another like members of an extended family. They looked like young adults, fully grown but without any signs of aging. It was hard to tell while they were kneeling, but they seemed tall.

They didn't wear much in the way of clothing, just leather skirts and a rolled up carpet on their back slung across their chests with a cord. They all had skin that was tan and dark brown, mottled in patches like continents. Their facial features were unlike any I'd seen on earth, with eyes that seemed larger and more narrowly spaced than they ought to be, and chins that sloped in a distinctive way toward the jaw.

Eight of them were women, and although neither gender covered from the waist up, they wore necklaces of colored feathers and gold beads. Most of them wore blades of some kind strapped to their belts.

They must have been talking about me, because several of them looked up from their crouch to stare. I made eye contact with a woman who had blue feathers. Her brow was pinched with fear, and she glanced back and forth between me and Alsethu. Maybe that threat of devouring people wasn't idle. One of the men, who had a distinctive pale stripe down his nose, asked Alsethu something, and he replied in the same language.

"What are you telling them?" I asked.

"I told them to keep an eye on you, that I'd be coming to fetch you later when I got hungry. I didn't say I needed you in one piece though, so mind your manners."

"Did you tell them about the herb I'm looking for?"

I tried to get the photocopy out of my pocket, but Alsethu was already loping off.

"Tell them yourself!" Alsethu shouted back.

The Pilell got to their feet, chattering anxiously with one another. The woman with the blue feather came over and took my arm, as if I were a little sister who had been entrusted into her care.

"Can you aid me in the search of this herb?" I asked them, in the pidgin that Jack taught me.

But the woman with the blue feathers shook her head, palms out, as if she had no idea what I was saying. I turned to Alsethu, but he had vanished.

I stayed with the Pilell for centuries.

At least, that's what it felt like. For a long time, I couldn't understand anything they said. Then a few words stuck in my brain. Then I figured out what those words meant. Then I could say them. More words came, phrases, sentences. It took a long time, many hours of frustration and confusion and people laughing behind their hands when I said the wrong thing. After what felt like days, I learned their language, and eventually I even lost my accent. It must have been years. Hours? It was hard to tell in the Realm.

"Why do you cover your breasts?" Bluefeather asked me once. We were running along a rocky beach, where boulders stuck out of the waves like stepping stones, and having fun leaping from one to the other.

"Modesty," I said, sprinting to leap. I leapt and barely reached the boulder, skinning my knee. It healed instantly, as wounds here did. I pretended it didn't hurt.

Palesocks, who had dark thighs but tan feet and ankles, didn't quite make the leap and fell into the sea. He scrambled out, dripping with seawater, and Bluefeather laughed at him, but not unkindly (she kind of had a thing for him).

"Do the men of your world force women to hide their breasts out of shame?" Palesocks asked, shaking himself dry.

"No," I leapt to the next boulder, where Bluefeather waited for us. "It's just modesty."

"People in the dying lands aren't as advanced socially as we are," Bluefeather told him. She herself had an impressive chest undaunted by gravity, and I was a little envious. "She's only been here a lifetime, she can't be expected to adopt our ways already."

"What do you mean, a lifetime? I have to go home. I need that herb."

"A baby's lifetime," Palesocks said, changing the subject, as they always did whenever I mentioned wanting to get the elecampane. "Didn't you hear? A new baby was born. Want to go see it?"

"Let's go," Bluefeather said, before I could answer. "But take off your jacket, Treemaker. You look weird hiding your chest like that. You're among civilized people now."

So, we went to see the baby. He and his mother were with a different herd, who ran in a long line snaking through dry rocky valleys dotted with yucca and greasewood. I'd never seen any of them before, but all Pilell

were one people, and when they saw us, they slowed down so we could meet the little one.

The baby had been strapped to his mother's back, but she unslung him and took him out of the harness that held him. Palesocks and Bluefeather clasped their hands over their faces in awe and envy, like Fenwick did at an electronics trade show. You'd think they were baby-crazy thirty-something women by the way they oohed and ahed over him.

He looked just like a normal baby, blue eyed and chubby. His skin was more dark than tan, and he had a tan splotch on the center of his chest that looked like a hand.

"We're calling him 'Little Hand' until he comes up with a name he likes better," his mother said. She was tan on her left side and dark on her right, with a pattern like flames licking across her collarbone.

"He's the seventeenth person younger than me," Palesocks said. He touched his fingertips to his forehead, and then touched the same fingertips to the baby's forehead.

"Twenty-three for me," Bluefeather said, repeating the forehead touching gesture.

"One," I said. I touched my fingertips to my forehead, then touched them to the baby's forehead. He stared at me, apparently fascinated by my alien, non-Pilell features and coloring.

"Will you take him to the Tree soon?" Palesocks asked.

"We are going there now," she said. "Will you run with us?"

"Yes," I said. "I want to go to the tree."

"Not now, Treemaker," Bluefeather said, taking my arm. "We have something to show you."

"But I need to see the Tree. I need the elecampane. I have to save my friend."

Palesocks took my other arm. "Thanks for letting us meet our newest brother," he said. "He's a treasure."

Little Hand's mother smiled like a queen with the praise. She nodded at us, and then strapped her baby back on.

"I want to see the Tree," I told them. "That's where the herb is, isn't it? That's what Alsethu told me."

"You don't need to go right now." Palesocks tugged on my arm to lead me away. He led me up the side of this dry California-like hill, treading on stones and cacti with bare feet like it was rubberized track. (You got used to

the pain.) “They’re going to introduce him to the Tree. It wouldn’t do to intrude on the ritual. You wouldn’t want to offend one of the Old Ones.”

“The Old Ones have favored us,” Bluefeather said. “They only grant us a child when we have pleased them.”

At the crest of the hill, the desert abruptly became tundra. Landscape did this in the Realm. It changed illogically. Desert became forest, forest bordered on frozen sea, which bordered on jungle. It never ceased to amaze me.

“The Vargel say that they only have new babies come when someone leaves for the dying lands.”

Palesocks made a snort like a horse. “The Vargel are full of ashes and lies.”

“Did they really say that?” Bluefeather asked, as we loped away. “Do they really believe that? Twigs on the tree, but the Vargel are foolish.”

“When can I see the Tree?”

“Have you ever seen the violet jungle?” Bluefeather asked, “We should go.”

She took my arm and ran through the tundra, leaping over fragile wildflowers and rushing glacial rivers. She led me through a dense forest of fir that became leafier and moister and warmer. Cannas the size of redwoods grew next to violet-leaved rubber plants.

They were using the landscape to distract me from my goal, but how could a violet jungle not distract me? Earth had no forest like this. It certainly didn’t have a jungle without insects.

I stopped asking to go to see the Tree. But I didn’t forget.

No one sleeps in the Realm, but when we got tired of running, we made it night and sat in a circle around a fire and told stories. Nosestripe said he once came from the dying lands, but his stories of what his life was like sounded implausible. He told of boar as big as houses that dug tunnels that rerouted rivers, and of a king with golden wings, who could fly from city to city. I asked what the name of his land was, who his people were, and he said he couldn’t remember. Anyway, he wasn’t ever going back. Once you joined the Pilell, you didn’t ever return to the dying lands. They don’t exile their folk like the Vargel do.

I’d ditched my jeans, keeping only my jean jacket with the photocopy and the dryad acorn and the dessicated elf finger in the pockets, along with the knowledge that I couldn’t stay here forever.

I had my own carpet, bestowed upon me by my brothers and sisters to mark that I belonged with them. I had lost my shoes. I didn't need them here.

One day we ran across the chaparral, leaping over gulches, feet treading lightly through the dry grass as we swerved through juniper. I was looking for the herb. I'd never stopped looking for it.

Something appeared on the horizon. At first it looked like the top of a cumulous cloud, except that it was dark green. I veered towards it.

"I know a place where it never stops snowing. Don't you love running through fresh snow?" Bluefeather took my arm and tried to lead me away.

"I can't." I pulled my arm free and ran towards the Tree of Life. Did she think I didn't know how to bend the landscape? I was a Pilell too.

"Don't go there." She circled around my side and veered, like a dog herding sheep. "I know a place with terrapins as big as boulders. They will let us cling to their shells and ride them."

"I can't stay here forever."

"Don't go there," she said again, blocking my path.

I stopped. "That's where the elecampane grows. I need it."

She stopped too, blocking my way. "If you get the elecampane, you'll go back to the dying lands. You can't kill yourself like that, Treemaker."

"Don't think I haven't noticed your attempts to keep me here. I love it here, Bluefeather. I do. I'm happy among the Pilell, but I made a promise. Fenwick will die if I don't get that herb."

"So? People die in the dying lands. That's why they call it that. This Fenwick isn't one of us. You are." She drew her knife. "I didn't want it to come to this."

Bluefeather lunged for me, but I dodged and sprinted towards the Tree of Life. She was right behind me. I had my own knife, a blade as long as my forearm strapped to my hip. We fought sometimes for the fun of it, but that was just a slice here, a gouge there. When Bluefeather lunged, she swung her blade in a maiming arc, and if I hadn't ducked, my head would have disattached from my body.

"That's how it's gonna be?"

"I can't let you go home. You'll die there."

She swung again, and I rolled out of the way.

"I won't die right away." I leapt to my feet with my blade in hand, deflecting just in time.

“But you will eventually.” She pointed the tip of her blade at me, shifting her weight from foot to foot as if looking for an opening.

“You’re willing to decapitate me to keep me here?”

“If that’s the only thing that will save your life, yes,” she said, swinging her blade low at my knee, just barely missing when I pulled my leg back. “I’ll reattach your limbs when you come to your senses.”

“I have to go home.” I just barely managed to block another strike. This couldn’t go on. “I made a promise. Let me go get the herb. I have to go.”

“But what about us? Don’t you care about the Pilell? Do we mean that little to you?” She swung again. Double-pronged attack of emotional guilt and neck-severing strikes. Damn. Pilell women fought hard.

But I fought hard too, and I wanted it more. I blocked and counterstruck. “I made a promise. I have to save my friend.”

“But you’re one of us now. You’re like a sister to me. If you go, I’ll never see you again.” Bluefeather arced her blade down, going for my knee. She looked like she was about to cry.

I pulled it back just in time. My own eyes stung with tears. “I’m sorry. This isn’t easy for me either.”

“It can be easy.” She lunged, trying to decapitate me. I blocked with my own blade, but the tip of her knife sliced a gash in my chin, which healed instantly (but not without pain.) “Just forget the dying lands and stay here. You’re one of us, Treemaker.”

“I know. I’ll miss you especially. You’ve been such a good friend.” I tried to cut her right arm off, but she pulled back, so I only cut her elbow. A few drops of blood flecked out before it healed. “I’m sad to go.”

“So don’t.”

“I have to.”

I waited until she swung her arm back for another strike, and while she was vulnerable, I lunged in, plunging my own blade deep up into her belly, like a punch to the solar plexus. On someone in the dying lands, a strike like this with a blade in my hand would kill.

Here, I distracted her for maybe four seconds. She grunted with pain, and I slipped her blade from her loose fingers. Using both blades like scissors, I severed her head as neatly as I could. Tidier wounds were easier to reattach. I scooped up her head and pulled it away from her body, where her arms were already feeling around for it.

“I’m sorry,” I said to her face, which was scowling at me, the lips working soundlessly without air. “I need to save Fenwick.”

I kissed my friend on the forehead, and laid her head down on the grass, not too far from her body. Her body had already risen to its feet and was patting the grass in a circle, like a person searching for a lost contact lens. She’d find her head soon enough, and then she’d have to run back to Ululan to get it reattached. By then, I’d have the elfwort and be back on my way to the dying lands.

I hoped, anyway. Bluefeather wouldn’t fall for the same trick twice.

I ran as fast as my legs would carry me, pulling the land around me until the Tree of Life loomed into view.

I’m not a pious person by any stretch of the imagination. I’m only Catholic under duress, and I’ve never had much in the way of religious sentiment, but every once in a while even skeptics feel awe. My eyes drifted heavenward to take in the canopy soaring like dark green clouds overhead.

The Tree of Life. No wonder Dael was willing to swear on it.

A garden spread out around the tree in a wide shadow, trees and bushes and roots of every kind, in bloom and in flower simultaneously, like a botanist’s dream. I slowed to a walk, treading carefully on the thin path that spiraled like a sketched line towards the tree in the center. Palms grew next to succulents, which flourished in the shade of red leaved maples. Orchids with roots like spiders clung to the trunks of rough barked pine. Water lilies floated in pools next to cacti. I scrutinized the plants as I wound my way along the path, but they had been arranged by a mysterious algorithm. Eventually, I found myself at the center of the spiral with the trunk of the tree looming as wide as a skyscraper.

I stopped and looked up. The branches arched thousands of feet overhead, swaying distantly. The bark seemed smooth from a distance, but up close it had grooves and furrows deep enough for me to stick my forearm into.

I came closer, and placed my hands against the bark. The trunk under my fingertips felt like a living thing, pulsing with more life than a tree had. Than a human had. It felt like the heart-vein of the world.

Maybe you had to leave an offering before you could have a plant from the garden. Take a penny, leave a penny? Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out one of the dryad’s acorns, and backed a few paces away. I knelt and put my hands on the ground, which was black and loamy like potting soil.

“I don’t if you can hear me, or maybe you’re not even sentient, but if you can, please, take this and let me get what I came for.”

I dug a hole in the soil and dropped in one of the dryad acorns. I stepped back, half expecting a sapling to spring out of the ground, but nothing happened.

It took me a month to search the garden and find the elecampane. Or maybe it was only twenty minutes. It was hard to tell in the Realm. It grew on the opposite side of the tree from the place I came in, in a marshy meadow between a dandelion and some weird plant that looked like an alien. Was it the right plant? A lot of plants looked alike. It felt like it.

The elecampane came up to chest high on me. It had jagged leaves, yellow flowers, and rather nondescript seedpods. I took out the utility knife Ms. Yseult had given me, sliced it directly down the middle, and dug down to get half the roots as well.

The two halves of the plant healed themselves as though they were earthworms regenerating. Was that something plants did here, or was it the knife? Was that why it didn’t cut Dael?

A coyote howled. My limbs went cold and weak. Coyotes don’t howl like wolves do. Coyotes howl like children yelping in pain, or like young men caught up in the throes of alcohol and adrenaline.

I ran, using the Pilell trick of pulling my destination closer to me. Running for the exit. Running to go home.

The Realm is a dreamscape. I could run faster than any of them, if I just willed it strongly enough.

I ran faster than I thought possible, tearing through the garden, ignoring the spiral path, clutching the elecampane as if it were the key to the only door that led out of the Realm and back into the real world.

As soon as I left the garden, I saw them, the lanky brown Pilell and the grey-furred coyote. My brothers and sisters of the Pilell wanted to keep me here to save my life, an intervention. I could understand that. Why did Alsethu want me here? Because it was funny to let Fenwick die? I couldn’t let them catch me.

Like those mothers who lifted cars to save their trapped babies, I summoned every ounce of speed I had. The landscape changed like a blur. Grassland, rocky cliffs, seascape, forest. More forest. Live oak gave way to juniper which became pine which turned into pale silvery birches. Birches. Like that house in the Bromley district.

I was running as fast as I could through the birch forest, but when the ground dipped and swayed I lost time. When thick growth blocked my way, my flight became a scramble, and the Pilell gained on me.

“Treemaker!” they called out to me. “Stop! You don’t have to do this!”

I kept running. If they caught me they’d kill me. No, they wouldn’t kill me. They were trying to save my life. They would sever my head from my body and keep it in a sack for a few centuries, until I came to my senses. Until I forgot about Fenwick. Until I gave up.

Part of me, a secret part, thought that wouldn’t be so bad. I could become a Pilell forever, and never go home again. Never grow old. Never die.

I thought about Fenwick, alone in his apartment, growing weaker as Violet’s curse tapped her energy.

I ran on. White trees whipped past my peripheral vision. I ran so fast I almost smacked my forehead on the trunk which had fallen at an angle across my path. Ducking under it, I glimpsed something that didn’t fit.

Golden brown, like varnished wood.

Horizontal lines and right angles, like stairs.

I grabbed a trunk as I passed, whipping around a hundred and eighty degrees, using my arm as a tether.

Nosestripe (who had always been kind of a dick to me, but he was still my brother Pilell) stood in front of me with his blade bared.

“What will Alsethu think of us, if we let you go home to die?”

I drew my blade and feigned an attack, but instead of following through, I sprinted towards the stairs.

Nosestripe was right behind me. He grazed my calf with the tip of his knife, but I ignored it and dashed towards the golden brown hole in the earth. These stairs led down, to another forest.

Nosestripe grazed me again along my spine, but the stairs were only a few yards away, so I dove for them, sliding like I was going for home base.

You can’t slide as well on the undergrowth-tangled soil of a birch forest as you can in a baseball diamond. I slid maybe four feet, and my fingertips brushed the ankles of someone blocking me. I pressed my eyes shut and waited for the guillotine blow.

It didn’t come.

The forest had grown silent except for ragged breathing and faint whispers.

“Yseulta,” one of them whispered, maybe more than one.

I opened my eyes and turned my head to see whose ankles I was touching.

Ms. Yseult loomed over me, wearing her homespun white gown, the gold leaf necklace, and the shape of a Native American woman which was certainly not her true form.

The Pilell knelt before her, as they had for Alsethu.

“Honored One,” Nosestripe said, addressing Yseulta. He did just try to sever my limbs, but I was still overwhelmingly impressed by the *cojones* it must have taken to speak up like that. “Honored one. Alsethu commanded us to keep Treemaker here. She’s one of our people. Please don’t let her go home to die.”

“This creature belongs to me,” she said, pointing down at me. “And I owe her a boon. Treemaker, you may descend.”

I glanced back at the Pilell gathered in the forest around me. Bluefeather was there, with her head on her shoulders. They looked like friends seeing me off at the airport, maybe parting forever. Their eyes shone with tears, even Nosestripe.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, clutching the elecampane in the other. With one final look at the people who had been my tribe for the past century, I turned and descended the stairs to the dying lands.

At the foot of the stairs, a path led through birch trees, green with buds above and yellow with dried leaves below. My bare feet didn’t make noise beyond the rustle of leaves. At the end of the path I found myself facing a very familiar door, a door I had exited through many times, after seven hours daily with sawdust and glue and shims and screws.

I pivoted slowly, taking in the panorama of the forest I had created. It was still beautiful. My heart swelled with pride. The stairway was the only non-forest thing in the room, and now I knew where the stairway led to. Even the windows could hardly be seen through the forest of white-trunked trees. The yellow-brown leaves on the ground matched the forest in the Realm perfectly. It wasn’t a flaw, it was a necessity. I looked up to the fluorescent lights, which now looked bluer, more like the sky. Of course, it was hard to tell because the leaves were starting to unfurl.

Leaves. Budding leaves. In the forest I had created.

I left the fey-bladed utility knife at the foot of the stairs.

I opened the door, and walked over the porch, across the wild green meadow of a lawn under the budding elm trees and through the streets of the Bromley district.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

It was morning, it was spring, and the time flew past. A long-forgotten sensation plagued my limbs as I walked. Oh yeah, fatigue.

It had been two months since I left.

Dael the asshole had stolen my car, so I didn't get to Old Twi's house until late afternoon, even though I got a ride for a few miles from a guy in a pickup who was too stoned to notice (or care) that I was dirty and shoeless, carrying my Pilell's carpet, a four-foot weed, and a blade as long as my forearm.

Old Twi's dogs whined with alarm when I came to the fence. They didn't stretch to the end of their tethers like the last time, but clustered together in a pack near the porch. The doorbell duct-taped to the fence made a cranky buzzing sound from inside the house. Pressing it made the dogs raise their muzzles to bark, as if they weren't sure their master could hear the noise.

"Shaddup!" Old Twi yelled at the dogs as he banged the screen door open. The dogs stopped barking and lay down, watching him. He carried a shotgun tucked under his arm and a sweat-stained ballcap on his head. He narrowed his eyes at me, then widened them and tilted his head back.

"Damn. It's you. Didn't think you'd actually do it. Come on up."

I opened the gate and walked to the porch. The dogs watched me warily, but didn't bark.

"Is it Easter yet?" The steps creaked under my weight.

"Maundy Thursday. You're cutting it close." In the house he poured me milk in a chipped enamel cup and handed it to me. "I've been lookin' at that doll. Girl hasn't got much left."

"Then let's get going."

"Drink the milk first. You got a bit of fey about you." I laid the elecampane on his kitchen table across a stack of newspapers. The roots dangled off the end of the table, dropping sprinkles of dirt onto the floor. Dirt from the Realm of the Faerie. I'd been there just this morning, and it already seemed far away, like a dream I had when I was a child. I drank the milk and set the cup on the table.

“You got the rest?”

I nodded and took the ingredients out of my jean jacket pockets. One dryad acorn left. The disgusting finger, wrapped in a tissue and a ziploc baggie. A sprig of mistletoe, also wrapped in a plastic baggie, looking considerably less fresh than the elecampane.

“Sit yourself down. This is gonna take a while.”

Old Twi filled a big pasta pot with water and set it to boiling. He drew out ingredients from the cabinets in the kitchen, like he was making stone soup. A handful of metal filings. Some dried plums. A teaspoon of orange-brown oil. Most of the finger. A sprig of the mistletoe.

“Cut me some of that elecampane.”

I reached into my pocket for a utility knife. Sliding the blade out, the metal shimmered oddly. This was the same knife I’d left at the foot of the stairs in Yseulta’s house. Why was it ...? Puzzle it out later. Save Fenwick now. I used the second knife, the one with the normal blade, to cut the plant.

Old Twi dumped the plant into the soup. A cat was flirting outrageously, rubbing up against my ankles and purring, but she abandoned us when she’d finished drinking the last of my milk. Old Twi left the room, and when he came back, he held the shoebox with the doll in it. He shook the doll into the soup too.

I felt like I was falling asleep sitting up, as if I hadn’t eaten or slept in hundreds of years and the only thing keeping me going was anxiety and the desire to see this thing through.

Old Twi took a cleaver off a hook and sharpened it with what looked like a hunk of rock salt. He fished the doll out of the soup with a slotted spoon and dropped it on the table with a splat. Metallic scented steam rose from it.

Using the cleaver with a violence that made the table jump and the newspapers slide onto the floor, Old Twi hacked the doll into pieces.

“Quick, the acorn.”

I handed him the acorn, and he scraped it and the doll pieces back into a bucket of water resting on the floor near the door. He left the room, and came back with a pile of wood ashes on a piece of newspaper, which he slid into the bucket.

“That should just about do it,” he said.

“That’s it? He’s all better?”

“Curse is gone. Can’t say how long it will take for her to throw off the energy drains. Maybe a minute, maybe a—”

I didn’t hear the rest of what he said because I was already out the door, running for the road.

Everything seems a lot closer when you have a car. I didn’t make it to Fenwick’s apartment, but after a couple hours I passed by the dojo, where someone would probably give me a ride. Class was just getting out.

Cammie was walking out the door. She did a doubletake when she saw me, glancing from my Pilell’s carpet slung across my chest, to my knife, to my bare feet. “Hey, Kit, where you been? What’s with the weird outfit?”

“Long story. Do you think you could—”

Fenwick appeared in the window, tightening his ponytail as he turned to chat with Rob. My heart fluttered. I stepped past Cammie into the dojo, not seeing anything except his face.

Fenwick looked completely, passionately alive. His beard had grown out, bushy and reddish-blond. His eyes were animated and his skin flushed and healthy. You’d never know to look at him that he’d even had a cold.

“So weird,” he said, talking to the other students. Some were dressed in their gis, as if he’d appeared in the middle of class and they all came out to say hello to him. “I wake up and there’s this guy in my apartment, wearing a nurse’s uniform. I ask him what he’s doing there, and he looks at me like I’m that singing frog from the cartoon. Turns out I had a psychotic break or a stroke or something. They’re still not sure what it was. I’m supposed to go to the neurologist, but honestly, I feel fine.”

He broke off because I had launched myself at him for a hug.

But instead of catching me in his arms like he always did, he dodged me, as if I were testing his karate-fu by faking an attack. Instead of meeting his arms, his chest, I met air and stumbled, crashing into the trophy case behind him.

“Dude, pretty harsh way to treat your girlfriend,” Theo said. “She was just trying to hug you.”

Fenwick stepped back even more, as if I were an overly friendly Golden Retriever and he was wearing nice clothes. “My what now?”

“Girlfriend,” I said, rubbing my hip where it had been bruised by the case.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he said, laughing nervously.

“Since when?” Hannah asked. “I thought you two were serious.”

“Yeah, this is news to me,” I said. My hip hurt, and my feet were bleeding from walking barefoot all over town, but my heart hurt so badly that the rest of it faded into the background.

“I’m sorry, I barely even know you. I don’t remember anything since Christmas, and, I mean, I remember we used to hang around together a long time ago, but are you sure we were dating?”

Theo and Cammie were hanging back near the door, along with Kishimoto-sensei, as if they didn’t want to draw attention to themselves by leaving, but they weren’t sure they wanted to be here.

Fenwick had changed. He wasn’t meeting my eye like he used to. He was a stranger. Not a stranger, but not a lover either. He was standing too far away, his body was tilted away from me. His feet pointed at Hannah, not at me.

“You’re supposed to break up by text, dude,” Rob said. “That’s how normal people do it.”

Fenwick turned to Rob. “How could I break up with her if we were never going out in the first place?”

“Coulda fooled us,” Theo said.

“Yeah,” Hannah said tilting her body and edging a few inches closer to him. “I thought you two were pretty serious.”

Fenwick shook his head. He made eye contact with everyone but me, as if I were some vagrant begging for bus fare instead of the woman who risked everything to save his life. The woman he bought an emerald ring for.

“I don’t remember dating her. And it’s not even that, it’s that, I don’t, you know, I’m not into her.”

“You don’t love me anymore?” I asked. The faint sound of a coyote laughing reached my ears, muffled and quiet, like a cell phone in a pocket. Alseth’s price for making the Pilell accept me. Transfer love and affection from one account to another. A simple transaction. Hilarious.

“Sorry,” Fenwick said. “I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, I’m sure you’re a nice girl and all, but whatever you thought we had, we don’t.”

“Dude,” Rob stage whispered. “Worst break-up speech ever.”

I pushed past him towards the door. I’d always hated to cry in front of other people.

I don’t remember the walk home. I don’t remember crawling into bed. It seems I could hardly even remember what it was like to be in Fenwick’s

arms, in his heart, as if it were a dream I had a year ago.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

I stayed in bed for a week. Or maybe it was two? A long time. My sheets started to stink. My hair got greasy. My heart remained resolutely broken.

Kaa came by once or twice, but he didn't stay long before he left again to spend his time in the trees fluffing out his feathers to court females. Seemed like he was doing pretty well. I tried to be happy for him, but I was jealous. Jealous of a bird, how about that?

Fenwick didn't call. Why should he? He didn't love me anymore. His love had been erased, sucked away, wiped clean.

James came by the next day, bearing a large cup and a paper bag. "I brought you some chai and a scone."

I wouldn't drink it. It was all I could do to keep down the hot water with ginger in it that Elaina brought me. Food wouldn't stay down at all, and caffeine might ruin what little sleep I was getting.

He looked around my room, but there wasn't any dresser or nightstand to put the cup on so he just set it on the floor.

"Elaina told me what happened," he said. "I can hardly believe it. Don't you think it's weird that he should just suddenly not love you anymore?"

Weird wasn't the right word. Tragic. Horrible. Catastrophic.

James went on with his pep talk, something about other fish in the sea, or time healing all wounds. He talked for a while, but it didn't seep in. I just stared at the wall. What good would words do when my heart felt like this? After that, I asked Elaina not to let anyone in. James came by again, but Elaina brushed him off. My mom came by. Same thing. A week later, Silvara came by.

Elaina let Silvara in, of course.

Silvara sat on the bed. She didn't speak, just turned to regard me in that patient way she had. I hadn't changed the sheets or showered, and stunk like a transient, but I'd recovered enough to feel bad about it. Silvara raised her gaze to the window. Kaa was in the light well. I saw him leave and then felt him when he flew out of view.

In the trees, Kaa wheeled and dove to impress his new mate. His thoughts seeped into mine. He felt quite pleased with himself, and his

thoughts turned to nests and eggs. Our connection hadn't broken. What did he feel when I was in the Realm? Did he hurt too, when my heart got torn in two?

After maybe an hour, Silvara finally spoke.

"James asked me to come by and convince you to get out of bed. It's not easy to do what you have done, and it's never easy to have your heart broken. That you are even breathing is a major victory. I will tell James that you aren't ready yet. Take all the time you need."

With that, she rose to her feet and left.

Silvara could give James lessons on how to give a pep talk. After she left, I felt strong enough to get up.

You can't stay in bed moping forever. It's really boring, for one, and eventually you run out of ramen, which necessitates a trip to the store, which necessitates taking a shower and brushing your teeth and doing all of those other things that people do when their heart hasn't been broken into a zillion pieces and stomped on.

And I had promises to keep.

I tried, again, to return the fey knife Yseulta had given me. Alsethu had taught me not to trust immortals bearing gifts. I took the bus to her house in Bromley, and after about ten minutes of standing on the sidewalk I got up the courage to dash across the wild meadow of a lawn and up onto the porch. The lid clattered as I dropped her knife in the mailbox and ran.

The knife reappeared in my pocket that afternoon, like it had a find spell, the spell to return lost and stolen items. Elaina and James both denied having cast any magic on it. The taint of magic didn't bode well, but it wasn't like there was anything to do about it. The thing was like that cat from the folk song.

So, I kept it. Utility knives were useful, and the blade still hadn't dulled. If it was cursed like Alsethu's gift had been, there was no sign of it yet.

In the evening, I took the bus to Wasserhausen, to return Fain's rosary.

Fain wasn't up yet. It was still light out. I read a borrowed paperback until the sun began to set, and when it got too dark to read I leaned against his door and tried not to wallow in self-pity. Fain and I hadn't spoken, and there was a chance that he wasn't friends with me anymore either, but at least I had a reason to be here. The sky turned orange, and the streetlights flickered on. The stoop of his apartment grew cold. Was Fain awake yet? Did he even remember me?

The deadbolt snicked open. Invitation enough for me. I opened the door and slipped inside, closing it quickly again to guard against the sun's last feeble rays. I set my bag down.

"There's a gun trained at your head." Fain spoke with icy cold seriousness from within the darkness in the room.

I froze. "If you didn't want me to come in, why did you unlock the door?"

"I didn't unlock the door. You have thirty seconds to explain who you are and what the hell you're doing in my condo."

"Don't shoot, Fain. I'm unarmed. I'm reaching into my pocket. I'm not going for a gun." I reached in to my pocket and pulled out the rosary, dangling it from my fingers to one side so he could see it.

"Kit?" I heard a small thunk as he set the weapon on the table.

Fain was on me, fangs and lips and tongue meeting my willing mouth. His arms wrapped around me and he carried me to the floor in the living room before I realized I left my seat. All the pent up tension released in a flood. After two months, I was almost as hungry for this as I had been for food. No, hungrier. Fain was hungry as well, tearing off my clothes and scattering them. His hands held me down on the carpet, as he kissed me into a frenzy.

It was better than I had fantasized. Not just the constant touching, not just the skillful kisses, but the insistence, the desire. He wanted me. He had missed me. His body told me that I had been worth waiting for. And it felt even better than running in the desert.

"Host me, please." Fain bent down over my throat. "Please, Kit. I need to taste you."

I turned my chin to one side to offer myself as host, too distracted to feel any pain. He drank deeply, like a man in love, shuddering as my body fed both his needs. When he was done, he licked the last few drops off my shoulder before they could stain his Persian rug.

"Promise me this won't be the last time."

I knew there was blood in his mouth so I closed my eyes to not see it. "I've got three hours before I have to be anywhere." I began kissing his skin. "Make me forget him."

He did his best. When we were exhausted, and showered, my stomach growled to remind me that I hadn't eaten anything, and Fain led me by the hand into the kitchen.

“I didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

“Soon?” I had to laugh. “No one else expected me to come back at all.”

“Not the irrepressible Kit.” Fain was bringing eggs and sausage and fruit out of his enormous stainless-steel refrigerator.

I pulled myself onto the counter. “Why didn’t you recognize me?”

“You smell different,” he said, cracking eggs one-handed into a skillet. “How did you unlock the door?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged and looked at my cuticles. But I did know. Sort of.

The Realm had changed me. Yseulta had changed me.

“All right, you don’t have to tell me yet.”

As Fain bent down to fetch a pan from under a cabinet, exposing his tight rear end. Fain hadn’t lost any of his sex appeal. “Do you want some coffee?”

“What I’d really like is a drink. I need some liquid courage.”

Fain poured me a cup of coffee and laced it with brandy. I drained it in one gulp and held it out for a refill. Fain obliged. “I heard about Fenwick.”

I didn’t reply, but nodded as I started on the second cup.

“He’s a fool.”

I might have said something to defend Fenwick, but right now I wasn’t feeling too charitable. I went to the goddamn Realm for him!

“I thought he would die if I didn’t save him.”

Fain stood up and walked back to the stove, ostensibly to tend his cooking, but his hands weren’t moving. “I have known many women in my life. Some have claimed to love me. Quite a few of them slept with me. I never had a woman who was loyal enough to go to the Realm for me.”

“I’m through with loyalty.”

Fain turned over his shoulder to look at me when I said this, with a half-smile that called me a liar. I finished my coffee while Fain cooked breakfast.

We ate in silence. It seemed hard to remember how to chew and swallow. Had I really been gone two months? The sausage tasted salty. This came from an animal? Something that once walked and breathed? The orange juice came from the inside of a piece of fruit? From a tree? Nourished only by earth and rain and sky? Eating felt like an act of worship. I took a long time chewing each bite, savoring the scents and flavors.

Fain was watching me, gaze caressing my throat as I swallowed another bite.

“What are you going to do now? You want to be my girlfriend?”

“Let’s keep it casual.”

“Casual? I thought commitment was what all the human girls wanted.”

“I’m not sure if I’m still human anymore.”

He digested that for a second, as though not quite believing, not quite dismissing the idea. He lifted my chin and inspected me, then leaned forward and smelled my skin with eyes half closed.

“Maybe some of the Realm wore off on you.”

“It’s hard to deal with.”

“I know. I remember how it felt when I suddenly wasn’t human anymore.”

“Kiss me.”

Fain did.

I couldn’t forget Fenwick, and the pain he caused me, but Fain sure tried hard to make me forget. By the time my appointment at the Guild House came around, I was almost too exhausted to stand.

The waiting room of the Guild House in Wasserhausen held a spotless carpet, white damask furniture, and impressive oil paintings. It also held a handful of nervous humans, two young vampires, a cocky initiate, and a pale and willowy faerie who fingered a manila folder, sitting alone and looking very frightened. Some of them came and went while we waited. I stared at the wall, marveling at the slow creep of time. Fain had to pinch me to keep me awake. It had been a couple of years since I last slept.

A human maid offered chocolate in bone china cups. I drank mine slowly, reveling in the scent, and stood to inspect the portraits.

Fain kissed my wrist gently and gave me a look that was almost unseemly in such a public place, except that by now we were the only two people left in the waiting room.

“Melbourne. The Guild Leader will see you now.” The maid had come back.

The maid led me to the Guild Leader’s office. Inside, Holzhausen sat still as a statue behind his mahogany desk in what was once the dining room of the houseboat. Most of the room was filled with bookshelves and some filing cabinets disguised by *trompe l’oeil* paintings of books. His

hands held a gold pen and a legal pad, and his plain brown face showed mistrust.

“Why do you smell like a faerie?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

He closed his mouth and tipped his head back, but didn’t speak. “Was your trip a success?”

“In a manner of speaking, sir. I returned from the Realm. Fenwick is well.”

“You returned sooner than I expected.” He laid his hands on the table, motionless. “And were you also successful in the errand I sent you on? Tell me of the contents of the casket. What did you see when you opened it?”

“Jack sent his greetings, sir, and a message.” I closed my eyes, trying to remember the message exactly. It was just a week ago that I heard it, but now it seemed a long time. “Jack Rabbity likes the yellow ones too.”

Holzhausen looked at me blankly. “Is that all?”

“He said it would make sense to you.”

“Do you understand the message?”

“No, sir.”

“Did he say why he wanted to give me the message?”

“He said he wanted to tell you about me. If you’ll forgive my saying so, sir, he seemed a bit hare-brained.”

Holzhausen laughed from the belly. My eyebrows rose. I wasn’t aware of anything funny.

“Oh, my dear friend Jack. Yes, he was, hare-brained, as you put it. He had his moments of cleverness. Tell me more of your encounter with him.”

I summed up as best I could. It seemed ages ago.

Holzhausen paused, tapping his lips for a moment. “You speak the language of the Realm?”

“Yes, sir. That is, uh, two of them.” A grandfather clock ticked somewhere within the houseboat. No one knocked on the door. I started to waver on my feet, and my head jerked involuntarily. Sleepy. I was sleepy and needed to get home. Holzhausen stopped his tapping and stared at me with an unreadable expression. Did he want me to say something? My nerves started to get to me, so I began to babble.

Holzhausen held up a hand to stop me.

“Tell me the message in the language of the Realm.”

“The common tongue? The pidgin, sir? I blinked in surprise, and said, “Iek canei’nenauws tsau beringut’dien’n”

“Say it again, slower.”

I did.

“Again.”

I did.

“Do you speak German?”

“No, sir.”

“I do. Jack knows that. He speaks that language as well.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“You noticed vampires do not have many mages among us?”

I blinked at the subject change. “I noticed, sir.” Pretty odd, now that he mentioned it. It seemed that what one needed most to become a decent mage was years of practice and study. You’d think that vampires would have more time for that sort of thing than anyone else, and yet there weren’t many mages among them, not that I had noticed, at least.

“Humans are better at mage-craft than vampires, and those of the Realm are the most talented in that area. Jack believes you have talent, and that you will be loyal to me.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“Ich kann Ihnen als Zauberin gut dienen.”

That sounded like what I had told him, but with a different accent.

“In German, it means ‘I can serve you well as a sorceress.’ Would you like to work for me?”

“Sir, I’m not a mage.”

“My current dayrunner is retiring and I need someone to replace him. I am offering you his position. If you accept, I will subsidize and direct your education in the art of mage-craft, among other things.”

“A dayrunner, sir?”

“You will complete tasks for me during the day; run errands mostly, as you expected. At first you won’t have many responsibilities, but when you are better at mage-craft, I will ask you to carry out missions for the Guild.”

I started to make a comment, but he continued, holding a hand to forestall any interruption.

“I understand you may not have the stomach for wetwork.”

I nodded. That had been a concern of mine. Well, that, and working for the most dangerous man in the city. But Uncle Fred had vouched for him.

Uncle Fred said Holzhausen was a decent person. And the Guild offered good health insurance.

“You will be well compensated, but you must understand I expect complete loyalty, and a certain amount of discretion. From your past behavior, I doubt you will have a problem with either of those. You are unusually steadfast.”

“Thank you, sir.” Wow, a compliment from the Guild Leader? And he didn’t even add a ‘for a human, that is,’ caveat? “I accept your offer.”

He removed a small gold cup and a knife with a malachite-inset handle from a drawer in his desk. Then he fetched a decanter off a shelf, pouring what looked like port wine into the cup on the desk.

“Give me your hand.”

I thrust my right hand forward. He cut a shallow gash across my palm and held it over the cup. Three crimson drops fell into the port. He slashed his own palm and let his own blood drip into the cup. Three drops each. Was that significant? He brought the cup to his lips and drank half the liquid, never taking his eyes from my own.

“Drink.” He thrust the half-full cup at me.

The gold surface showed a red palm print on one side. Blood. Ew. And port wine, which didn’t taste much better. I threw it back and swallowed the liquid quickly, then offered the goblet back, adding my own bloody prints on the side.

He set the cup down on the table and clasped hands with me to close the ritual. “You work for me now, Dayrunner Melbourne. You can start tomorrow. Be here at dusk.”

I nodded and walked out the door.

Fain met me in the waiting room and took my hand in his. If he noticed my palm was bleeding, he didn’t mention it.

Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading Dryad's Blade. I have something to ask. Please take the time to write a review. Reviews are essential for helping people find my work. Without reviews, my book won't get noticed, and if it doesn't, other readers are not going to be able to enjoy reading about Kit and Fain and Yseulta. Without reviews, others won't go to the Realm of the Faerie and return again as you just did.

Feel free to write reviews on whichever site you like to review books on books2read.com/u/mqvX2

Not sure what to write? Just talk about the parts you liked. The romance between Kit and Fain? The Pilell? Talk about what you didn't like too; that will help readers decide if the book is for them. If you need more guidance, I have a sticky post called "how to write a book review" on my website www.catherinecheek.com/2016/08/28/how-to-write-a-book-review/ If you can't get enough of Kit Melbourne and want the latest news and some sneak peeks, you can sign up for my newsletter by entering your email there.

Thank you so much for your help.

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Vampire's Dayrunner Preview

“Having to be at work before sunrise has got to be the worst thing about working for a vampire. As far as I’m concerned, the only good reason to be out at dawn is that the bars are closed and it’s time to go home.”

It was just after four in the morning, and instead of sleeping, I was wide awake and chatting with my familiar in the bathroom. Kaa didn’t respond to my complaint except to tap on the faucet with his beak, telling me to turn it on. He could turn it on in the kitchen, but the bathroom knobs were too hard to turn even for an especially clever crow.

“Guess that’s why they pay dayrunners the big bucks.”

“Kaa,” my familiar agreed, around a beakful of water. He hopped to my shoulder and started preening, his own version of the morning grooming ritual. I pulled a comb through my hair, careful not to dislodge him.

“Kaa, what would Cinderella have done if her Prince Charming decided to get engaged to a gorgeous petite redhead instead?”

Kaa cocked his head at me.

“I know.” I sighed. “She’d do what I’m doing. Get a new job, a new place to live, a new boyfriend, and get on with her life.”

A tinny melody came from the other room, muffled slightly by the dirty shirt it was hidden under. I raced into the chilly bedroom and dug through the pockets to find the phone before whoever it was hung up. Must be work. No one else would call this early.

“Melbourne here.”

“Morning, Kit. Did I wake you?” Mr. Hall probably hoped he did.

“No.” I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder and stepped into my pants. “What’s up?”

“We need to check the Boss’ perimeter spells. They’ve gone down again.”

“Shit. Again?”

“That’s not the kind of language for a young lady to use, Kit,” Mr. Hall said. “You’d better get here before sunrise. That’s at—”

“Five thirty-two. I have an almanac too, Mr. Hall.”

“You don’t need to get snippy with me, Kit. I’m only trying to help.”

“I’ll be there. Goodbye Mr. Hall.” We hung up and I walked back to change in the relative warmth of the steamy bathroom.

“He is such a prick, Kaa. Why can’t he call me Melbourne like the vampires do?”

“Kaa,” my crow said. He was a good listener.

My bindi was stuck to the corner of the mirror, and came off with a gentle fingernail pried underneath. My magic jewel. It was a theoretically a powerful and priceless one-of-a-kind artifact, but the only thing it did was let me see through glammers and spells. Oh yeah, and I could spot lycanthropes too, except that I only knew one and he didn't even want to date me anymore. With a little spirit gum, the red and gold felt paisley stuck between my brows where it belonged.

They say that people who have been in a car accident tend to categorize their lives into "before the accident" and "after the accident." A car accident might have been less life-altering. New place, new job, new friends. Some things were better now, there was no denying it.

"I should be grateful that at least you still wanted me after I came back."

"Kaa!" he said, and flew to the toilet to take care of the rest of his morning ritual.

I looked at my watch. "Ten till five already? Time to go, Kaa. You feel up to a car ride?"

Kaa shook his head and preened again.

I scratched his ears with my fingernails and picked him up with the other hand. "Please? I'd really like to have you along." I kept scratching him even as we walked to the kitchen for breakfast. The scratching won him over. Kaa finally nodded in agreement and took the dog biscuit I offered him. One for him, and one for me, since the breakfast bars were all gone.

Traffic was light this early in the morning, and Mr. Hall waited for me on the street in front of our boss' house.

"So, what did you find?" I asked Mr. Hall. We were in front of the big wooden farmhouse where Grant Holzhausen, Guild Leader for the vampires, slept during the day. Kaa sat on my shoulder and regarded Mr. Hall with one black eye.

"Mrs. Threadgold was walking her dogs and noticed the perimeter ward was down again. I would have noticed it myself if I had come by here, but I really thought you had done a good enough job last time so I didn't check up on you."

Mr. Hall was in his late sixties, and had been Holzhausen's dayrunner for over thirty of those years. His of white hair and WASPish ancestry made him look like Somebody Important, especially when he wore a suit, which he nearly always did. I wore a suit only when I had to. Most of the time, I

wore jeans and jean jacket, which had been through almost as much as I had.

“Look. Here’s one of them.” Mr. Hall held up the small bundle. It looked like a mouse pellet comprised entirely of plant materials. With the bindi on I could see the spell’s power. I would have been able to anyway, had the spell not faded. Properly made, they were supposed to glow with energy so long as the ring remained unbroken. They would deter people from crossing the perimeter, and if someone was persistent enough to cross, the loss of energy would warn Holzhausen as he slept in the house. He had a security system as well, but being the Vampire Guild Leader gains one a lot of enemies, and he felt that not all of them could be deterred with electronics.

“Why didn’t it work? We did everything right, didn’t we?”

“I thought so, but someone must have tampered with it.”

“During the night?” I asked, with an eyebrow raised. “Tolstoy and Campbell were here. They would have seen something.”

“Unless one of them tampered with it.”

“Attacking the Guild Leader is treasonous. What are you suggesting, Mr. Hall?”

He waved his hand at me. “Forget I said anything. Don’t worry about it, Kit.”

I narrowed my eyes at his patronizing tone. Don’t worry about it? It was my job to worry about it. “How was it tampered with?”

“I don’t know. I’m almost as bad a mage as you are.” Mr. Hall stood up and brushed mud off his pants, looking like one of the X-Files agents investigating a site of a supernatural occurrence. Why on earth did he insist on wearing suits if he knew he would be mucking about in the yard? Maybe he had a wife at home to wash his clothes for him, and didn’t mind making extra work for her. “Kit, I’d keep quiet about this if I were you.”

“The boss needs to know about this.”

“He deserves solutions, not problems. Besides, what if he suspects one of us?” He glanced towards the house, as if Holzhausen were awake and peering at us from behind the closed shades. “You know how they feel about humans. We’re not Guild members. They won’t forget that.”

“I’m a Guild member,” I reminded him. But I could see his point. I’d had enough temp jobs to know that when the petty cash goes missing, the

new girl is the first to get blamed, regardless of proof. I sighed. "All right, fine. I'll keep quiet if you will."

"Good." He picked up my backpack with the textbooks in it, handing it to me in exchange for the spell bundle. "How's school going?"

"Fine."

We began to walk towards the next spell bundle. Mr. Hall let me bend down to pick up the next bundle, but he took it from my hands as though not trusting me to carry it.

"What are you taking?"

"Drama and psychology."

"Right, to help you lie better. He had me study that too. He got you taking martial arts yet?"

"No." Holzhausen had told me the dojo I already studied at was reputable enough, and Fain had showed me how to use my Guild-issued 22. Fain took me to the range sometimes to practice. It was his idea of a nice date.

"That's good. Girls shouldn't fight."

Slow count to ten. Don't punch him. Mr. Hall was going to teach me to do this job, and he would only work with me until the end of October. "I'll repair the spell."

"I can do it quicker. You run along to your schoolwork."

I reached for the bundles. "I can do it."

Kaa cawed a couple times at Mr. Hall, as if to emphasize that at least I was enough of a mage to have my own familiar.

"Okay, I'll walk you through it, make sure you're doing it well enough." He followed me around while I undid each bundle and wrapped it up again, checking to make sure the contents were intact. Whoever had tampered with them did a pretty good job, because if I hadn't made them myself I wouldn't have noticed the tiny flaws. When they were all wrapped up tight, I set them at the proper distance from one another until the net was complete.

Mr. Hall nodded curtly. "Good enough. We'll make a mage of you yet."

That "we" was pretty arrogant. Holzhausen was the one supervising my education. Mr. Hall was almost as bad a mage as I was.

"I have some errands to run, if you think I can handle picking up the dry cleaning on my own."

He didn't respond to my sarcasm. "Okay. See you at dusk then."

Except for the pre-dawn perimeter check, that day was normal. Holzhausen had a list of errands for me to do, and yes, picking up the dry cleaning was on it. At dusk when I met Holzhausen at the Guild House in Wasserhausen, I didn't say anything about the perimeter spells being messed up again that morning. Mr. Hall told me not to bother Holzhausen with it, because he deserved solutions, not problems. But since the Guild Leader hadn't hired a stupid little girl to be his dayrunner, I asked Kaa to guard the following two days. No one was going to attack *my* boss on *my* shift.

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Kater Cheek has written novels, short stories, poems, book reviews, corporate communications, plays, lyrics, blog posts, letters and even a chicken comic. She enjoys hobbies that involve fire, power tools, or dangling in the air. She currently resides in the eastern United States.

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